INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS AND GROUP PROCESSES

Personal Standards for Judging Aggression by a Relationship Partner: How Much Aggression Is Too Much?

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What determines whether people tolerate partner aggression? This research examined how norms, relationship experiences, and commitment predict personal standards for judging aggressive acts by a partner. Studies 1a and 1b (n = 689) revealed that experiencing aggression in a current relationship and greater commitment predicted greater tolerance for common partner aggression. Study 2 longitudinally tracked individuals who had never experienced partner aggression (n = 52). Once aggression occurred, individuals adopted more tolerant standards, but only if they were highly committed. Study 3 involved experimentally manipulating the relevance of partner aggression among individuals who reported current partner aggression (n = 73); they were more tolerant of aggressive acts imagined to occur by their partner (vs. the same acts by a stranger), but only if they were highly committed. Personal standards for judging partner aggression are dynamic. They shift toward greater tolerance when committed people experience aggression in a current relationship.

Keywords: partner aggression, norms, relationship motives, commitment

Interpersonally harmful behavior takes on a special meaning when it occurs in the context of an intimate relationship. Most people, for example, might be puzzled when they are insulted or belittled by a stranger. Such behavior by intimate partners, however, might cause more lasting pain and doubt. Aggressive comments and actions by a partner raise a basic paradox: The person who should provide intimacy, security, and love instead is being hurtful. Individuals have standards for what should occur in relationships, versus what would be grounds for ending a relationship. Many individuals may believe that they would not tolerate partner aggression because it falls below their standard for acceptable behavior, and yet when their partner becomes aggressive, they may not be ready to end their relationship. Research has shown that individuals who feel strongly committed to maintaining their relationship will downplay aggressive behavior (Arriaga, 2002) and are more likely to remain with an abusive partner (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Yet there are limits to what one might tolerate, particularly in dating relationships in which there are few barriers to leaving (Le & Agnew, 2003). How much aggression by a partner is too much and causes one to question continuing a relationship?

We examined personal standards people hold for aggressive partner behavior, as indicated by judgments of whether specific aggressive acts by a partner would be grounds for ending a relationship. Research on partner aggression overwhelmingly focuses on predicting when/why individuals become aggressive (cf. Finkel, 2014). The current research draws attention to how people judge the point at which a partner has gone too far.

Personal standards for how much aggression to tolerate are likely to be influenced by several factors. One such factor concerns a person’s broader social context and the descriptive norms regarding the extent to which aggression is perceived to be common or typical in relationships. The more common aggression is assumed to be, the more likely people may be to tolerate it. However, personal standards for aggression are unlikely to be solely a function of perceived social norms. Individuals who reside in similar social contexts defined by similar norms may differ in how much aggression they would tolerate before ending their relationship.

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relationship or when they feel committed to continuing a current relationship. Many individuals may continue a relationship even after their partner becomes aggressive (i.e., they become a target) or they themselves become aggressive (i.e., they become a perpetrator). We suggest that the motive to continue a relationship shapes judgments of partner aggression. We present four studies using various methods (cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental) to examine personal standards for partner aggression—what predicts them and how they shift across time and contexts.

Partner Aggression: Nature, Social Norms, and Personal Standards

The very issue of defining what comprises partner aggression may be influenced by societal norms and standards (Counts, Brown, & Campbell, 1999; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). The distinctions between what is considered “aggressive,” “abusive,” or “violent” are often elusive. The current research adopted the umbrella term of partner aggression to include acts that are intentional and harmful (Richardson, 2014). Intimate partner violence scholars further differentiate between common and severe forms of partner aggression (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, & Rehan, 2000; Johnson, 1995). Common forms of partner aggression include verbal aggression aimed at denigrating a person (e.g., calling names, humiliating a partner), and/or hostility (e.g., storming out of a room), and frequently is perpetrated by both partners. In contrast, severe forms of partner aggression, often perpetrated by one partner, include overly controlling behavior (e.g., closely monitoring a partner’s whereabouts, restricting access to resources), acts that instill fear (e.g., threats, destroying belongings), and physical aggression (e.g., hitting, punching; Basile, Arias, Desai, & Thompson, 2004; Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). A similar distinction is made between psychological versus physical aggression; although highly controlling and pervasive, psychological aggression often indicates a more severely aggressive relationship.

Interdependence theory suggests that each person has a threshold for what would be grounds for ending a relationship (i.e., a person’s comparison level for alternatives; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). People tend to agree on which acts of partner aggression are severe (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008), but may agree less on whether specific acts fall below their personal threshold to warrant ending a relationship. Such a threshold can gauge how much aggression individuals might tolerate in their own relationships.

We posit that individuals have more tolerant standards for common partner aggression than for severe aggression, even though common aggression can cause more harm than is commonly acknowledged. In many societies, individuals express strong norms against the occurrence of “domestic violence” (TNS Opinion & Social, 2010). People, therefore, may adopt strong standards against severe aggression in their own relationships, as they become socialized into what is considered acceptable (Bandura, 1986; Foshee et al., 1998; Schwartz & Dekeseredy, 2000). What is interesting is that even though physical aggression is perceived to be more problematic than nonphysical aggression (e.g., verbal aggression, controlling behavior; Capezza & Arriaga, 2008; Simon et al., 2001), nonphysical aggression predicts personal distress more strongly than does physical aggression (Arias & Pape, 1999; Basile et al., 2004; Dutton, Goodman, & Bennett, 1999; Taft et al., 2006). For example, one study revealed that women who had physically aggressive partners reported greater difficulty recovering from their partner’s repeated acts of humiliation than from acts of physical aggression (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990).

In the current research, we were particularly interested in the type of partner aggression that commonly occurs in relationships (e.g., insulting or putting down a partner). Such acts are meaningful because they are extremely common, with incidence rates of over 80% in college and nonclinical samples (e.g., Cercone, Beach, & Arias, 2005; Hines & Saudino, 2003; Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009; Taft et al., 2006). Although such acts are perceived to be innocuous, they predict unhappiness and greater personal distress over time (Arriaga, Capezza, Goodfriend, Rayl, & Sands, 2013; Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015). Such partner aggression is common yet distinct from other issues that signal a troubled relationship (e.g., dishonesty, infidelity, personal stressors). There is something about partner aggression per se, and particularly instances in which a partner intentionally uses belittling comments or insults that devalue a person, that predicts negative personal outcomes (Follingstad et al., 1990; Taft et al., 2006). A recent study by Arriaga and Schkeryantz (2015) revealed that common aggression uniquely predicted an increase in personal distress beyond the effects of couple functioning. Because the outcomes of common partner aggression are not as visible as are the outcomes of physical aggression, people may not notice the harm that they are experiencing as a result of their partner’s verbal and related aggression (Arriaga et al., 2013; Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015).

Given the strong social norms against severe aggression (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008; Simon et al., 2001), we expected that people would judge severe acts by a partner to be grounds for ending a relationship. Despite its negative outcomes, common partner aggression, in contrast, is not as stigmatized and may evoke greater acceptability. We focused our research on identifying factors that are likely to influence personal standards for common aggression.

What Causes Personal Standards for Partner Aggression to Become More Lenient?

We suggest that standards for judging common acts of partner aggression are dynamic and shift under the influence of specific motives. Aggressive acts that generally are assumed to be “deal breakers” in relationships (i.e., grounds for ending a relationship) may be judged as tolerable when they have occurred in one’s own relationship. Two key motives that make for a slippery slope in judging partner aggression are the need for personal consistency and strong commitment.

Personal Consistency

Consistency theories (e.g., cognitive dissonance theory, Festinger, 1957; balance theory, Heider, 1958) posit that individuals are motivated to avoid contradictions or inconsistencies in their beliefs and values. People might explain away their own acts of aggression but are likely to struggle in justifying a partner’s aggression. Being the target of partner aggression creates a mental state of dissonance (inconsistency). When a partner’s behavior is judged to be aggressive (or more aggressive than one’s own behavior), one is likely to believe that the circumstances do not call for hurtful behavior. Something must give to restore consistency.
Distancing oneself could restore consistency, but it is difficult to maintain distance from a relationship partner. When a person cannot sustain distance or the events do not seem to warrant ending a relationship, individuals restore consistency by adjusting their beliefs and values regarding the partner’s aggressive behavior. The high rate of verbal aggression reported in current college samples (e.g., Cercone, Beach, & Arias, 2005) indicates that relationships often persist after an aggressive incident, perhaps as a result of individuals adopting more tolerant standards to restore a sense of personal consistency.

We hypothesized that individuals who currently are in an aggressive relationship would exhibit more tolerant standards for common partner aggression, as compared with individuals who are not in an aggressive relationship (Hypothesis 1a). Relatedly, we predicted that individuals would shift toward more tolerant standards when they first experience partner aggression (Hypothesis 1b), and would exhibit more tolerant standards when asked to imagine a plausible situation in which their partner acts aggressively, relative to others who imagine a stranger acting aggressively (Hypothesis 1c).

Strong Commitment

Strong relational commitment comprises a motive to protect and maintain a relationship “through thick and thin,” which shapes relationship-relevant thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012). Commitment involves intending to stay in a relationship, feeling strongly connected to a partner, and assuming a future together (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). When individuals feel committed (or “dependent”; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), they may adopt more tolerant standards for negative partner behavior. For example, when individuals feel strongly committed, they are more likely to accommodate when a partner behaves destructively, and forgive a partner’s relational transgressions (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Partner aggression, however, is distinct from thoughtless or selfish partner behavior in that it predicts personal harm beyond typical relational problems and its effects often go unnoticed, as discussed above. When partner aggression occurs, individuals who adopt standards to tolerate their partner’s aggression may maintain their relationship at the expense of their own well-being.

Previous research has not examined how commitment affects personal standards for tolerating partner aggression. Existing research, however, has revealed that greater commitment predicts perceptions that may function to maintain an aggressive relationship. For example, compared with less committed individuals, highly committed individuals reinterpret their partner’s conflict aggression as merely joking around (Arriaga, 2002), and exaggerate how unhappy they would feel if their relationship were to end (more unhappy than they actually feel once it ends; Arriaga et al., 2013).

We hypothesized, therefore, that when individuals experience aggression in a current relationship, stronger commitment would predict greater tolerance for common partner aggression (Hypothesis 2a). We were particularly interested in how individuals regulate a partner’s aggression once it occurs or is salient. Therefore, we further predicted that strong commitment would predict more tolerant standards when a relationship becomes aggressive (i.e., at the onset of aggression in a current relationship; Hypothesis 2b) or when individuals in aggressive relationships are asked to imagine an aggressive incident by their partner, versus by a stranger (Hypothesis 2c). We did not advance a priori predictions regarding commitment for individuals who were not currently in an aggressive relationship. Conceivably greater commitment could cause all individuals to adopt more tolerant standards of partner aggression regardless of their aggression status (a commitment main effect), or commitment could cause more tolerant standards only among individuals who are in an aggressive relationship and need to justify it (a commitment by current aggression status interaction).

Judging Severe Aggression

Strong commitment and current aggression may motivate greater leniency in judging partner aggression, but only up to a point. Common aggression may be condoned, but there are strong social norms against severe aggression. Severely aggressive acts are likely to be judged as falling below one’s threshold for what should be tolerated and thus may be judged as grounds for ending a relationship. One study, for example, revealed that abused women were more likely to leave their partner when the abuse was severe (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). We expected consistency and commitment motives to evoke greater tolerance for common partner aggression but not greater tolerance for severe aggression.

Current Research

Four studies examined whether specific acts of partner aggression would be judged as grounds for ending a relationship. From a social norms perspective, individuals should have more tolerant standards to the extent that they perceive partner aggression to be common in their social context (aggression normativity), or have become habituated to aggression in past relationships (past aggression; Stein, Tran, & Fisher, 2009). From a personal motives perspective, individuals should have more tolerant standards for common aggression to the extent that their current relationship involves aggression (consistency motive) and/or they are committed to maintaining their relationship (commitment motive). These variables were examined simultaneously to assess their independent associations.

Studies 1a and 1b used correlational methods to examine key variables that may predict standards for judging partner aggression. Study 2 provided an attempt to replicate the cross-sectional findings in Studies 1a and 1b, but also included a longitudinal component based on a sample of individuals who had never been in an aggressive relationship; we examined whether those who experienced partner aggression for the first time prospectively adopted more tolerant standards. In Study 3, we used experimental methods to vary the salience of partner aggression among individuals who reported current aggression. All studies relied on college samples given their high incidence of common partner aggression (Hines & Saudino, 2003).

Studies 1a and 1b

Studies 1a and 1b were designed as correlational studies to compare key groups that are likely to differ in their tolerance for aggressive acts. The primary group consisted of individuals who
were in a romantic relationship and reported aggression by their current partner (“involved: current aggression” group). They were contrasted with two comparison groups: individuals who were in a relationship but had not experienced current partner aggression (“involved: no current aggression”), and individuals who were not in a relationship (“single”).

The two involved groups varied only in their immediate current connection to partner aggression and provided a means to test Hypothesis 1a (i.e., individuals in a current aggressive relationship would exhibit more lenient judgments of common partner aggression). Both groups could include individuals who had experienced aggression in past relationships; they varied only in their current aggression status. Past experiences are likely to be more distal and less salient, but they affect current judgments of aggressive behavior and therefore were included as a predictor variable. The single group was examined to determine whether merely being in a current relationship evokes more tolerant judgments of aggressive partner behavior. Both studies explored group differences in descriptive norms by assessing aggression normativity (i.e., how common aggressive acts are perceived to be).

Studies 1a and 1b differed in a few ways. The Study 1a sample was comprised of women only and did not include a measure of aggression perpetration in a current relationship (own aggression). Whereas both studies involved group comparisons that were relevant to the research aims, Study 1b included additional key variables (own aggression, participant sex), which made it possible to examine the relative independent effects of several variables in multiple regression models. Studies 1a and 1b methods were almost identical and are described together, as are the results pertaining to similar analyses across the two studies. Study 1b also involved unique model tests, which are presented separately in later sections.

Method

Participants. The Study 1a sample consisted of n = 322 female university students and the Study 1b sample consisted of n = 689 university students (51% female). All participants received course credit for their participation, and were eligible for the study if they were previously or currently in a romantic relationship. The sample exhibited typical demographic characteristics of college samples in the Midwest region of the United States. In both studies, participants were 19-years-old on average (SD = 1 year) and primarily self-identified as being “White” or of European descent (86% in Study 1a and 80% in Study 1b; Asian/Asian American: 6% in Study 1a and 12% in Study 1b; African American: 6% in Study 1a, and 4% in Study 1b; Hispanic/Latino: 2% in Study 1a and 3% in Study 1b; Other: 1% in Study 1a and 2% in Study 1b). A majority of participants were in a current relationship (80% in Study 1a, 72% in Study 1b), exclusively involved (Study 1a: 91% of those in a current relationship; Study 1b: 83%), of 16 months in duration on average in both studies (SD = 16 months in Study 1a; SD = 15 months in Study 1b).

Procedure. Participants attended an on-campus lab session in groups of 30 or less. They were seated in individual areas separated by wall dividers or at least 6 feet apart. An experimenter greeted participants, described the study, worked through consent procedures, and then instructed participants to complete a survey that included all study measures. All of Study 1b participants completed an online survey administered via PsychData.com; in Study 1a, 47% completed a paper-pencil survey rather than the online survey. During the debriefing, an experimenter talked with participants to assess their affective state; none were visibly upset.

Measures. Both studies included the same measures except for own aggression, which was measured in Study 1b only. Several variables were measured for purposes beyond the current research in some but not all surveys: current happiness, forecast of future happiness, well-being, psychological distress, self-esteem, mood, dyadic adjustment, attachment security, implicit relationship beliefs, and perceptions of a specific conflict. The variables measured for this research are described below.

Relationship status and demographic information. A series of questions tapped current relationship status (single, involved) as well as basic demographic (in Study 1b, participant sex was coded 1 = female, 2 = male) and relationship characteristics (e.g., duration, exclusivity).

Commitment. Participants completed the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), including a 7-item measure of commitment level (αStudy 1a = .95; αStudy 1b = .95) with a 7-point response scale: 1 (do not agree at all), 4 (agree somewhat), 7 (agree completely). Items were averaged such that higher values indicated higher commitment.

Current and past aggression. Partner’s aggression was measured with 12 items, each referring to a specific aggressive act by a partner and modeled after the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Participants indicated how many times their current partner had done each of the following aggressive acts to them without them (the participant) doing it first (α = .79): insulted or swore at you, belittled you in front of others, said that someone else would be a better partner, threatened to hit you or threatened to throw something at you, said “you’ll never get away from me” in an angry or threatening way, intentionally destroyed your belongings, slapped you, pushed or shoved you, hit you with a fist or with something that hurts, beat you up, used physical force against you, did something during a fight that physically injured you. The following scale was used to measure frequency of each: 0 (never), 1 (once), 2 (2–3 times), 3 (4–6 times), and 4 (7 or more times). Items were recoded to calculate a “variety score,” which is the total number of items that were endorsed (occurred at least once). Variety scores reduce skewness, give equal weight to different behaviors, reduce memory bias, and are commonly used to indicate level of partner aggression (Moffitt et al., 1997).

In Study 1b only, a measure of own aggression consisted of the same response scale, and parallel instructions and items, all reworded to indicate own aggression (how many times the participant had done each thing without the partner doing it first; e.g., “insulted or swore at your partner,” “pushed or shoved your partner;” α = .79). Using the same variety score method, the number of items endorsed was summed to indicate level of own aggression.

Aggression in a past relationship was measured using the same items tapping partner’s aggression, but reworded to be about past relationships. Using the same variety score method, the number of items endorsed was used to indicate level of past aggression.

Aggression status groups. Participants were categorized into one of three groups based on their relationship status (currently involved vs. single) and current partner aggression status (current aggression vs. no current aggression): (a) involved: current aggres-
sion (32% in Study 1a who reported partner aggression, and 47% in Study 1b who reported partner aggression and/or own aggression); (b) involved: no current aggression (48% in Study 1a, and 25% in Study 1b); and (c) single (20% in Study 1a, and 27% in Study 1b).

**Aggression normativity and aggression tolerance.** Two 16-item measures were developed for the purposes of this research. Both measures involved having participants judge the 16 aggressive acts listed in the Appendix; the instructions and response scales were varied for each measure. In a subset of the sample (n = 120), participants were randomly assigned to conditions that varied the order of these two measures, which did not significantly affect mean responses.

To judge aggression normativity, participants were instructed to consider how typical or common each act is:

Consider the typical relationships that you have been around. Please indicate how common the following behaviors are in the typical relationships that you have seen while growing up. Does the behavior occur in most relationships or in very few? Use the following scale to indicate how common the behavior is . . .

Participants rated the items provided in the Appendix using the following 7-point response scale: 1 (not at all common), 4 (somewhat common), 7 (very common).

To judge aggression tolerance, participants were instructed to consider whether each act would be grounds for ending a relationship:

Now consider what would be grounds for ending a relationship. For example, if your partner forgets a date, would that be grounds for ending the relationship? What if your partner is unfaithful? It may be difficult to judge some situations, but to the best of your ability, indicate for each behavior, were it to occur, whether it would be reasonable for you to end a relationship. Do not consider when people actually end relationships, but rather when it would seem reasonable to end a relationship. To what extent would there be grounds to end your relationship if your partner . . .

Participants rated the items provided in the Appendix using the following 7-point response scale: 1 (definitely would not end a relationship) to 7 (definitely would end a relationship). Responses on this measure were reverse-scored so that higher ratings indicate a more tolerant or lenient standard (i.e., being less inclined to judge an act as justifying ending one’s relationship).

For data reduction purposes, an exploratory factor analysis (promax rotation) was conducted. The analysis included items from both scales given their similarity, and combined data from (promax rotation) was conducted. The analysis included items tapping aggression normativity (i.e., beliefs about how typical or common each act is; $\alpha_{\text{Study 1a}} = .89; \alpha_{\text{Study 1b}} = .94$). Two variables were derived from the 16 items tapping aggression tolerance (i.e., judgments of whether an act would be grounds for ending a relationship). Six items were averaged to measure tolerance for common aggression (Items 1–6 in Table 1; $\alpha_{\text{Study 1a}} = .85; \alpha_{\text{Study 1b}} = .87$) and the remaining 10 items were averaged to measure tolerance for severe aggression (Items 7–16 in Table 1; $\alpha_{\text{Study 1a}} = .93; \alpha_{\text{Study 1b}} = .96$). The distinction between common aggression (primarily verbal aggression) and more severe aggression (controlling and fear-inducing tactics and physical aggression) is widely supported in existing literature (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000; Johnson, 1995). Tolerance for common aggression and tolerance for severe aggression revealed consistent correlations across Study 1a, $r(322) = .51$, and Study 1b, $r(689) = .51$, both $p < .001$.

**Results and Discussion**

**Study 1a and Study 1b descriptive information.** The current participants exhibited levels of partner aggression that are typical among U.S. college students (e.g., Cercone et al., 2005). The majority of participants reported having a current or past relationship that involved at least one act of aggression (71% in Study 1a, and 88% in Study 1b; the Study 1b rate included both partner aggression and own aggression). Among involved individuals who reported aggression in their current relationship (in Table 1, the “Involved: Current aggression” group), most reported two or more acts of current aggression (81% in Study 1a; 85% in Study 1b), and many reported at least one act of physical aggression (28% in Study 1a; 38% in Study 1b).

**Group differences in judgments of aggressive acts (Studies 1a and 1b).** We compared the three groups (involved: current aggression, involved: no current aggression, single) in their mean judgments of whether specific acts of aggression would be tolerated in a relationship. Table 1 provides means and standard deviations of each judgment for each group. Although the aggressive acts may not have been differentiated by equal intervals of severity, the items corresponding to common acts near the top of the list were generally judged as acceptable, and more acceptable than the more severe items in the middle and bottom of the list.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Study 1a did not include item 16 of each measure, which was added in Study 1b. Study 1b and much of Study 2 omitted Item 2 of the aggression normativity measure (bottom half of the Appendix) because of a programming error.

\(^2\) We also examined a four-factor structure suggesting two variables for aggression normativity: common aggression versus severe aggression (paralleling tolerance for common aggression and tolerance for severe aggression). The item loadings, however, were less discriminant (i.e., failing to load .50 or more on the corresponding factor and less than .35 on other factors). Nonetheless, all of the analyses were repeated using these two normativity variables as appropriate (i.e., normativity of common aggression in models predicting tolerance for common aggression, and normativity of severe aggression in models predicting tolerance for severe aggression). The results were similar. A single normativity of aggression variable was retained because it (a) was better supported by item loadings in the factor analysis, (b) is more concise, and (c) did not alter any conclusions.

\(^3\) There was high agreement across the three groups regarding whether specific aggressive acts warrant ending a relationship. In a separate analysis, aggressive acts in Table 1 were rank ordered for each group based on the mean judgment of each item, from least likely to warrant ending a relationship to most likely. As expected, items pertaining to more common aggression (e.g., "... shouted or yelled at you") were judged less likely to warrant ending a relationship than severe aggression items (e.g., "if a partner . . . beats you up"). Importantly, the three groups provided similar rank orderings of the items: The item ordering of each group (from least likely to end a relationship to most likely) was highly correlated with the item ordering of the other groups ($r$s ranging from .97 to .99).
Descriptively, the groups differed in the point at which they shifted from one side of the response scale (would end a relationship) to the other side (would not end a relationship). In both studies, that shift tended to occur with a more severe item for participants who were currently involved in an aggressive relationship (between items 4 and 5) than for others, suggesting a different “tipping point” at which partner aggression becomes unacceptable.

Table 1 also reveals that the three groups differed in their mean judgments of some specific items and their mean judgment of common aggression (composite of Items 1–6). The results were similar across studies. The involved-current aggression group exhibited the most tolerance in their mean judgment of commonly aggressive acts. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, people who were in an aggressive relationship had more tolerant standards than people who were not in an aggressive relationship. The involved-aggression group also perceived greater aggression normativity (i.e., how common the acts are) than the involved-no aggression group. The groups did not reveal consistent differences in their level of commitment.

The groups did not differ in their mean judgments of severe aggression (composite of Items 7–16). The low means indicate a floor effect and reveal that participants uniformly judged these acts as justifying ending a relationship. Generally there are strong norms against severe partner aggression (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008; Simon et al., 2001), which are likely to evoke judgments that such aggression would warrant ending a relationship.

The descriptive information and group comparisons suggest several conclusions. First, across the board, most common aggressive acts were judged as not being sufficient to warrant ending a relationship, as revealed by means for the tolerance for common aggression variable that were generally in the acceptable range (around 4 or higher). Only as acts became more severe did judgments shift to reflect more stringent standards. Second, those who were currently in an aggressive relationship consistently revealed the most tolerant standards for common aggression, significantly more than the single group (across both studies) and the involved-no current aggression group.

Among those who reported current aggression, the association of commitment level with level of own aggression, as revealed by means for the tolerance for common aggression variable that were generally in the acceptable range (around 4 or higher). Only as acts became more severe did judgments shift to reflect more stringent standards. Second, those who were currently in an aggressive relationship consistently revealed the most tolerant standards for common aggression, significantly more than the single group (across both studies) and the involved-no current aggression group.

Note. For all means, the scale ranged from 1 (definitely would end a relationship) to 7 (definitely would not end a relationship), except for aggression normativity: 1 (not at all common), 4 (somewhat common), 7 (very common). Within each study, means with different superscripts indicate significant differences (p < .05) based on Tukey HSD tests.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Study 1a</th>
<th>Study 1b</th>
<th>Study 2, Time 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involved: Current</td>
<td>Involved: No current</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Shouted/yelled</td>
<td>5.6(.5)</td>
<td>5.3(.6)</td>
<td>5.1(.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Insulted/swore</td>
<td>5.3(.6)</td>
<td>4.5(.7)</td>
<td>4.2(.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Refused to talk</td>
<td>5.1(1.6)</td>
<td>5.1(1.5)</td>
<td>4.7(1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Called names</td>
<td>4.0(1.8)</td>
<td>3.8(1.8)</td>
<td>3.1(1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Beaten</td>
<td>3.8(1.6)</td>
<td>4.4(1.6)</td>
<td>2.9(1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Others are better</td>
<td>2.5(1.4)</td>
<td>2.4(1.5)</td>
<td>2.0(1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Threatened</td>
<td>1.9(1.1)</td>
<td>1.8(1.3)</td>
<td>1.5(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Destroyed things</td>
<td>1.9(1.1)</td>
<td>1.8(1.4)</td>
<td>1.6(1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. No escape</td>
<td>1.7(1.2)</td>
<td>1.8(1.4)</td>
<td>1.4(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Pushed/shove</td>
<td>2.0(1.5)</td>
<td>1.6(1.3)</td>
<td>1.6(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Slapped/hit</td>
<td>1.5(1.0)</td>
<td>1.4(1.2)</td>
<td>1.3(0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Grabbed and shook</td>
<td>1.6(1.0)</td>
<td>1.5(1.2)</td>
<td>1.6(1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Hit with a fist</td>
<td>1.1(4.3)</td>
<td>1.3(1.1)</td>
<td>1.2(0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Slammed on wall</td>
<td>1.3(0.9)</td>
<td>1.3(1.2)</td>
<td>1.3(0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Beat up</td>
<td>1.0(2.0)</td>
<td>1.2(1.1)</td>
<td>1.1(0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Used physical force</td>
<td>1.4(1.2)</td>
<td>1.3(9.0)</td>
<td>1.1(3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common aggression (1–6)</td>
<td>4.4(1.2)</td>
<td>4.1(1.2)</td>
<td>3.7(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe aggression (7–16)</td>
<td>1.6(1.7)</td>
<td>1.5(1.1)</td>
<td>1.4(0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression normativity</td>
<td>2.1*(9.9)</td>
<td>1.7*(7.9)</td>
<td>1.9*(7.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*4 We compared the two groups of currently involved individuals in their level of commitment to explore potential differences in commitment as a function of current aggression status. The results were inconsistent across studies. In Study 1a, the involved-current aggression group reported lower commitment than the involved-no aggression group, F(1, 255) = 5.68, p = .018. In Study 2, the two groups did not differ in their level of commitment, F(1, 231) = 0.40, p = .529.

Among those who reported current aggression, the association of commitment level with level of partner aggression was consistently negative but not robust, r(Study 1a) = -.21, p < .001, r(Study 1b) = -.08, p = .110, and r(Study 2) = -.06 p < .476; commitment was not associated with level of own aggression, r(Study 1a) = -.03, p = .621, and r(Study 2) = -.07, p = .415.
Predicting tolerance for common aggression (Study 1b). Multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess the independent effects of various predictors. Study 1b was used for this analysis to examine potential gender effects, as well as the independent effects of partner aggression versus own aggression. (Analyses from Study 1a omitting own aggression and participant sex provided similar findings, which are available upon request.)

The outcome variable was tolerance for common aggression, and predictor variables included level of current partner’s aggression, level of own current aggression, commitment level, aggression normativity, past aggression, and participant sex. All aggression variables were continuous (as distinct from the analysis of group differences). Single individuals were omitted from the current analysis given that they could not report on their commitment or current aggression. Across these and subsequent studies, participant sex frequently revealed a main effect and therefore was retained, whereas the moderating effect of sex and any effects involving relationship duration were not consistent and therefore were dropped from further analyses.

Table 2 presents the simple correlations among the predictor variables, and Table 3 presents the regression results. As can be seen for Study 1b (Model 1) and consistent with Hypotheses 1a and 2a, higher levels of a current partner’s aggression and greater commitment were uniquely associated with greater tolerance for common aggression. Being male also was associated with greater tolerance (participant sex coded 1 = female, 2 = male). Own aggression in a current relationship was not significant, suggesting that being more aggressive did not exert an effect beyond the other variables on greater tolerance for partner aggression.

We conducted several exploratory analyses to determine whether the association of commitment with greater tolerance for aggression was unique to individuals who were currently in an aggressive relationship. One model included the same predictors that were tested above (Table 3, Model 1), and added the current aggression group variable (current aggression vs. no current aggression) and an aggression group by commitment interaction. The interaction was not significant, \( t(493) = -0.43, p = .668 \); the association of commitment with tolerance for common aggression did not differ reliably among those who were in an aggressive relationship, \( t(327) = 2.86, p = .005 \), from those who were not in an aggressive relationship, \( t(175) = 1.84, p = .078 \). Two more models examined the current aggression group only (\( n = 327 \)), to assess whether level of partner/own aggression moderated the association of commitment with tolerance for common aggression; there was no moderation by partner aggression, \( t(319) = 0.29, p = .772 \), or by own aggression, \( t(319) = 0.29, p = .769 \). A final model examined the subset of individuals who reported more severe partner aggression, defined operationally as at least two acts of partner aggression, one of which involved physical aggression; \( n = 130 \). As above, there was no moderation by partner aggression, \( t(122) = -0.37, p = .709 \), or by own aggression, \( t(122) = -1.45, p = .141 \), and commitment continued to predict greater tolerance, \( t(123) = 2.57, p = .012 \).

Greater commitment predicted more tolerance of common aggression, as suggested by Hypothesis 2a. This association was robust in different samples of individuals who reported partner aggression in their current relationship. Although this association was only marginal for the \( \text{Involved: No current aggression} \) group, the association did not differ reliably for the two groups of involved individuals (current aggression, no current aggression).

Predicting tolerance for severe aggression (Study 1b). The descriptive information in Table 1 revealed a floor effect in judgments of severe aggression. Nonetheless, we conducted a multiple regression analysis parallel to the analysis of tolerance for common aggression. Experiencing a higher level of partner aggression, aggression normativity, and being male each was uniquely associated with more lenient standards of severe aggression (see Table 3, Study 1, Model 2). There was no association of commitment with such standards across any of the analyses (simple correlation, a unique effect in the main model, or a unique effect for any of the subsamples to test whether aggression status moderated an effect of commitment).6 These findings suggest that the support attained for Hypotheses 1a and 2a regarding standards for common partner aggression does not generalize to more severe aggression.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to (a) replicate the first two studies using cross-sectional analyses of the entire sample, and (b) expand beyond some of the limitations of cross-sectional analyses by examining a specific subset of participants who were analyzed longitudinally. The first two studies revealed that individuals in a current aggressive relationship are more lenient than others in judging common acts of partner aggression. What are the origins of such differences? Study 2 begins to address this question by examining a subset of individuals who had never experienced partner aggression. Through this subsample, we examined how standards for partner aggression change prospectively when partner aggression originates.

We predicted that individuals whose relationships become aggressive (i.e., who experience onset of aggression) would be motivated to shift their standards toward greater tolerance for partner aggression (within-person change over time), whereas individuals who continue to have no partner aggression experiences would not be motivated to shift their standards (Hypothesis 1b). We further expected that among individuals whose relationships become aggressive, those who are highly committed would be particularly motivated to shift their standards, more so than individuals who are less committed and therefore less motivated to justify aggressive behavior (Hypothesis 2b). As in

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6 We also conducted a repeated measures analysis on tolerance for common versus severe aggression as outcomes (varying only in severity of the aggressive acts), using the same set of predictors. The results matched what is already reported above.
Studies 1a and 1b, we did not have a priori hypotheses regarding the predictive role of commitment for individuals who did not experience partner aggression (i.e., general main effect of commitment even among those who are not experiencing aggression vs. a simple effect of commitment only among individuals who require a justification to continue a relationship after it becomes aggressive). As in the previous studies, aggression normativity, past aggression, and participant sex also were examined.

In addition to replicating and expanding the initial studies, another aim was to test both causal directions of the robust association between experiencing aggression and condoning it, which has been demonstrated across several nations (García-Moreno et al., 2005). We have suggested that individuals who experience partner aggression shift their standards to be more lenient. Instead, however, it may be that individuals with lenient standards enter relationships destined to become aggressive, more so than individuals who hold more stringent standards (i.e., standards predicting onset of aggression). We explored these contrasting ideas.

Two samples were analyzed in Study 2. One sample was used in a cross-sectional analysis based on the initial measurement occasion-
sion, which allowed for a replication test of the first two studies. The cross-sectional component also included a measure of couple functioning, which was used in determining whether partner aggression has effects that are distinct and unique beyond the effects of generalized low couple functioning. A second longitudinal sample consisted of the subset of individuals who reported at the initial measurement occasion that they had never experienced partner aggression in a current or past relationship; all of their measurement occasions were analyzed to assess whether their personal standards for partner aggression changed if their relationship became aggressive during the study period (onset of aggression).

Method

Design and participants. Study 2 comprised multiple measurement occasions (“Times”), each administered 2 weeks apart on a sample of $N = 256$ university students. Although a majority of participants completed six Times ($n = 149$) whereas others completed five Times, we refer to the final Time as “Time 6” for ease of presentation. Participants were eligible for the study if they were in a romantic relationship, and they received course credit for their participation. Of the participants initially sampled, $n = 21$ were dropped from analysis because they reported fabricating their responses and/or relationship status, and two were dropped because they failed to follow instructions.

Two samples were analyzed for Study 2. The *Time 1 sample* was comprised of all $N = 233$ participants who completed Time 1 (62% female, 37% male, 1% missing gender information [$n = 3$], which was assigned a code in between females and males for inclusion in analysis). This sample was examined in cross-sectional analyses to assess whether the results reported in the initial studies were replicated. A second sample was comprised of the subset of individuals who reported at Time 1 *never having experienced partner aggression*; of those, one dropped out of the study before Time 6 and one had missing data on a key measure. The *longitudinal sample* was comprised of $n = 52$ participants (65% female) whose repeated measurements were examined longitudinally to assess the onset of partner aggression. The primary longitudinal analysis contrasted those who experienced an onset of partner aggression versus those who continued in their status of never experiencing partner aggression.

The Time 1 sample exhibited typical demographic and relationship characteristics of college samples in the Midwest region of the United States: 19-years-old on average ($SD = 1.40$), and primarily White/European (79%); Asian/Asian American: 12%; Other: 10%). Participants primarily were exclusively involved (94%), with the average relationship duration 15 months ($SD = 18$ months), and most remained in their relationships throughout the course of the study (85% of Time 1 sample; 81% of those who qualified for the longitudinal sample).

Procedure. At Time 1, participants attended an on-campus lab session in groups of 20 or less. They were seated at individual computers separated by cubicles, wall dividers, or at least 6 feet apart. An experimenter greeted participants, described the study, worked through consent procedures, and provided instructions for the current survey and subsequent surveys that participants completed independently from a remote computer. After Time 1, participants were e-mailed links for each of the subsequent surveys, administered via PsychData.com.

Measures. Several variables were measured for purposes beyond the current research in some but not all surveys: current happiness, well-being, psychological distress, self-esteem, mood, and attachment security. The variables measured for this research are described below.

Relationship status and demographic information. A series of questions tapped basic demographic and relationship characteristics (e.g., duration, exclusivity).

Commitment. At Time 1, participants completed an eight-item measure that tapped various aspects of the quality of an intimate relationship (e.g., trust, intimacy; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). We specifically examined one item measuring commitment (“How committed are you to your relationship?;” response scale: $1 = not at all, 4 = somewhat, 7 = extremely”), which has been validated against the seven-item commitment measure that was used in the first two studies ($r > .90$; see Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006).

Couple functioning. A measure of couple functioning was based on the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995). Six items measured the extent of agreement on specific issues (e.g., intimate relations), ranging from 1 (always agree) to 6 (always disagree); these were reverse-scored. Four items measured frequency of relationship distress (e.g., considering breaking up), ranging from 1 (all the time) to 6 (never). Items were averaged such that higher numbers indicated higher couple functioning ($\alpha = .79$).

Aggression in current relationship. Partner and own aggression in a current relationship was assessed at Time 1 using the same measure as in the first two studies.

Aggression normativity and tolerance for common/severe aggression. Study 2 adopted the same measures used in the first two studies (aggression normativity, Time 1 $\alpha = .95$, Time 6 $\alpha = .92$; tolerance for common aggression, Time 1 $\alpha = .87$, Time 6 $\alpha = .91$; tolerance for severe aggression, Time 1 $\alpha = .96$, Time 6 $\alpha = .97$). The Time 1 correlation between tolerance for common versus severe aggression was the same as in the first two studies, $r(233) = .51, p < .001$. For participants whose relationships persisted, these measures were administered at Times 1 and 6; for those whose relationships ended, the measures were administered at Time 1 and the Time at which a breakup was reported.

Onset of aggression in current relationship (post-Time 1). At each measurement occasion after Time 1, participants completed a partner aggression measure that assessed what had occurred in the previous 2 weeks since the last survey. Four items tapped major components of psychological aggression and one item tapped physical aggression, whereby each item included a generic type of aggression followed by examples: using verbal denigration and intimidation (two items; e.g., put downs, insults, being overly sarcastic), being possessive or controlling (one item; e.g., forbidding interactions with others), using threats (one item; e.g., breaking objects to intimidate, threatening physical harm), or using any physical force (one item; e.g., slapping, punching). Participants indicated the frequency of their partner’s behavior (five items; $\sigma_{\text{mean}} = .67, \sigma_{\text{range}} = .61-.70$) and then own behavior (five items; $\sigma_{\text{mean}} = .67, \sigma_{\text{range}} = .63-.76$), each using the same response scale: 0 (never), 1 (once), 2 (2–3 times), 3 (4–6 times), and 4 (7 or more times).
Based on these measures, participants were categorized into one of two groups assessing onset of aggression: Those who indicated the onset of aggression after Time 1 (onset = 1; 38%), versus those who did not report any aggression after Time 1 (no onset, onset = 0; 62%). Given the difficulty in obtaining these data and the small group of participants in the onset group (n = 20), onset of aggression combined new instances of only own aggression (n = 7), new instances of only partner aggression (n = 4), and new instances of both (n = 9).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive information and group differences. The samples exhibited levels of partner aggression that are typical among U.S. college students (e.g., Cercone et al., 2005). Among those who reported aggression in a current or past relationship (in Table 1, the Involved: Current aggression group), a majority (82%) reported two or more acts of current aggression, and 26% reported at least one act of physical aggression. The first two studies revealed similar rates.

The same group comparisons in tolerance for partner aggression were examined as in the first two studies. Table 1 provides Time 1 mean judgments of specific items for each group. Replicating the first two studies, the groups differed descriptively in the point at which they shifted from one side of the response scale (would end a relationship) to the other side (would not end a relationship), whereby participants who had experienced aggression exhibited a more severe “tipping point” at which aggression becomes unacceptable (between Items 4 and 5). This group exhibited greater tolerance for common aggression than others (mean of Items 1–6), but the groups did not differ in tolerance for severe aggression (mean of Items 7–16) or judgments of aggression normativity (see Footnote 4 regarding the association between level of aggression and commitment).

Time 1 (cross-sectional) analysis: Predicting judgments of common/severe aggression. We examined tolerance for common aggression in the same multiple regression models that were analyzed in Study 1b, including as predictors: level of current partner aggression, level of current own aggression, commitment level, aggression normativity, any past aggression, and participant sex (see Table 2 for the simple correlations among the predictors). Higher level of partner’s aggression and greater commitment were uniquely associated with greater tolerance for common aggression (see Table 3, Study 2, Model 1 on the right side), as predicted by Hypotheses 1a and 2a. Being male also was uniquely associated with greater tolerance. These findings replicate the Study 1a findings. Aggression normativity and own current aggression also revealed significant or marginal associations in the model displayed in Table 3, although these associations were not robust in alternate models (see Footnote 5).

We examined whether the current aggression versus no current aggression groups differed in the extent to which commitment predicted greater tolerance for common partner aggression. As in Study 1b, there were no significant interactions of commitment with aggression status (same models and samples examined in Study 1b: current aggression vs. no current aggression, amount of partner aggression, amount of own aggression, and physical aggression subsample).

Study 2 also assessed couple functioning at Time 1, which was correlated with several of the other predictor variables (see Table 2). When this variable was added as a predictor to the model tested above, commitment remained significant, t(225) = 3.79, p < .001, partner’s aggression became marginal, t(225) = 3.79, p = .073, couple functioning was not significant, t(225) = −0.74, p = .462, and the other predictors exhibited the same pattern of significance. This suggests that standards for common aggression were not being driven by more general deficits in couple functioning.

We examined tolerance for severe aggression through the same predictor models examined for common aggression. Higher level of partner’s aggression and being male each was uniquely associated with greater tolerance for severe aggression, whereas the association of commitment was not significant (see Table 3, Study 2, Model 2). These findings replicate the Study 1b findings. When couple functioning was added as a predictor, the general pattern remained the same: Level of partner’s aggression was significant, t(225) = 2.73, p = .007, as was being male, t(225) = 8.44, p < .001. Couple functioning was marginal, t(225) = −1.96, p = .051, and the other predictors exhibited the same pattern of nonsignificance.

Longitudinal analysis.

Does onset of aggression predict a shift in standards? The longitudinal sample of individuals who had never experienced partner aggression (as assessed at Time 1) allowed for a direct test of Hypothesis 1b and 2b, which suggests that individuals would adopt more tolerant standards when they experience partner aggression for the first time, and commitment would have a unique association with tolerance once they experience partner aggression. The analysis compared individuals who reported an onset of partner aggression, versus those who did not. None of the models predicting tolerance for severe aggression were significant. Therefore, the analyses focused on tolerance for common aggression.

The data were analyzed using a residualized regression approach, whereby Time 6 tolerance for common aggression was regressed onto from Time 1 tolerance, along with other predictors. Additional regression models examined change scores (i.e., later score—Time 1 score); the same pattern of results emerged given that the two groups (no aggression group, new aggression group) did not differ in the distribution of tolerance scores at Time 1 (see Table 4, Tolerance for common aggression, Time 1). There was relatively high stability in the rankings of individuals on tolerance for common aggression from Time 1 to Time 6, r(39) = .72, p < .001. Although the mean change within-person (M = −.27) suggested an average decline over time in judgments tolerating common aggression of less than one scale point, individuals varied in how much they changed (SD = 1.15, range from −3.17 to 2.50).

We conducted a multiple regression analysis predicting Time 6 tolerance for common aggression, including as predictors: onset of aggression, commitment level (centered), and the interaction of onset of aggression and commitment, controlling for aggression normativity (centered), participant sex, and whether the relationship ended (wherein these control variables did not alter the pattern of results). The interaction term was significant, t(44) = 4.83, p < .001. None of the other variables exhibited a significant effect: onset, t(44) = 0.79, p = .433; commitment, t(44) = 0.22, p = .824; aggression normativity, t(44) = −1.47, p = .150; breakup status, t(44) = −0.12, p = .908; and participant sex,
\( r(44) = 0.93, p = .358 \). Additional analyses decomposed the significant interaction of commitment and an onset of aggression.

In one set of analyses, separate multiple regressions were run to examine the simple effect of commitment among individuals who experienced an onset of aggression versus those who did not. Figure 1 depicts the residualized change in tolerance for common aggression as a function of commitment level (Time 6 predicted levels, partialling out Time 1 levels), whereby higher numbers indicate increasingly tolerant judgments over time and lower numbers indicate decreasing tolerance. Commitment was associated with increased tolerance among those whose relationships became aggressive (onset group), \( r(14) = 3.71, p = .002, \beta = .61 \), but not among those whose relationship remained nonaggressive (no aggression group), \( r(26) = 0.16, p = .877, \beta = .03 \). When amount of new partner’s aggression was added as a predictor (in addition to aggression onset status), it was not significant, \( r(13) = -0.24, p = .810 \), whereas commitment remained significant, \( r(13) = 2.90, p = .012 \); the same pattern emerged when amount of new own aggression was added as a predictor, own aggression, \( r(13) = -0.43, p = .675, \) commitment \( r(13) = 2.78, p = .013 \). These findings support Hypothesis 2b: Greater commitment predicted an increase in tolerance for common partner aggression among individuals who experienced partner aggression for the first time.

A second set of analyses decomposed the interaction in an alternative way by examining the simple effect of onset of aggression among individuals who were highly committed, relative to those who were less committed.\(^7\) Onset of aggression predicted increased tolerance for common aggression among those who were highly committed, \( M (SD)_{onset} = 4.6 (1.3) \) versus \( M (SD)_{no\,onset} = 3.9 (1.5) \), \( r(25) = 2.09, p = .046, \beta = .34 \), and decreased tolerance among less committed individuals, \( M (SD)_{onset} = 2.6 (1.3) \) versus \( M (SD)_{no\,onset} = 2.8 (1.4) \), \( r(12) = -2.56, p = .025, \beta = -.36 \). When controlling for amount of new aggression by a partner, however, the effect of onset of aggression among highly committed individuals became marginal, \( r(11) = 1.85, p = .075 \), and the opposite association among less committed individuals vanished, \( r(11) = -0.88, p = .397 \); the association of amount of partner’s new aggression was not significant in either model. Similar findings were obtained when controlling for amount of own new aggression.

These findings provide qualified support of Hypothesis 1b: Onset of aggression predicted a shift toward greater tolerance of common aggression, but only among highly committed individuals. This shift was not observed among individuals who felt relatively less committed and had relationships that became aggressive, or among individuals whose relationships did not become aggressive.

**Do Time 1 standards predict onset of aggression?** We have demonstrated that committed individuals whose relationships be-

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\(^{7}\) For this particular analysis we present the simple effect of onset as a function of a dichotomized commitment variable. Over half of the participants in Study 2 (64\%) and Study 3 (55\%) indicated the highest possible level of commitment (a rating of “7” on a 7-point scale). For ease of simple effects presentation and interpretation, we dichotomized commitment to differentiate participants who indicated feeling maximally committed, versus those who felt less than a maximal level of commitment. In Study 2, the onset by commitment interaction was significant using the dichotomized commitment variable, \( r(44) = 2.43, p = .019 \). In Study 3, the manipulation by commitment interaction was significant using the dichotomized commitment variable, \( r(72) = 2.96, p = .004 \).
come aggressive will adjust their standards for partner aggression in ways that align with their new aggressive experiences. This analysis examined whether the reverse might true: Are people who report greater tolerance for common partner aggression more likely to enter relationships that become aggressive?

A logistic regression model examined onset of aggression as an outcome, including as predictors: Time 1 tolerance for common aggression, Time 1 commitment level, Time 1 aggression normativity, eventual breakup status (which did not alter the results), and participant sex. Time 1 tolerance for common aggression did not predict onset of aggression, Wald chi-square = 0.22, \( p = .640 \), nor did any other of the predictors. A second logistic model added as a predictor the interaction of commitment and tolerance for common aggression (both Time 1) to determine whether high commitment qualified a possible association between greater tolerance and ending up in an aggressive relationship. The interaction did not predict onset of aggression, Wald chi-square = 1.94, \( p = .164 \).

These null findings argue against the idea that personal standards regarding partner aggression precede personal experience with aggression (cf. Zayas & Shoda, 2007). The findings are more consistent with the idea that initial experiences with partner aggression subsequently shape personal standards. The findings suggest that experiencing aggression in a relationship creates an unpleasant state of dissonance; committed individuals may reduce such dissonance by shifting their standards to be more tolerant of partner aggression. Predicting breakup status. An exploratory logistic regression explored whether Time 1 predictors (commitment, tolerance for common aggression, aggression normativity, participant sex) or onset of aggression predicted whether participants were in relationships that ended versus persisted. As would be expected based on previous research (Le & Agnew, 2003), commitment predicted persistence, Wald chi-square = 5.68, \( p = .017 \); no other predictors in this analysis were significant. Another model included the interaction between aggression onset and Time 1 tolerance for common aggression. Perhaps individuals who experience aggression end their relationships based on their Time 1 standards. The interaction was not significant, Wald chi-square = 0.03. Similar findings emerged when Time 1 tolerance for severe aggression (rather than common aggression) was a predictor.

Summary and implications. Study 2 provides key information to understanding how experiences with partner aggression and commitment predict personal standards for partner aggression. Cross-sectional analysis of Time 1 data replicated the findings from the previous two studies. Group differences in current partner aggression status predicted personal standards for partner aggression. The cross-sectional findings suggest that individuals who are in an aggressive relationship adjust their standards; the more aggression they experience in a current relationship, the more they adopt standards that take into account their experiences. The cross-sectional results thus may reflect ways that individuals have accommodated to their aggression experiences. What is noteworthy about Study 2 is the longitudinal analysis of how individuals react when their first instance of partner aggression occurs, before they have had a chance to acclimate to partner aggression. When aggression first occurs, many individuals may not adjust their standards to be more tolerant of aggression. The longitudinal results revealed that only individuals who were motivated to protect and maintain their relationship—that is, those who were highly committed—immediately adopted more tolerant standards.

This suggests qualifying Hypothesis 1b: Individuals exhibit greater tolerance of common partner aggression when they first experience it, but only if they are highly committed to their relationship. Individuals who are highly committed need to justify continuing their relationship once it becomes aggressive (cf. Arriaga, 2002); adopting greater tolerance for partner aggression provides precisely that justification (e.g., “Even strong relationship may have difficult moments”). Importantly, the effects of commitment and onset of partner aggression were not eliminated when controlling for couple functioning more generally.

Study 2 also provides a more nuanced interpretation of support for the hypotheses regarding commitment. Whereas the cross-sectional analysis suggests a main effect of commitment, the prospective (longitudinal) analysis suggests a commitment effect that is qualified by current experiences. In the cross-sectional analyses, individuals who reported greater commitment tended to be those who reported greater tolerance for common aggression (commitment main effect). However, when examining a prospective shift (within-person change) in standards, highly committed individuals were inclined to adopt more tolerant standards only once their relationship became aggressive. Conditions that make salient or personalize aggression by a current partner may trigger commitment processes (e.g., adjusting personal standards), whereas conditions in which current aggression is less salient may not require the activation of commitment to protect a relationship. Study 3 directly tested this idea.

**Study 3**

Study 3 was an experiment designed to vary the personal relevance of partner aggression. Participants read a vignette that described a couple interaction in which a partner becomes verbally aggressive; participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions that varied whether the vignette described their own relationship or a stranger’s relationship. Participants were eligible if they reported aggression in their current relationship, which enhanced the plausibility of the aggressive vignette and increased the likely impact of varying personal relevance. Study 3 tested a combination of Hypotheses 1c and 2c: When the relevance of a partner’s aggression is high, individuals who feel committed would exhibit more tolerant standards in judging their partner’s aggression than those who feel less committed; when personal relevance is low, commitment will not trigger greater tolerance. Specifically, commitment should predict greater tolerance when judging aggressive acts imagined as occurring in one’s own relationship, and not when judging the same acts imagined as occurring in someone else’s relationship (a commitment by personal relevance interaction).

**Method**

**Design and participants.** A between-subjects design was used to vary the personal relevance of a partner’s aggression (manipulated variable: own partner vs. stranger’s partner); level of commitment was measured. The sample consisted of \( n = 73 \) college students (70% female) who were part of a subject pool at a large Midwest university and who received course credit for their
participation. The sample was recruited from participants who reported current partner aggression on a mass pretest administered to the entire subject pool. Of the $n = 81$ who had reported a current aggressive relationship on the pretest, $n = 9$ were in new and nonaggressive relationships by the time of the study; they were eliminated to retain a sample of individuals currently in an aggressive relationship. The final sample included $n = 38$ participants in the partner condition and $n = 35$ participants in the control (stranger) condition.

Participants exhibited typical demographic, relationship, and current aggression characteristics. They were 20-year-olds on average, primarily White/European (85%), exclusively involved (88%), with an average relationship duration of 24 months ($SD = 26$; with one outlier removed: $M = 21, SD = 17$). Most participants reported at least two acts of aggression of those measured in the previous studies (86%) and a smaller portion reported physical partner aggression (34%).

Procedure. Participants attended an on-campus lab session in groups of 10 or less. They were seated at individual computers separated by cubicles. An experimenter greeted participants, described the study, worked through consent procedures, and then instructed participants to complete computerized materials, which were administered through PsychData.com.

A cover story was used. The experimenter described the study as being about students’ views of different types of interpersonal situations involving individuals who they may know. Participants were told that they would be asked to imagine a specific situation with a specific other person, and that the computer would randomly assign them to the type of situation (fun activity, conflict, planning or decision making) and to a specific person (family member, relationship partner, friend, or stranger). In reality, all participants were directed to a conflict situation and were randomly assigned to imagine the situation involving either their partner or strangers.

All study materials were administered on computers. After completing the computerized materials, participants were debriefed and the experimenter talked with participants to assess their affective state; none were visibly upset.

Manipulation. The manipulation consisted of having participants read and imagine one of two versions of a conflict scenario to evoke high versus low personal relevance. Participants in the high relevance condition were instructed to imagine the situation occurring with their partner (vs. a stranger in the low relevance condition) to the best of their ability even if the situation seemed ambiguous or unlikely. In both versions of the scenario, a partner is upset and the couple discusses a problem. The partner’s tone becomes increasingly angry until the partner becomes verbally aggressive, using insults, criticism, and yelling. The partner ends by saying, “#@$%!!! Why do things have to be this way with you? Why do I put up with this and why do I put up with you?” The two versions of the scenario were written to be gender neutral; they were identical except in references to one’s own partner versus a stranger’s partner (e.g., “your partner” or “the stranger’s partner”).

Measures. Computerized surveys assessed basic demographic characteristics, current relationship characteristics (relationship quality including commitment, relationship duration, level of exclusivity), and attitudes toward close friend and a family member to support the cover story. After the manipulation, additional measures assessed the dependent variable, manipulation checks, and level of partner’s and own aggression in a current relationship.

Relationship status and demographic information. A series of questions tapped basic demographic and relationship characteristics (e.g., duration, exclusivity).

Commitment. Prior to the manipulation and while answering questions about relationship characteristics, participants completed the same measure of relationship quality that was used in Study 2 (Fletcher et al., 2000), which included the same single item to measure commitment.

Dependent variable. After the manipulation, participants were asked several questions that included the item of primary interest: “Would you (the) partner’s behavior be grounds for ending the relationship?” Participants answered using a 7-point response scale: 1 (not at all), 4 (somewhat), 7 (extremely). The item was reverse-scored so that higher numbers indicated greater tolerance for the partner’s aggression.

Manipulation checks. To ensure that the manipulation was effective, participants were asked three questions: “While imagining the hypothetical situation, to what extent did you have in mind your own present relationship?” “While imagining the hypothetical situation, to what extent did you have in mind a stranger’s relationship?” “While imagining the hypothetical situation, to what extent did you have in mind someone else?” The same 7-point response scale was used for all three items: 1 (not at all), 4 (somewhat), 7 (extremely). A series of ANOVAs indicated that the manipulation worked: Relative to participants in the stranger condition, participants in the partner condition were more likely to have in mind their own present relationship, $M(\text{SD})_{\text{partner}} = 5.2$ (1.7) versus $M(\text{SD})_{\text{stranger}} = 3.8$ (2.0), $t(72) = 3.09, p < .001$, less likely to have in mind a stranger’s relationship, $M(\text{SD})_{\text{partner}} = 2.7$ (1.8) versus $M(\text{SD})_{\text{stranger}} = 4.8$ (1.6), $t(72) = -5.34, p < .001$, and less likely to have in mind someone else, $M(\text{SD})_{\text{partner}} = 2.6$ (1.7) versus $M(\text{SD})_{\text{stranger}} = 3.7$ (2.0), $t(72) = -2.12, p = .018$.

Current aggression. Two measures of current aggression were administered. One was comparable with the amount of partner/own aggression used in the other studies (modeled after the Conflict Tactics Scale [CTS]; Straus & Gelles, 1990), using the same instructions and response scale but adding items to measure indirect aggression (e.g., silent treatment, ignoring a person out of anger) and physical injury from aggression (e.g., having a physical injury from a fight). A total of 19 items measured current partner’s aggression ($\alpha = .86$) and 19 items measured own aggression ($\alpha = .80$). Items were combined using variety scores, as was done in the previous studies, to tap mean number of aggressive acts endorsed for a current partner’s aggression and mean number of acts endorsed for own aggression.

An additional measure of partner and own aggression was modeled after the Follingstad Psychological Aggression Scale (FPAS; Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005). The measure used in this study consisted of items that clustered types of psychological aggression (e.g., “Become verbally aggressive toward a partner when upset. For example, yelling and screaming, losing one’s temper, calling a partner derogatory names, being overly sarcastic to the point of being insulting”). The scale used a 7-point response scale (1 = not at all/never, 4 = somewhat/at times, 7 = a lot) and included 14 items tapping partner psychological aggression ($\alpha = .88$) as well as 14 items tapping own psychological aggression ($\alpha = .81$).
Results and Discussion

We conducted a multiple regression analysis predicting the dependent variable from the personal relevance manipulation (0 = stranger/control condition, 1 = partner condition), commitment level (centered), and the interaction of the manipulation and commitment, controlling for participant sex. There was a main effect of the personal relevance manipulation, such that participants in the partner condition exhibited greater tolerance of the described aggressive behavior, $M_{SD\text{partner}} = 5.2$ (1.6) than those in the stranger condition, $M_{SD\text{stranger}} = 3.9$ (1.3), $t(68) = 4.46, p < .001$, and a main effect of participant sex, such that men were more tolerant than women, $M_{SD\text{men}} = 5.0$ (1.4) versus $M_{SD\text{women}} = 4.4$ (1.6), $t(68) = 3.08, p = .003, \beta = .31$. The effect of commitment was not significant, $t(68) = 0.55, p = .586, \beta = .07$. The manipulation main effect was qualified by an interaction with commitment, $t(68) = 2.39, p = .020, \beta = .32$. We examined the association of commitment with tolerance for the partner’s aggression within each level of the manipulation.

As can be seen in Figure 2, participants who imagined the conflict occurring with their partner (high relevance) exhibited greater tolerance to the extent that they were committed. The simple effect of commitment was significant in the high relevance condition, vs. low relevance: stranger condition). Higher numbers indicate more tolerant judgments. Partner condition: participants who imagined the partner becomes aggressive, highly committed individuals, possibly because high commitment motivated justifying being committed to an aggressive partner’s aggression when they were highly committed and personal relevance was high (own relationship). Less committed individuals in the same condition, and all individuals in the low relevance condition, were less accepting of a partner’s aggression. This suggests that high personal relevance and high commitment create a psychological state that motivates individuals to tolerate a partner’s aggression.

Indeed, the need to justify being committed to an aggressive relationship may even motivate how much an individual discloses about aggression in their current relationship. A few weeks prior to Study 3, participants were screened for experiencing aggression in a current relationship. Exploratory analyses revealed that their reports of current aggression during the study may have been influenced by the manipulation. After imagining an incident in which a partner becomes aggressive, highly committed individuals reported lower levels of current aggression than did less committed individuals, possibly because high commitment motivates downplaying current aggression when such aggression is particularly salient. In contrast, after imagining someone else’s partner becoming aggressive caused highly committed individuals to report higher levels of current aggression relative to less committed individuals, possibly because learning that others are aggressive reduces the stigma attached to being in an aggressive relationship.

General Discussion

Individuals tolerate many partner qualities and behaviors that can be irritating or negative; every person, including relationship partners, may have annoying habits and may be inconsiderate, thoughtless, selfish, or contentious on occasion. Partner aggression, however, comprises a specific relationship issue that can be uniquely hurtful to the person who is the target. Partner aggression predicts declines in target well-being and increases in target distress, often exhibiting such negative effects beyond the target’s awareness (Arriaga et al., 2013; Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015). The current research examined personal standards for partner aggression, and specifically how much aggression by a partner one
would be willing to tolerate before ending a relationship. The current analysis of how much aggression by a partner is too much suggests several theoretical and practical implications.

Individuals may develop standards for partner aggression, in part, based on what they perceive to be common or typical. Perceived norms for partner aggression, however, are not applied to personal situations in a uniform or static manner. We have suggested that individuals differ in their standards because they differ in their personal and relational motives.

In Studies 1a, 1b, and 2, all individuals were fairly tolerant of common aggression. Individuals who currently had an aggressive partner, however, revealed more tolerant standards for common partner aggression (mostly verbal aggression) than others. Those in aggressive relationships judged aggressive acts to be grounds for ending a relationship at a more severe point than was the case for others (see Table 1), suggesting a different “tipping point” in judging partner aggression.

When examined as continuous variables, relationship commitment and level of partner’s aggression uniquely predicted greater tolerance for common aggression (Hypotheses 1a and 1b), beyond the effects of own current aggression, aggression normativity, past aggression, and participant sex. Perceiving aggression to be common or typical (aggression normativity) and past aggression experiences did not exhibit robust associations with tolerance for aggression in models controlling for other variables. This suggests that perceived social norms are related to personal standards for partner aggression, but personal motives (need for consistency and relationship commitment) may exert a stronger influence.

Studies 2 and 3 provided more direct evidence for the idea that being directly affected by partner aggression may cause standards to shift. The longitudinal component of Study 2 revealed that individuals shifted their aggression standards toward greater tolerance when they experienced partner aggression for the first time, but only if they were strongly committed to their relationship (Hypotheses 1b and 2b combined). This is consistent with a causal process whereby being the target of aggression causes people to adopt more tolerant standards. There was not support for the opposite causal process: Individuals with more tolerant standards of partner aggression were not more likely to be in a relationship that became aggressive. Societal norms and beliefs may affect whether aggression is condoned in others’ relationships, but ultimately experiences in one’s own relationship dynamically shape personal standards for aggression. The longitudinal component of Study 2 thus may capture the origins of personal standards that eventually cause group differences between those who are currently involved in an aggressive relationship and those who are not, as exhibited in Table 1. Moreover, when participants experienced partner aggression for the first time, their Time 1 standards did not predict what they actually tolerated as indicated by the lack of prediction of their stay/leave decisions. People were able to indicate behavior that they considered to be grounds for ending a relationship, but they did not necessarily end their relationship when their partner behaved precisely in the way that had seemed unacceptable.

Study 3 experimentally varied the personal relevance of partner aggression. Participants who were in aggressive relationships imagined a situation in which either their own partner becomes aggressive (high relevance) or a stranger’s partner becomes aggressive (low relevance). Even though the behavior was the same on both conditions, participants were more tolerant of their partner’s aggressive behavior than a stranger’s behavior. This occurred, however, only among individuals who were motivated by strong commitment (Hypothesis 1c and 2c combined). This study underscores the powerful context of a romantic relationship (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000) in shaping perceptions of others’ behavior.

Individuals who reported high levels of aggression by a current partner revealed greater tolerance for severe acts of partner aggression, relative to others (see cross-sectional analyses of Studies 1b and 2). Arguably individuals with severely aggressive partners shift their standards over time to become aligned with their current experiences. In contrast to current experiences, relationship commitment was not associated with tolerance for severe aggression.

The current studies revealed that motivational variables (current aggression status, commitment level) reliably predict greater tolerance for common partner aggression, more so than do social norms variables (aggression normativity, past aggression). Committed people may manage aggression in several ways.

Is it a case of committed individuals seeing ambiguous behaviors as not being aggressive? Study 3 argues against this possibility given that participants randomly assigned to imagine aggressive behavior in different contexts (own relationship vs. stranger’s relationship) perceived the same behavior in different ways; the context mattered more than the behavior itself. Instead, is it a case of accurately perceiving aggressive behavior but minimizing its effects? This explanation is plausible given that people perceive events differently when they no longer are in an abusive relationship: They feel happier and more accurately perceive the damaging effect of their past partner’s aggression (Arriaga et al., 2013; Follingstad et al., 1990).

Are tolerant standards a case of accurate perceptions of aggression being overridden by relational considerations? We suspect that individuals who are motivated to continue their relationship are affected by focalism bias (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). People judging a list of aggressive acts that do not pertain to them may be considering only the aggressive acts, whereas people judging aggressive acts that do pertain to them instead may be considering more complicated feelings that bring to mind other partner episodes of happiness and love. Such broader relational considerations may cause a person to reframe a partner’s aggressive behavior, in effect minimizing the behavior’s meaning (cf. transformation of motivation; Arriaga, 2013; Reis & Holmes, 2012). Moreover, when accurate perceptions result in judgments that minimize aggression along these lines, these judgments may be deliberate at first but become relatively habitual and automated over time (Wood & Neal, 2007), which could modify the basic perceptual process that was examined in Study 3.

In sum, tolerance for aggression could reflect seeing ambiguous behaviors as not aggressive, a minimization of aggression effects, or an accurate perception of aggression being overridden by other motivational forces and relational concerns. We have suggested that motivational forces override accurate perceptions of aggression and cause the meaning and effects of aggression to be minimized; over time this could affect how aggressive behaviors are “seen.” This issue remains to be resolved in future research.
Unexpected Findings, Limitations, and Strengths

Several findings were not hypothesized in advance. Although there were theoretical reasons to anticipate that strong commitment would motivate greater tolerance of partner aggression among individuals in aggressive relationships, there was not a strong theoretical basis for this prediction among individuals who were not in aggressive relationships. The effects of being highly committed may generalize to everyone. In the cross-sectional results of Studies 1a, 1b, and 2, greater commitment was associated with greater tolerance of common aggression but not severe aggression. In the more rigorous longitudinal design, however, highly committed people adopted more tolerant standards of common aggression (a within-person change) only if their relationship became aggressive; those who were in relationships that did not become aggressive retained their initial standards. People often have negative beliefs about partner aggression, but such beliefs may weaken once aggression affects them personally.

A second finding that was unexpected occurred in the Study 3 experiment. Aggression in a current relationship was assessed after the manipulation and dependent variable, to maintain a cover story that was used. The unexpected finding was that the manipulation affected reports of current aggression. When participants were exposed to a stranger’s aggression, they were more inclined to report own and partner aggression to the extent that they were committed. Knowing that others experience aggression and being motivated to protect their relationship may have combined to cause higher reporting of current aggression. In contrast, participants asked to imagine their partner’s aggression reported lower rates of partner aggression to the extent that they were highly committed (there was no effect on reports of own aggression). This is consistent with the idea that they are motivated to present their relationship in a more positive light. The findings are tentative; it is conceivable that despite random assignment, individuals in the two conditions differed prior to the manipulation.

A third unexpected finding that was present in almost all of the studies was that male participants were more tolerant of partner aggression than were female participants (a sex main effect on judging tolerance of aggressive acts). This occurred across judgments of commonsense and severe aggression. Although there are not consistent gender differences in perpetrating common aggression (verbal aggression, some psychological aggression), these studies suggest that men may tolerate more aggression by a partner than would women.

A limitation of the current research is that the measure of tolerance for partner aggression was worded only to assess an individual’s tolerance for acts enacted by a partner, and did not assess what individuals consider to be acceptable for their own behavior. Had such a measure been included, this may have shed further light on possible gender differences. We did not find that being more aggressive predicted greater tolerance for a partner’s behavior; that is, perpetrators did not feel a need justify their aggressive behavior by claiming such acts are not grounds for ending a relationship. Future research could directly compare judgments of partner acts and own acts of aggression to determine whether (or when) aggressive individuals might adopt more lenient standards.

The samples were limited in that they comprised college students who primarily were in dating relationships. Although their relational and aggression characteristics were typical for adults in their age group, their results may not generalize to older and/or married adults.

A strength of this research is that the studies assessed both partner and own aggression in one’s current relationship (except in Study 1a). Another strength concerns the sample obtained in Study 2 of individuals who had never experienced partner aggression, and who were examined over time to assess how standards change after experiencing aggression. That sample was difficult to obtain, which resulted in an underpowered analysis. The other studies were based on larger samples, in some instances substantial samples for cross-sectional analyses (Studies 1a, 1b, and 2).

All of the samples were derived from a subject pool of college students at a large Midwestern university. This may pose a limitation in generalizing the findings to others. There are no strong theoretical reasons, however, to anticipate that the findings would differ for other college students or young adults in the United States. Other studies have revealed similar rates of partner aggression (Cercone et al., 2005; Hines & Saudino, 2003). Young adults and college students provide an important demographic group in which to study standards for partner aggression given the high prevalence of partner aggression and the important experiences that can shape their future relationships. Developmentally, this is precisely the stage in which many relationship patterns are formed. One such pattern concerns tolerating the type of partner aggression that is likely to occur in their current and future relationships, given that across the studies and samples, most individuals were fairly tolerant of common aggression.

Broader Implications

The current findings advance theory on commitment processes. This research suggests qualifying generalized statements about the benefits of relationship commitment (e.g., “commitment is good”). Strong commitment predicts relationship persistence (Le & Agnew, 2003), but it may also motivate perceptions of partner aggression that sustain a relationship at the expense of a person’s well-being (Arriaga et al., 2013; cf. Hui, Finkel, Fitzsimons, Kumasihro, & Hofmann, 2014; McNulty, 2010). When strong commitment motivates lenient standards in judging partner aggression, there is a risk of condoning new instances of partner aggression and persisting in a relationship that is harmful.

The current findings also suggest new theory on social norms regarding partner aggression and violence. Efforts to create new (injunctive) norms for what is considered to be acceptable can be used to address entrenched societal problems—for example, norms that make severe violence against women and girls worldwide unacceptable, or norms to suggest that curbing climate change can be profitable (Raymond, Weldon, Kelly, Arriaga, & Clark, 2014). The current studies, however, suggest that beliefs about what is typical or common (descriptive norms) may not account for the standards individuals use in judging common partner aggression. Such standards shift in dynamic ways when they affect an individual’s relationship and are filtered through personal and relational motives.

Tolerance for severe aggression was not affected by level of commitment, and the predictive value of believing that partner aggression is common (aggression normativity) was inconsistent. Greater tolerance for severe aggression, however, was consistently observed among individuals who had highly aggressive partners. This is important because it suggests that individuals who experience relatively
severe partner aggression are not inclined to end their relationship—that is, they do not judge such acts as warranting ending a relationship.

What does this suggest for intervention efforts? Domestic violence increasingly is considered to be unacceptable worldwide (Eurobarometer Survey, 2010), particularly as cases gain public awareness (http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jun/10/moscow-domestic-violence-problem-russia). Beliefs about what one finds to be acceptable, however, do not always predict actions when aggression actually occurs in one’s own or a close others’ relationship. How to address cases of domestic violence remains a controversial issue. A recent high profile case of domestic violence by a prominent U.S. athlete, for example, sparked a public debate over the failure of others to intervene, including the lack of swift action by sports leagues when confronted with clear evidence of players perpetrating partner violence (“Upon Further Review,” 2014). These recent events highlight how cases of domestic violence continue to be “swept under the rug,” just as they were decades ago (Gelles, 1993).

Efforts to address tolerance of partner aggression are important. It may be obvious that tolerance of severe partner aggression can result in physical injury. What is less obvious is that tolerance of common aggression is pervasive, despite the psychological harm of such aggression, harm that often goes unnoticed. If societal tolerance of aggression breeds further aggression, then interventions would need to target such injunctive norms that support all types of aggression. Equally important, however, is an understanding of the personal motives that may keep people in violent situations. Such an understanding may spawn interventions to help individuals fulfill their needs in ways that do not cause them harm (e.g., trying to reduce a partner’s aggressive behavior, pursuing a nonaggressive relationship). We are not suggesting that targets of aggression are responsible for their fate. Rather, we are suggesting that intervention efforts may be futile if they focus only on norms without also addressing the motives that may cause people to adjust their standards for acceptable behavior by others. Perpetrators, although aggressive, may target specific needs that individuals have. Intervention efforts, therefore, might identify those needs and encourage other ways of satisfying them.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the decision regarding how much aggression is too much may hinge on the extent to which a person wants their relationship to continue. People often persist in aggressive relationships, even in highly abusive relationships, not necessarily (or only) because they are financially dependent but rather because they are emotionally dependent (Strube, 1988). Intimate relationships are a fundamental aspect of people’s lives (Reis et al., 2000), even for people who may not be aware of how affected they are by their relationship (Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015; McNulty, Olson, Meltzer, & Shaffer, 2013). Outsiders may not understand the powerful draw of a person’s intimate relationship, until those outsiders are themselves in a committed relationship. At that point, people often shift their beliefs and values to align with their current relationship experiences, a process that was demonstrated in the current research. Standards for acceptable relationship behavior are malleable, which can help relationships persist but also may create a slippery slope that encourages tolerance of aggressive behavior.

**References**


Appendix

Measures of Aggression Normativity and Aggression Tolerance: Items and Factor Loadings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Aggression normativity: “Indicate how common the behavior is . . .”</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Shout or yell at a partner.</td>
<td>.59  -.13  .14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Threaten to hit partner or threaten to throw something at a partner.</td>
<td>.54  -.11  .14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Refused to talk about an issue with a partner.</td>
<td>.62  -.09  .16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Call a partner names (like “ugly,” “idiot”).</td>
<td>.63  -.14  .08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Belittle a partner in front of others</td>
<td>.63  -.08  .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tell a partner that someone else would be better for the relationship.</td>
<td>.77  -.04  .00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Threaten to hit a partner or threaten to throw something at a partner.</td>
<td>.70  -.07  -.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Intentionally destroy a partner’s belongings.</td>
<td>.63  .00  -.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Say to a partner in an angry or threatening way, “You’ll never get away from me.”</td>
<td>.85  .03  -.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Push or shove a partner.</td>
<td>.86  .06  -.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Slap or hit a partner.</td>
<td>.85  .08  -.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Grab and shake a partner.</td>
<td>.86  .06  -.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Hit a partner with a fist or with something that could hurt.</td>
<td>.79  .09  -.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Slam or hold a partner against a wall.</td>
<td>.86  .08  -.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Beat up partner.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Use physical force against a partner.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Aggression tolerance: “To what extent would there be grounds to end your relationship if your partner . . .”</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>. . . shouted or yelled at you.</td>
<td>.02  -.04  .71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>. . . insulted or swore at you.</td>
<td>-.01  -.02  .77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>. . . refused to talk about an issue with you.</td>
<td>.03  -.06  .62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>. . . called you names (like “ugly,” “idiot”).</td>
<td>.03  .21  .73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>. . . belittled you in front of others.</td>
<td>.02  .15  .72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>. . . told you that someone else would be a better partner.</td>
<td>.00  .27  .51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>. . . threatened to hit you or threatened to throw something at you.</td>
<td>-.02  .65  .32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>. . . intentionally destroyed your belongings.</td>
<td>.03  .65  .26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>. . . said to you in an angry or threatening way, “You’ll never get away from me.”</td>
<td>.01  .62  .21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>. . . pushed or shoved you.</td>
<td>.04  .71  .23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>. . . slapped or hit you.</td>
<td>-.07  .88  .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>. . . grabbed you and shook you.</td>
<td>-.00  .84  .09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>. . . hit you with a fist or with something that could hurt.</td>
<td>-.08  .99  -.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>. . . slammed or held you against a wall.</td>
<td>.02  .92  -.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>. . . beat you up.</td>
<td>-.08  .95  -.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>. . . used physical force against you.</td>
<td>.03  .90  -.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The factor analysis was based on the samples in Studies 1a, 1b, and 2. Three factors emerged. The loadings for each of three factors appear in the three columns along the right numbered 1, 2, and 3.

This item was missing in Study 1 (see Footnote 1).