HUMAN AGGRESSION
AND VIOLENCE

Causes, Manifestations, and Consequences

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THE PARADOX OF PARTNER AGGRESSION: BEING COMMITTED TO AN AGGRESSIVE PARTNER

XIMENA B. ARRIAGA AND NICOLE M. CAPEZZA

Aggression in relationships is a serious problem. In the United States, for example, approximately, 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are physically assaulted by a romantic partner annually, with the majority of reported acts (about 75%) being mild forms of aggression, such as pushing or slapping (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Each year, about 5% of physically abused women (approximately 44,000) suffer serious injuries from being beaten up, choked, or assaulted with a weapon. (Such severe acts are significantly more likely to be perpetrated by men against women than the reverse; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; see also Chapters 2, 13, and 14, this volume.)

Whereas other forms of aggression often occur in contexts where aggression might be expected (e.g., between antagonistic groups), aggression committed by a relationship partner violates most people's fundamental hopes and expectations for a close relationship. Targets of partner aggression who are committed to their relationship are left to make sense of a paradox: The presumed source of love and intimacy is also the source of pain. This paradox often causes outsiders to wonder why the victims of partner aggression remain with their aggressive partner.

In this chapter, we suggest that perceptions or interpretations of the partner's acts play a central role in continuing the relationship, and we consider
the possibility that individuals perceive aggressive partner acts as less severe to
the extent that they are committed. Victims who downplay their partner's
aggression fail to protect themselves and thus run the risk of being hurt further.
Moreover, when members of a society fail to recognize that partner aggression
has negative consequences and should not be tolerated, partner aggression
becomes more likely to continue as perpetrators avoid punishment and targets
to fall get needed protection and support.

We begin by defining partner aggression and delineating the different
forms it takes. We then review our own and other research on what is known
about perceptions of partner aggression in general, and about how victims' percep-
tions compare with others' perceptions. We then shift the focus from percep-
tions of partner aggression in general to how victims perceive their own
partner's acts. We use concepts from interdependence and consistency theories
to suggest that the closer and more committed the victim feels to the perpetra-
tor, the more likely she is to downplay his aggressive acts. We end by discussing
how a victim's well-being is affected by continuing a relationship in which she
downplays her partner's aggressive acts.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PARTNER AGGRESSION?

Our focus is on acts that occur between partners in an intimate relation-
ship and that are intended to inflict harm. These include physically aggressive
acts, such as hitting, punching, and kicking. They also include psychologically
aggressive acts, such as yelling, derogating, threatening, and otherwise attempt-
ing to control and dominate another person (O'Leary, 1999).

For several reasons, we are particularly interested in perceptions of psy-
chological aggression. Severe forms of psychological aggression, such as humili-
ating, degrading, and threatening a partner, are highly correlated with
occurrences of physical aggression (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). Moreover,
recent research has revealed, somewhat surprisingly, that a pattern of sustained
psychological aggression is as or more damaging to a victim than physical
aggression. For instance, over 70% of physically abused women report that
emotional abuse had a more damaging effect on their self-esteem and health
than physical aggression (Pollingstedt, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990).
Psychological aggression not only has a strong, deleterious effect on a victim's
mental health (e.g., Arias & Pape, 1999), but it has also been linked to a num-
ber of adverse physical health outcomes. Victims of psychological aggression
are just as likely as victims of physical aggression to suffer from chronic neck
or back pain, migraines, stomach ulcers, spastic colon, and gastrointestinal
symptoms, among other health problems (Coker et al., 2002; Coker, Smith,
Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000). Thus, psychological aggression has clear
mental and physical health outcomes for victims.

Yet, as we describe later in this chapter, psychological aggression is not
perceived to be as serious as physical aggression, despite the growing literature
on the severe consequences of psychological aggression suggesting otherwise.
This may make victims themselves and people in general less likely to counter
partner psychological aggression than physical aggression.

Much of our analysis focuses on commitment, a strong subjective force
that keeps people in relationships (Rusbult, 1983). A victim's feeling tied to
a partner, imagining a long-term future with the partner, and intending to
remain in the relationship—all of which are aspects of commitment (Arriga
& Agnew, 2001)—create a subjective state that motivates more benign inter-
pretations of negative partner acts (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001).
To date, we have examined commitment and type of aggression (i.e., phys-
ical vs. psychological) as important factors predicting perceptions of partner
aggression, but there are likely many other personality, relational, and social
circumstances that affect perceptions. We begin our analysis by establishing
how partner aggression is generally perceived.

HOW IS PARTNER AGGRESSION GENERALLY PERCEIVED?

Perceptions of partner aggression vary. One source of variation is time,
in that perceptions are more negative today than they used to be. A second
source of variation in perceptions is the specific type of aggression being
considered.

General U.S. Norms

In the United States, acts of physical aggression in intimate relationships
may have been tolerated 40 years ago, but they are now generally considered
unacceptable (Gelles, 1993). Representative U.S. samples have shown that
acts of physical aggression (e.g., punch, slap) are considered to be cases of
domestic violence and are thus unlawful. For instance, 98.8% of respondents
in one study (Carlson & Worden, 2005) reported that a husband punching his
wife constitutes domestic violence, and 91.3% considered slapping to be an
act of domestic violence.

Although these U.S. norms against physical abuse have become stable
parts of American culture, there is an absence of comparable norms against
psychological aggression. For instance, only 53.8% of respondents consider
a husband insulting his wife by calling her "a stupid slob" to be domestic
violence (Carlson & Worden, 2005). Other studies of representative American samples (e.g., Sorenson & Taylor, 2005) have shown that sanctions against a perpetrator (e.g., arrest, restraining orders) are supported more for physically aggressive behaviors (e.g., slapping, punching, beating) than for psychologically aggressive behaviors (e.g., belittling, humiliating, threatening). On one hand, this may not seem surprising given that physical aggression can lead to visible injuries whereas psychological aggression leaves no physical marks. But on the other hand, U.S. society's failure to condemn psychological aggression is surprising given that its effects are as or more damaging to the victim's long-term well-being than physical aggression. It is as if American adults adhere to the familiar childhood retort that "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Unfortunately, that long-lived maxim is untrue.

Research that attempts to identify individual characteristics that make a person prone to tolerate domestic violence has yielded mixed findings. For example, several studies examining the sex of the perceiver suggest that women find a perpetrator's aggressive behavior more blameworthy and less acceptable than do men (e.g., Cauffman, Feldman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000; Pierce & Harris, 1999), but not all studies have found similar sex differences (e.g., Capezza & Arriga, 2008a). Although there may be some variation among ethnic groups and subcultures, the belief that acts of partner aggression are best avoided seems to be widely held in the United States.

Physical Versus Psychological Aggression

Our own research (Capezza & Arriga, 2008a, 2008b) suggests that perceptions are strongly influenced by the nature of the partner acts and that not all forms of partner aggression are perceived equally. In one study (Capezza & Arriga, 2008b), college students who had previously been or were currently in a relationship read a hypothetical scenario in which a marital couple has an argument and the husband becomes aggressive. The levels of physical aggression (i.e., none, low, high) and psychological aggression (i.e., low, high) were crossed in a between-subjects factorial design. After reading the scenario, participants completed measures of their perceptions of (a) the perpetrator's behavior and (b) the conflict.

The results revealed that participants generally held negative perceptions regarding the event, with mean ratings beyond the midpoint and close to the scale anchor indicating negative perceptions. The main effect for physical aggression was strong: Across all dependent variables, participants perceived the perpetrator and conflict in more negative ways with increasing levels of physical aggression, confirming that norms exist among the college students we sampled against using physical force in a relationship. The effect for psychological aggression was not as robust, however: One dependent variable failed to show any effect; one showed a more negative perception for high (vs. low) psychological aggression, and one showed the effect only when physical aggression was absent (i.e., a simple effect within the no physical aggression condition). A similar study (Capezza & Arriga, 2008a) revealed that participants' perceptions did not vary between a vignette depicting verbal aggression (e.g., yelling and swearing) versus one depicting severe emotional aggression (e.g., ridiculing, degrading, highly threatening behaviors), despite the documented serious consequences of emotional aggression.

People generally see physical partner aggression as negative. Views of psychological aggression, although not positive or neutral, are not uniformly negative. It stands to reason that victims of partner aggression should share these perceptions; that is, they should view their partner's behavior negatively, particularly when the acts qualify as physical aggression. Social psychological theories, however, suggest that this commonsense prediction may be incorrect, as we explain in the next section outlining our theoretical analysis of victim perceptions.

WHY MIGHT VICTIM PERCEPTIONS DIFFER FROM OTHERS' PERCEPTIONS?

At first glance, it seems counterintuitive to suggest that victims of partner aggression might downplay their partner's aggressive acts. One might expect victims to seek help and sympathy and to complain that their partner's acts are severe and damaging. Why and how, then, might victims downplay their partner's aggressive acts? Two social psychological theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant when answering this question.

Consistency Theories

In social psychology, consistency theories suggest that victims who feel particularly tied or committed to their partners would be likely to perceive their partner's aggressive acts less negatively than victims who are less committed to their partners. Heider's (1958) balance theory, for example, suggests what he called a positive unit relation between the two partners and a positive unit relation between the perpetrator and his aggressive act. At the outset, the sentiment relation between the victim and the perpetrator's aggressive act would be negative, comprising a state of imbalance among the three relations (i.e., two positive and one negative relation). If the unit relation linking the two partners is strong, that is, if the ties keeping them together are strong and the victim is committed, then this would create pressure to shift the sentiment...
relation between the victim and the perpetrator's aggressive act from negative to neutral or positive. In short, the victim would adopt a less negative view of the partner's aggressive act.

In addition to commitment, the nature of the aggressive behavior may also make a difference. Overly aggressive acts (e.g., hitting, punching) are more difficult to reinterpret as benign than are less physical forms of aggression (e.g., belittling, degrading). Regardless of commitment level, an individual may be more likely to adopt a neutral sentiment toward an act of verbal aggression than toward an act of physical aggression.

Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory would make a similar prediction. The theory suggests that accepting two opposing beliefs results in mental discomfort that motivates a person to change one of the beliefs to be consistent with the other. Less committed individuals faced with an aggressive (and thus negative) partner act might come to feel more negative about the relationship. More committed individuals, however, are motivated to feel positive about the partner and therefore would adopt a less negative perception of the partner act. Similarly, less physical forms of aggression would not create as much dissonance as would overtly physical forms of aggression.

Interdependence Theory

A second theoretical framework that is useful for understanding why victims might downplay partner aggression is interdependence theory (Kelley, 1979). This theory provides an analysis of thoughts and actions based on a person's interaction situation (e.g., a partner interaction) and the person's broader goals toward the relationship. Highly committed individuals are strongly affected by what the partner does; they are "dependent" on the partner to the extent that their interaction experience is strongly affected by what the partner does or what the two partners do in unison.

Contentious interpersonal situations, including ones in which a partner is aggressive, trigger in most people an inclination to retaliate with comparable behavior (Kelley, 1979). However, what often redirects the expected reaction and determines the actual response is a person's broader goals for the relationship. Actual behavior reflects any of several broad goals, such as wanting to help the partner, promote the relationship, or be slightly ahead of the partner (McCintock, 1972). When faced with a highly negative interaction—for example, when the partner is aggressive—highly committed individuals will either be motivated to respond in ways that salvage the relationship (e.g., downplay or justify the aggressive act) or reduce their motivation to save the relationship by becoming less committed and dependent. Research has shown that, compared with less committed individuals, more committed individuals respond to a negative partner behavior by redirecting their reaction from retaliation to an attempt to diffuse the contentious situation (Yovetich & Rusht, 1994).

To the extent that psychological aggression does not have the social taboo attached to physical aggression, situations in which a partner is psychologically aggressive may be perceived as less contentious than physical aggression situations. Victims may find it easier to respond in benign ways toward less than more overt forms of aggression, irrespective of their commitment level.

In addition to predicting responses to contentious partner situations, interdependence theory suggests that people become acclimated to events in their relationship by forming expectations of typical behavior, namely a standard of comparison or "comparison level" (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Individuals gauge their satisfaction level based on whether events in their relationship exceed their expectations (causing high satisfaction) or fall short of their expectations (causing low satisfaction). As such, victims who repeatedly experience partner aggression may come to expect the occurrence of aggression in their current and future intimate relationships. The more aggression individuals experience, the more likely they are to perceive the acts as normal rather than severely negative.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks call into question the idea that a target of partner aggression would immediately take a negative stance toward the partner's aggressive actions. It depends on factors such as the individual's level of commitment, the nature of the aggressive acts, and the current comparison level or level of expectations.

REINTERPRETING THE PAST: DO VICTIMS DOWNPLAY THEIR PARTNER'S PAST AGGRESSION?

Earlier we reviewed research examining how people in general view aggression in relationships. Given the theoretical analysis we described, a likely source of systematic variation in perceptions of partner aggression is whether one is currently being victimized. Because current victims are linked to an aggressive partner, they may have a vested interest in holding more tolerant perceptions of partner aggression. Indeed, a recent worldwide study by the World Heath Organization (Garcia-Moreno, Heise, Jansen, Ellsberg & Watts, 2005) revealed that perceiving a male partner's aggression as normal or justified—specifically, accepting a man's beating of his wife—was more pervasive among women who had experienced such aggression than among those who had not.

Much (but not all) of our own research on this issue has primarily involved female college students. We focus on women mainly to narrow our analysis at the outset, with the intention of expanding it to male victims once
the basic processes of entrapment are well understood. By no means do we suggest that men are not victims of partner aggression; in fact, research has shown that they can be at risk with respect to less severe aggression (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

We focus on college students for several reasons. From a practical standpoint, it has been convenient to collect data from college samples. More important, however, on theoretical grounds, we have been interested in the forces that keep victims connected to an aggressive partner when there are no legally binding reasons for remaining with the partner (which is the case in marriage), and when victims reside in an environment where there are many other potential partners (which interdependence theory conceptualizes in terms of the comparison level for alternatives; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Because the objective circumstances are such that leaving one's abusive partner should not be difficult, it stands to reason that the subjective circumstances keeping victims in the relationship must be strong.

Research Comparing General Perceptions of Current Victims, Past Victims, and Nonvictims

We sought to examine further the link between being victimized and holding tolerant beliefs regarding partner aggression (Arriga, 2007). We predicted that current or past victims would be more tolerant than nonvictims, based on the idea in interdependence theory that individuals shift their point of reference for expected behavior based on their own experiences. The more aggression one has experienced, the more aggression might come to be expected in relationships, and thus the less likely it would be viewed as grounds for ending a relationship.

Our critical prediction, however, was with respect to differences between current and past victims. If these two groups do not differ in their perceptions of partner aggression, it suggests that these perceptions are not motivated by one's current relationship goals. They are influenced only by the victim's experiences and expectations. Consistency and interdependence theories, however, suggest that current victims should be more tolerant of partner aggression than past victims. Current victims remain involved with their partner and thus have an interest in holding perceptions that are consistent with this involvement. We anticipated support for a motivated cognition process, whereby current victims would be more tolerant in general of partner aggression than past victims, who in turn would be more tolerant than nonvictims.

Across two studies, we recruited female college students who had previously been or currently were in a relationship (Study 1, n = 186; Study 2, n = 156). Participants completed several measures, including their own relationship status (i.e., currently dating or not), and their victimization status (i.e., current victim, victim in a past relationship, never been victimized) as indicated by a scale modeled after the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus & Gelles, 1990). The CTS asks participants to indicate the number of times their current partner has engaged in specific verbally, emotionally, or physically aggressive acts (e.g., partner insulted or swore at you, partner grabbed and shook you).

Participants also completed a scale that asked about the same and additional specific partner aggressive acts; on this scale, they were instructed to indicate the degree to which having a partner commit that act would be grounds for ending a relationship. We also included one nonaggressive conflict act as a comparison point. The scale anchors were definitely would not end a relationship versus definitely would end a relationship. Responses were recoded and averaged to create three dependent variables, with higher numbers indicating more tolerance for a particular type of act: (a) a nonaggressive act (e.g., refused to talk about an issue with you), (b) psychologically aggressive acts (e.g., insulted or swore at you, intentionally destroyed your belongings), and (c) physically aggressive acts (e.g., grabbed and shook you). Study 2 also assessed the participant's perpetration status and eliminated participants who had been perpetrators more than victims. All analyses controlled for whether the participant was currently in a relationship. Study 1 also controlled for the format of the survey (paper and pencil vs. online). Study 2 exclusively relied on online surveys, but controlled for participant's amount of perpetration.

Generally, both samples perceived physical aggression to be grounds for ending a relationship. Both samples were more tolerant of psychological aggression than physical aggression and were less uniform (i.e., more variable) in their ratings of psychological aggression. Both samples were relatively tolerant of a nonaggressive act. In short, not all aggressive acts are perceived similarly, and there is more tolerance of psychological aggression than of physical aggression.

Despite these general trends, in both studies the participant's victimization status was significantly and positively associated with perceptions of what would be grounds for ending a relationship. This provides evidence that standards shift based on one's experience, consistent with interdependence theory's comparison level construct. Moreover, perceptions of partner aggression were motivated by the amount of connection with a partner. Current victims were more tolerant of psychological aggression than past victims, who were more tolerant than nonvictims. In short, the more connected a victim is, the more motivated the victim may be to tolerate partner aggression.

We now turn to a more direct indicator of connection to a partner: a person's level of commitment. We also focus more specifically on perceptions of acts that have already occurred, rather than perceptions of what might be grounds for ending a relationship if they were to occur. That is, we shift our focus from hypothetical, possible acts to ones that have actually occurred.
Research on Commitment and Partner Aggression

Consistency theories provide a framework for anticipating differences between individuals who are currently involved with an abusive partner and those who are not. However, these theories have not provided precise ways to conceptualize and measure variations in closeness or connection among relationship partners. In that respect, interdependence theory has been useful. Rusbuldt’s concept of relationship commitment (Rusbuldt, 1983; Rusbuldt et al., 2001)—thoughts and feelings that reflect wanting to continue the relationship and being attached to the partner, thoughts and feelings that stem from being strongly affected by a partner—is useful for predicting variations in perceptions among current daters. In several lines of work, our basic prediction has been the same: The more committed a victim is to a partner, the more likely the victim will be to avoid maintaining strongly negative views of the partner’s aggressive acts.

One study (Arriaga, 2002) testing this basic prediction examined whether victims of partner aggression “spin” (reinterpret) their partner’s aggressive acts as “just joking around.” Students at a community college and a large university were recruited for a survey study. Of the 82 who reported currently being in a romantic relationship, 54 (18 males and 36 females) reported that their current partner had engaged in at least one aggressive act. Participants completed various relationship measures, including a widely used measure of commitment (Rusbuldt, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) and the CTS (Straus & Gelles, 1990) to indicate the number of times their current partner had been aggressive, that is, to indicate the amount of conflict-related violence.

Participants also completed a scale modeled after the CTS, listing the same aggressive acts but varying the instructions to elicit instances when the partner was joking around. Some of the acts listed—the same as those used earlier in the survey—might well have occurred when the partner was joking around (e.g., pushing) but other acts were unequivocally aggressive (e.g., kicking, beating up, striking with a weapon). Participants who reported these severe aggressive acts in a joking context were deemed to be reinterpreting unambiguously violent behaviors as being less serious or nonviolent than they really were. The number of times these severe acts occurred provided an indicator of joking violence.

In general, participants who reported more conflict violence also reported more joking violence, $r(54) = .36, p < .01$. The association of conflict violence with joking violence was moderated, however, by commitment level, suggesting that highly committed individuals did not share the same pattern of perceptions that characterized less committed individuals. Less committed individuals who reported conflict violence were no more or less likely to report joking violence, $r(22) = -.06, p = .79$. In contrast, highly committed individuals were much more likely to have their reports of joking violence associated with their reports of conflict violence, $r(32) = .59, p < .01$, suggesting that they reinterpreted their partner’s aggression in ways that would make it easier to accept while continuing the relationship.

The highest levels of conflict violence were reported by individuals who were highly committed and who reported joking violence. For highly committed individuals, accepting partner aggression and reinterpreting it go hand in hand. As would be predicted from cognitive dissonance theory, individuals who are strongly tied (i.e., committed) to their partner feel a sense of entrapment (Rusbuldt & Martz, 1995) and find it difficult to report even particularly difficult instances of aggression (Arriaga, 2002).

PERCEPTIONS OF THE FUTURE: HOW EMOTIONALLY AFFECTED DO VICTIMS ANTICIPATE BEING FROM A BREAKUP?

So far we have focused on victims’ motivated perceptions of their partner’s past aggressive behaviors. Interdependence theory suggests that victims might suffer from motivated, distorted perceptions of a range of interpersonal situations with their partner, not just those involving aggression. A person who has no overarching goals for interactions with the partner would perceive things differently than a person who is committed to a relationship with the partner (Kelley, 1979). We therefore anticipated that commitment would predict motivated perceptions of how affected one would be if the relationship ended.

Research in the affective forecasting literature (e.g., Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) shows that people overestimate how emotionally affected they are likely to be by positive or negative events. For example, people predict that they would be happier on winning the lottery than lottery winners actually are. Academics predict they would be much less happy if denied tenure than is actually the case among those who actually were denied tenure. In one of several studies discussed by Wilson and Gilbert (2003), Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, and Wheatley (1998) examined the bias in forecasting future happiness among relationship partners. They found that partners thought they would feel much less happy following a breakup than was actually the case among those who had recently experienced a breakup.

Would victims of partner aggression show the same bias, whereby they overestimate how unhappy they might feel if their relationship with the aggressive partner ended? The commonsense view is that victims should not be as devastated as nonvictims. Victims often are more depressed within their relationships than are nonvictims, and ending the relationship would provide an opportunity to undo the negative consequences of being a victim of partner aggression.
The social psychological prediction, however, goes against this common sense. The same factors that keep a person in a relationship may be the ones that influence biased perceptions of future happiness or unhappiness. Our recent research (including data still being collected at the time this chapter was written) suggests that victims exhibit the same bias as nonvictims in predicting their (un)happiness following a breakup, even though victims report less happiness overall and less satisfaction in their relationships as compared with nonvictims. In an initial cross-sectional survey study (n = 165), dating participants were asked to forecast their happiness immediately following, 6 months after, and 1 year after the dissolution of their relationship. Their responses were compared with current happiness ratings of individuals who had been in a past aggressive relationship and who experienced the aggression either within the last month, 6 months, or 1 year.

Several interesting findings emerged for victims of partner aggression. First, current victims forecasted they would feel much less happy if their relationship ended than was actually the case among past victims (i.e., those whose aggressive relationship had already ended). This was the case for every time frame (i.e., immediately after, 6 months after, and 1 year after the dissolution). Second, current victims reported significantly lower current happiness and relationship satisfaction than individuals whose current partners were not aggressive (i.e., nonvictims). In short, current victims were less happy and less satisfied than their nonvictim counterparts but just as likely to overestimate the negative impact on their well-being of relationship dissolution. This finding contradicts the belief that current unhappiness in an unsatisfying relationship will motivate victims to forecast more happiness if their relationship ends. Instead, victims forecast levels of unhappiness comparable with those predicted by nonvictims.

Third, regardless of current victimization status, level of commitment was strongly related to forecasting future unhappiness were the relationship to end, r(78) = -.58, p < .001. We are currently collecting longitudinal data to compare with the findings from the cross-sectional study. In short, regardless of whether perceptions concern past partner aggression or the future of a relationship, victims of partner aggression exhibit the same motivated cognitions as nonvictims, cognitions strongly associated with level of commitment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS AND VICTIM WELL-BEING

We have shown that victims of partner aggression find themselves in a very challenging situation: They seek a partner who will love them and yet their partner is capable of harming them. Downplaying partner aggression may help victims manage the paradox that arises from choosing to remain with an aggressive partner (Duham & Senn, 2000) and is one way of coping with a severely troubling situation. As Durham and Senn (2000) noted, this coping strategy may have benefits and costs. In the short term, victims can find a "mental space" within which to sustain their relationships. In the long term, however, denying or justifying a partner's aggression may keep a victim from recognizing the acts as aggressive, detecting their negative consequences, and seeking help.

An obvious way to avoid the devastating effects of partner aggression is to prevent it from occurring. Major advances have been made over the last decades in understanding perpetrators of partner aggression (Arriga & Capezza, 2005; see also Chapters 2 and 14, this volume). Preventing the negative consequences of partner aggression, however, is not limited to ending the violence itself. It also involves helping victims of violence who are at risk of negative mental and/or physical health outcomes (Arriga & Capezza, 2005).

A major challenge in helping victims is simply finding them. Victims who downplay aggression often do not perceive a problem and thus fail to seek help. Unfortunately, aggressive partners often convince victims that the situation is not so bad, that other relationships would be worse, or that things will get better. At the start of their relationship, the perpetrator may have had qualities to attract the victim, and she may hope that those qualities will prevail and replace the aggressive tendencies. It should come as no surprise, then, that a victim may decline over time—feel more depressed, anxious, and uncertain—and yet not pinpoint a "serious" problem.

Other victims recognize a problem but cannot leave their partner. They may be financially dependent on the partner (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Alternatively, they may feel increasingly dependent as a result of feeling unworthy of anyone else. Psychologically aggressive partners often convince the victim that she is to blame for the aggression. As she comes to feel increasingly responsible and intent on repairing the relationship, she becomes further exposed to dangerous conditions—separation or supportive others, coming to feel that she is "never do better"—which may make her less able or motivated to seek help (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). More psychological aggression triggers a downward spiral of more victim self-blame, self-loathing, and loss of self, which increases dependence and susceptibility to future aggression (Kirkwood, 1993). Many victims accurately fear more violence if they try to leave.

Interventions need to be tailored depending on the specific circumstances of the victim. Financial dependence might best be addressed with immediate and sustained financial assistance (e.g., providing shelter, job training, childcare, and assistance in securing a home and employment). Emotional dependence might best be addressed by (a) redefining what constitutes a healthy, loving, and committed relationship; (b) recognizing highly aggressive
partner acts as destructive and understanding how they exert their nefarious effects on the victim; and (c) restoring self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense that one is capable of happiness alone or in another relationship. Denying aggression might best be addressed by a similar approach, especially by identifying destructive partner acts.

Would reducing commitment and dependence be the basis of an effective intervention? It is violent partners, not commitment or dependence, that causes harm to victims. Commitment and dependence are states that characterize a multitude of close relationships, are crucial to relationship well-being, and predict a vast array of relationship-maintenance behaviors. Indeed, healthy, committed relationships may be a source of physical and emotional well-being (Kiescolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). It is not commitment per se that needs to change but personal and societal norms that are conducive to the acceptance of violence. As such, interventions might address finding nurturing partners and sustaining a strong commitment to them rather than mistakenly suggesting that commitment or dependence per se is the source of distress.

Reducing the toll of partner aggression on mental and physical health requires changing perceptions of partner aggression. As victims adopt less embellished, more negative perceptions of the partner’s behavior, they become more emotionally ready to pursue their own goals with or without the partner. As societies strengthen and articulate negative views of all forms of partner aggression—physical and psychological—they may be more likely to (a) help and, importantly, support victims; (b) ostracize those who engage in partner aggression; and (c) support policies that will eradicate all forms of partner aggression. Eradicating partner aggression will eliminate the paradoxical situations in which victims must choose between sustaining unwarranted partner-enhancing perceptions and sustaining their own well-being.

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