Horseplay and Hitting: An Experimental Study of the Perception of Male and Female Aggression

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Thanks to Elizabeth Graham for her work on this project. Funded by the National Institutes of Health #R03 MH63792.

Introduction

Although women are more likely to be injured by their romantic partners than are men, women engage in more physical aggression than their male partners (Archer, 2000). This is particularly true when samples are dating or adolescents. Critiques of these conclusions have focused on the distinction between severity and prevalence ratings. An additional source of bias, however, is in self-report data. Social norms are less stringent for women acting aggressively toward men as opposed to men acting aggressively toward women. This phenomenon may be partially attributable to several things: 1) The prevalence of traditional gender norms; 2) The fact that most awareness campaigns of partner abuse and battering have focused on male aggression; and 3) The fact that men are typically larger than their partners, and thus more likely to hurt them. To the extent that reporters are more likely to define physical acts by men as ‘aggression’, and the same physical acts by women as ‘horseplay’ or ‘just fooling around’, gender differences in the ratings of aggression reported by partners will be biased and unreliable. Previous research comparing self- and partner- and observational measures of adolescent romantic aggression reveals that all sources of observational reports are more physically aggressive than their partners. However, whereas there is consensus about which males engage in physical aggression, agreement is markedly lower about females (Darling, Burns, & Cohan, 2004). One potential explanation for this anomaly is that there is greater variability in what is defined as ‘aggression’ when the perpetrator is male than when the perpetrator is female.

The goal of this project was to address two questions:

Are people more likely to describe non-affectionate physical contact in a romantic relationship as aggressive when the perpetrator is male than when the perpetrator is female?

Is this equally true at low and at moderate levels of physical intensity?

Method

Participants: Participants were 95 undergraduates (47 female) enrolled at Bard College in the spring of 2005. Individuals were recruited via email and on-campus posters, and were compensated with $5 for their time.

Procedure: Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of four 2-minute video interactions of a male and a female college student engaged in a conflict resolution task. The video script was based upon a previously recorded interaction of a dating adolescent couple in which the aggressor expressed jealousy and concern about the partner’s behavior. Videos varied along two dimensions: intensity of physical contact (low and moderate) and aggressor gender. In each video, five instances of non-affectionate physical contact were enacted. Rater gender was counterbalanced across conditions. Heart rate was recorded during viewing. Students completed questionnaires including demographic information, adjective checklists, and a modified version of the Conflict in Relationships scale (Wolfe, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998), in which they reported on actor behaviors.

Measures: Viewers’ responses to the CIR on aggression intensity were coded into four categories: Physical and verbal aggression, use of rational arguments, and affect. In each case, viewers were asked how well the description described what the actor did, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well). In each case, a mean score was calculated.

- Physical aggression included: She kicked, hit, or punched him/her; She slapped him/her or pulled his/her hair; She threatened to hurt him/her; She threw something at him/her; and She pushed, shoved, or shook him/her.
- Verbal aggression included: She said things just to make him/her angry; She spoke to him/her in a hostile or mean tone of voice; She ridiculed or made fun of him/her; She insulted him/her with put downs; She blamed him/her for the problem.
- Rational argument included: He gave reasons for his/her side of the argument; She told him/her that she was partly to blame; She tried to discuss the quality of their relationship; and She agreed that she was partly to blame.

Heart rate was measured continuously while viewers watched each interaction. Heart rate was measured for the 10 seconds prior to each act of aggression and for the 10 seconds prior to the first aggressive act. Heart rate was converted to beats per minute.

Results

Rater Reports

Four ANOVAs were performed in which ratings of aggressors’ use of physical aggression, verbal aggression, affection, and rational arguments were predicted from the gender of the rater, gender of the aggressor, and the level of intensity of aggression in the video recording. Results are reported in Table 1. The manipulation of aggression appeared to be effective. Aggressors in the moderate aggression condition were seen as more verbally and physically aggressive and using less reasoning than those in the low aggression condition (p<.01). There was no difference in ratings of affection. Overall, men were seen as more verbally aggressive than women (p<.01). Women rated physical aggression higher than did men (p<.01). Importantly, there was a significant interaction between gender of aggressor and intensity of aggression for physical aggression (p<.05).

The female aggressor was rated as less physically aggressive than the male in the low intensity condition and more physically aggressive in the high intensity condition, although trained coders rated them identically within intensity condition. Results are graphed in Figure 1.

Conclusions

What is defined as aggression in boys may be seen as just ‘fooling around’ or horseplay in girls.