



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

Sara A. Clarke¹, Andrew R. Burns², Deborah Kenealy¹ & Nancy Darling²
Bard College¹ & Oberlin College²

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 rates of aggression reported by partners will be biased and unreliable. Previous research comparing self-, partner- and observational measures of adolescent romantic aggression reveals that all sources report female adolescents 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 affection. 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 S/he kicked, hit, or punched him/her; S/he slapped him/her or pulled his/her hair; S/he threatened to hurt him/her; S/he threw something at him/her; and S/he pushed, shoved, or shook him/her.

Verbal aggression included S/he said things just to make him/her angry; S/he spoke to him/her in a hostile or mean tone of voice; S/he ridiculed or made fun of him/her; S/he insulted him/her with put downs; S/he blamed him/her for the problem.

Rational argument included 'he gave reasons for his/her side of the argument; S/he told him/her that s/he was partly to blame; S/he tried to discuss the quality of their relationship; and S/he agreed that s/he was partly right.

Affection included S/he stressed his/her commitment to him/her and S/he showed his/her love or liking for him/her.

Heart rate was measured continuously while viewers watched the interaction. Heart rate was measured for the 10 r-waves after each act of aggression and for the 10 r-waves 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 ($p \leq .01$). There was no difference in ratings of affection. Overall, men were seen as more verbally aggressive than women ($p \leq .01$). Women rated physical aggression higher than did men ($p \leq .01$). **Importantly, there was a significant interaction between gender of aggressor and intensity of aggression for physical aggression ($p \leq .01$).**

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.

Table 1:
Mean Ratings of Reasoning, Affections, Verbal and Physical Aggression by Aggression Condition and Gender of Aggressor. Scales range from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

	Low Aggression		Moderate Aggression	
	Male Aggressor	Female Aggressor	Male Aggressor	Female Aggressor
Reasoning	2.32	2.74	2.13	2.71
Affection	1.12	1.30	0.83	1.13
Verbal Aggression	3.52	2.70	4.00	3.67
Physical Aggression	1.56	1.09	2.09	2.63

Mean Physical Aggression

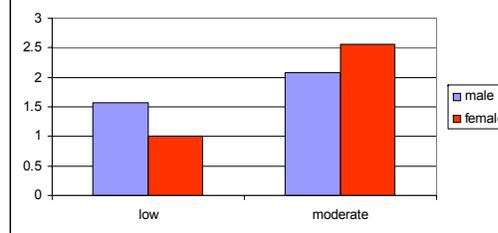


Figure 1: Mean ratings of the physical aggression of male and female actors at low and moderate levels of aggression

Key finding: In the low aggression condition, the female aggressor was rated as less aggressive than a male aggressor performing identical acts. In the moderate aggression condition, however, females were rated as more aggressive. Thus, ratings of female aggression are more contextually sensitive than ratings of male aggression.

Correspondence should be addressed to Sara Clarke (sara.clarke@gmail.com) or Nancy Darling (Nancy.Darling@oberlin.edu). This poster and other related papers can be downloaded from <http://www.oberlin.edu/faculty/ndarling/lab/eadpresent.htm>

Results

Heart Rate

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted in which raters' heart rate was predicted from condition and from time. In these analyses, heart rate was measured at four time points: talking prior to aggression, and immediately after each of three acts of physical aggression. In the videos, the third hit is clearly the most aggressive. For technical reasons, data was only available for 70 participants. Results are graphed in Figure 2. There was no overall difference in heart rate across the four videos ($p = .95$). Heart rate did differ by time ($p \leq .000$). **Importantly, there was a significant interaction between heart rate and condition ($p \leq .01$).**

In the low aggression/female aggressor condition, there is no significant change in heart rate from the talking only section of the video to the sections of the video immediately after aggressive acts. In the other three conditions, there is a statistically significant drop in heart rates from the initial talking phase to heart rate after aggressive acts.

Mean Heart Rate By Condition

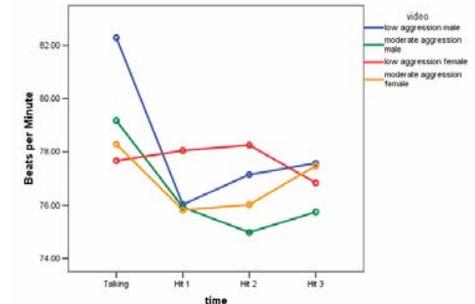


Figure 2: Heart rate by Condition and Time. The 'Talking' time point is heart rate immediately prior to the first act of physical aggression. Each subsequent time point is the heart rate immediately after each aggressive act. Note that in the condition where a female engages in low-level aggression, there is no change in heart rate before or after physical aggression.

Conclusions

Viewers rated a female actor as less physically aggressive than a male actor in the low level aggression condition, but more physically aggressive than the male actor in the moderate level aggression condition.

Heart rate did not change before and after viewing an act of low-level physical aggression when it was perpetrated by a female. Viewers did react when viewing males and when viewing females at moderate levels of aggression.

Together these findings indicate that low-level physical aggression may not be perceived as aggressive if the perpetrator is female. These results suggest that when participants report on the aggression in their romantic relationships, they may be more likely to report even low-levels of physical aggression by males, but be more contextually sensitive when reporting the same behaviors when perpetrated by females.

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