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Daily reports of intimate partner verbal aggression by self and partner: Short-term consequences and implications for measurement

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Abstract

Objective—Agreement within couples regarding the occurrence of aggression is surprisingly low. Survey research often collapses across partners' reports to create a pooled estimate of aggression in the relationship. This method ignores possible differences in partners' perceptions of the event, potentially weakening researchers' ability to detect consequences of aggression. The current study examines both partners' reports of verbal aggression to determine whether aggression reported by only one partner influences both partners' short-term outcomes.

Methods—We used a 56-day daily diary to examine the effect of verbal aggression on short-term negative outcomes. We examined whether aggression reported by either partner is sufficient to predict consequences for both partners, or if an individual must report aggression to experience consequences.

Results—Victims' reports of receiving verbal aggression were a better predictor of next day victim consequences than perpetrators' reports. Perpetrators' reports of perpetrating verbal aggression were a better predictor of next day perpetrator consequences than victims' reports. Days when partners agreed that aggression had occurred generally predicted the worst outcomes.

Conclusions—People's own reports of verbal aggression are the best predictor of short-term consequences. Pooling partner reports of aggression may make it more difficult to understand the consequences of intimate partner aggression.

Keywords

intimate partner aggression; intimate partner violence; domestic violence; daily diary; dyadic data analysis; multilevel modeling; hierarchical linear modeling

Agreement within couples regarding the occurrence of aggression is surprisingly low. It is often assumed that this disagreement is a type of measurement error, reflecting underreporting and social desirability concerns. Consequently, when reports of aggression are obtained from both partners in a couple, it has become standard practice in survey research to collapse across partners' reports to create a pooled estimate of aggression in the relationship. A critical but unexplored question is whether partner aggression has to be

recognized as aggression in order for it to have an impact on well-being. If the consequences of aggression depend upon recognition by the recipient, this has important implications for self-report measurement of partner aggression and for the standard practice of combining partner reports. Using independent daily reports from both members of intimate couples, the current study examined whether the next-day consequences of verbal aggression depend upon whether it is reported by the victim, the perpetrator, or both. We also explored gender and other individual difference variables as potential correlates of partner agreement regarding the occurrence of aggression.

Agreement Regarding the Occurrence of Aggression

A large body of survey research has examined the prevalence, predictors, and consequences of intimate partner aggression using self-report measures. The most common of these measures is the CTS-2, or revised Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The measure includes a series of behaviorally specific items assessing the occurrence of aggressive acts over the past year (or other time period), both as perpetrator (e.g., “I hit my partner”) and as victim (“My partner hit me”). As with any self-report measure, responses depend on the ability of the respondent to recall and interpret relevant behaviors in memory that match the items (Schwarz, 2012). By definition, all of the CTS items refer to dyadic behaviors that require the presence of both partners at the time of occurrence, but numerous studies have shown within-couple agreement regarding the occurrence of relationship aggression to be modest, with agreement about non-occurrence far exceeding agreement about occurrence (Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Lipsky, 2009; O’Leary & Williams, 2006; Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 2002; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995).

Daily diary studies provide an ideal methodology for comparing partner perspectives on the occurrence of relationship aggression. Recall biases should be minimized by the short recall period (Follingstad & Rogers, 2013); thus, we might expect superior partner agreement regarding aggression with shorter relative to longer (e.g., 1 year) intervals. However, in a recently completed study examining the impact of alcohol use on partner aggression, we found only modest agreement between partners regarding the occurrence of aggression in the past 24 hours (Testa & Derrick, 2014). Out of 414 days on which male-perpetrated verbal aggression was reported by at least one partner, partners agreed on only 97 days (23%). Similarly, out of 482 days on which female-perpetrated verbal aggression was reported by at least one partner, partners agreed on only 130 days (27%). Surprisingly, agreement was even poorer for physical aggression (only 15.6% for male-perpetrated and 12.5% for female-perpetrated). Women reported more victimization and more perpetration than men, for both verbal and physical aggression. This level of agreement is comparable to that reported in survey studies (Caetano et al., 2009; Caetano, Schafer, Field, & Nelson, 2002; Schafer et al., 2002; Testa et al., 2012).

In light of this modest agreement, it is considered accepted and best practice to pool the reports of aggression from both partners when estimating the prevalence of aggression (Schafer et al., 2002; Straus et al., 1996). For example, if the wife reports that she hit her partner but her husband fails to report being hit, the couple is classified as experiencing

wife-to-husband aggression. Because most partner aggression is reported by only one partner (Caetano et al., 2002), using the maximum report generally results in an estimate of aggression within the relationship that is higher than that based upon a single partner's report. It is widely assumed within this tradition that partner aggression is a socially undesirable behavior that is underreported. Thus, pooling the reports of both partners (or multiplying the single partner's report by a correction factor, e.g., Heyman & Schlee, 1997), is thought to correct for what Szinovacz and Egley (1995) label a "reporting bias," providing a better estimate of the true level of aggression within a relationship. Although there is some support for the role of social desirability in suppressing reports of partner aggression (e.g., Sugarman & Hotaling, 1997), other studies have found less clear evidence (Szinovacz & Egley, 1995). For example, O'Leary and Williams (2006) found that partner agreement regarding the occurrence of positive acts was no better than that for the occurrence of physical aggression.

Implicit in the pooled partner approach is the assumption that reporting an act of aggression reflects correct identification of an experience, whereas failing to report indicates reporting bias. In actuality, responses to the CTS or any self-report measure require the respondent to match the items to representations in memory, and whether or not the respondent reports an item as occurring depends on wording, context, memory, and interpretation (Schwarz, 2012). Thus, a respondent may fail to report an aggressive behavior because she or he does not recognize that behavior as occurring, rather than through a willful desire to distort (Hamby, 2005). For example, a woman might report that conflict involved heated disagreement but not "yelling." Her partner, on the other hand, may view the episode differently, and report that yelling did indeed occur. Although these two perspectives may be equally valid, the partner violence field has treated separate partner reports as incomplete pieces, not of interest in themselves.

The Role of Interpretation in Understanding Events

In contrast, an established body of literature within the close relationships field views the separate reports of each partner as meaningful reflections of subjective reality (Baldwin, 1992; Collins, 1996; Kelley, 1979; Reis & Shaver, 1988). According to this research tradition, the same objective event can be interpreted very differently by different people based on their working models (e.g., their expectations, motives, goals, and fears). These different interpretations of the same objective event can then have very real consequences, both positive and negative, for the person and the relationship. For example, people who expect others to be responsive to their needs perceive greater acceptance and support and draw closer to their partner when they experience negative interactions (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006). Conversely, people who expect rejection feel worse and react more negatively in response to negative relationship events (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Murray et al., 2003). Extending the couples' framework to understanding partner aggression suggests that discrepancies in partner reports of aggression may be more than nuisance variance; rather, each partner's perspective may provide distinct information with differential predictive ability.

Consequences of Aggression

Experiencing partner aggression, both physical and psychological, negatively impacts well-being (Anderson, 2002; Coker et al., 2002; Follingstad, 2009; Testa & Leonard, 2001). Within community samples, the consequences of psychological aggression may be even more severe than for physical aggression (Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009). A critical but unexplored question is whether psychological aggression has to be recognized by the recipient in order for it to have an impact on well-being. The current study examines whether a report of verbal aggression from either partner is sufficient to lead to negative short-term consequences, or if the victim must recognize that verbal aggression occurred to experience such consequences. Because our analyses are based on reports from a community sample, and not from a sample selected for high levels of aggression (e.g., battered women and their partners), we focus on verbal aggression and not on physical aggression in the current study.

Hypotheses

If failure to report aggression reflects measurement error, then negative effects on the victim's next day functioning should be similar regardless of which partner reports aggression; that is, if both partners report, only the victim reports, or only the perpetrator reports verbal aggression, the victim should experience worse consequences than when neither partner reports. However, if recognizing aggression is important, then next day functioning for victims should be worse when the victim reports receiving aggression (i.e., both-partner reports and victim-only reports) than when the victim does not report receiving aggression (i.e., perpetrator-only reports and neither-partner reports). It is also possible that when partners agree on the occurrence of aggression (i.e., both-partner reports), those incidents may be particularly salient, and hence will result in the most negative outcomes.

Hypotheses regarding the adverse effects of victimization are straightforward, but we also considered the effects of perpetration using parallel analyses. We tentatively offered hypotheses similar to those for victimization, reasoning that recognizing that one has aggressed toward one's partner should also be distressing. Perpetrators might experience guilt, shame, or remorse for their actions, increasing their negative mood. Because enacting aggression harms the relationship, we might also expect perpetrators to report poorer relationship functioning following aggression (e.g., Leopold, 2012). We tested the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. Victims will experience worse mood after reporting verbal aggression (both-partner/victim-only) than after not reporting (perpetrator-only/neither-partner).

Hypothesis 1b. Perpetrators will experience worse mood after reporting verbal aggression (both-partner/perpetrator-only) than after not reporting (victim-only/neither-partner).

Hypothesis 2a. Victims will experience poorer relationship functioning after reporting aggression (both-partner/victim-only) than after not reporting (perpetrator-only/neither-partner).

Hypothesis 2b. Perpetrators will experience poorer relationship functioning after reporting verbal aggression (both-partner/perpetrator-only) than after not reporting (victim-only/neither-partner).

Exploratory analyses

Many studies have considered the role of individual characteristics in interpretation of partner behavior (e.g., Campbell et al., 2005; Downey et al., 1998; Murray et al., 2003), but only a few have considered the role of individual characteristics on agreement regarding the occurrence of partner aggression. It is likely that any characteristic that increases people's sensitivity to negative partner behavior will increase the likelihood that such behavior is seen as aggressive. For example, women report both more victimization and perpetration than is corroborated by their partner (e.g., Testa & Derrick, 2014; Testa et al., 2012). Similarly, people with lower relationship satisfaction report receiving more psychological aggression than their partner reports perpetrating (Marshall, Panuzio, Makin-Byrd, Taft, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2011). We examined individual characteristics that might be associated with greater sensitivity to perceiving behavior as aggressive, and thus, a greater likelihood of disagreeing regarding the occurrence of aggression. Specifically, we examine gender, marital satisfaction, depressive symptomatology, emotion regulation, and aggressive anger expression.

Method

Participants

Participants included 118 married and cohabiting couples, between the ages of 21 and 45. They were initially recruited for a laboratory study involving alcohol administration (Testa, Crane, Quigley, Levitt, & Leonard, 2014) through advertisements and targeted household screening. To be eligible, both partners drank four or more drinks on an occasion at least once per month; neither partner reported medical contraindications to alcohol consumption or met criteria for alcohol dependence; and neither partner reported extremely severe partner violence (e.g., use of weapon, injury requiring medical attention). Additional details regarding recruitment and screening are provided in Testa and Derrick (2014) and Testa et al. (2014).

Men averaged 33.9 ($SD = 6.8$) and women 32.7 ($SD = 6.9$) years of age. Most participants were White (91.5% of men and 95.8% of women), had at least some college education (87% of men and 95% of women), and were employed at least part time (91.5% of men and 77.1% of women). The median household income was \$60,000 – \$75,000. Most couples were married (76% vs. 24% cohabiting), and had been living together for an average of 6.3 years ($SD = 5.1$). The majority (63%) had children. Of those with children, the median number was 2.

Procedures

Couples were mailed a packet of self-report questionnaires that included relationship satisfaction, emotion regulation, depression, and anger. All questionnaires used in the current study are published measures with established validity. They completed the packet

and returned it through the mail prior to a 45-minute training session for the daily report study at the University. Following the training session, couples completed daily reports using interactive voice response technology (IVR) for 56 days. Participants called the IVR system each day to complete their reports. The questions were asked via computer recording, and participants responded using the keypad on their phone. Participants were instructed to complete their reports at approximately the same time each day. Each partner was compensated \$1 for each report, \$10 for each complete week, and a \$30 bonus for 8 complete weeks. Participants were permitted to submit late entries (resulting in nearly 100% of days complete), but mood and relationship functioning were assessed only for the 87.9% and 87.2% of reports completed on time by men and women, respectively. Additional details regarding procedures and compliance are provided in Testa and Derrick (2014). This study received human subjects approval from the University's Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board.

Daily Report Measures

Each day, participants completed a series of questions regarding mood, relationship functioning, positive events, conflict events, and alcohol use (see Testa & Derrick, 2014, for more details). The mood and relationship functioning items referred to the day participants were completing the reports, given their temporal instability. Because we expected most couple interactions would occur in the evenings, possibly after participants had completed their reports for that day, we assessed reports of conflict and aggression for the previous day, allowing us to test the hypothesized temporal ordering (Day $t-1$ aggression predicting Day t outcomes).

Negative mood—Participants were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*), the extent to which they currently felt irritable, stressed out, angry, anxious, overwhelmed, and sad. Items were averaged to create the overall score ($\alpha = .92$ for both husbands and wives). Final scores ranged from 1.00 to 5.00 ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.74$ for men, and $M = 1.48$, $SD = 0.66$ for women), with higher scores indicating greater negative mood.

Negative relationship perceptions—Participants responded to two items on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*): “Today, how angry or irritated do you feel toward your spouse or partner?”; “Today, how much did you and your spouse or partner argue or disagree?” The two items were averaged to create the overall score ($\alpha = .77$ for husbands, $\alpha = .78$ for wives). Final scores ranged from 1.00 to 5.00 ($M = 1.30$, $SD = 0.61$ for men, and $M = 1.28$, $SD = 0.61$ for women), with higher scores indicating greater negative relationship perceptions.

Verbal aggression—Each day, participants were asked “At any time yesterday, did you and your partner have a conflict, argument, or disagreement, whether major or minor?” If so, they indicated whether the conflict included several behaviors derived from the CTS-2 (Straus et al., 1996). Each behavior was asked twice to assess behaviors directed toward the partner and the partner's behavior toward the self. A positive response to yelled, insulted, or made threats was scored as verbal aggression (i.e., a score of 1); the lack of a positive response was scored as the absence of verbal aggression (i.e., a score of 0). A positive

response to threw/kicked/hit something or pushed/grabbed/hit was scored as physical aggression; no positive response was scored as the absence of physical aggression. Because of the low rates of physical aggression in this community sample (only 32 male-perpetrated events and 40 female-perpetrated events; see Testa & Derrick, 2014), physical aggression is not analyzed in the current study.

Self-Report Questionnaires

Marital satisfaction—We assessed marital satisfaction using the 32-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; $\alpha = .90$ [men] and $.93$ [women]; Spanier, 1976). Items were summed to create the overall scale. Final scores ranged from 28 to 145 ($M = 113.02$, $SD = 13.58$ for men, $M = 113.17$, $SD = 15.92$ for women), with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

Depression—Depressive symptomatology was assessed using the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies – Depression Scale (CES-D; $\alpha = .88$ [men] and $.90$ [women]; Radloff, 1977). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*). Items were averaged to create the overall scale. Final scores ranged from 1.00 to 3.40 ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 0.37$ for men, $M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.40$ for women), with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptomatology.

Difficulties in emotion regulation—Chronic problems with emotion regulation were assessed using the 36-item Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; $\alpha = .75$ [men] and $.78$ [women]; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). Items were averaged to create the overall scale. Final scores ranged from 1.03 to 3.81 ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.47$ for men, $M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.53$ for women), with higher scores indicating greater difficulty regulating emotion.

Aggressive anger expression—The State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory-2 (STAXI-2; Spielberger, 1999) assesses the propensity to experience anger and methods of handling anger. We focus in the current study on the 8-item Anger-Expression-Out subscale (AX-O). The AX-O assesses tendencies toward aggressive expression of feelings of anger ($\alpha = .76$ for men and $.64$ for women). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). Items were summed to create the overall scale. Summed scores ranged from 9 to 28 ($M = 14.70$, $SD = 3.41$ for men, $M = 13.94$, $SD = 2.79$ for women).

Results

Daily Diary Analyses: Verbal Aggression and Negative Consequences

To analyze the couple daily diary data and examine Hypotheses 1a – 2b, we conducted multilevel modeling analyses using the multivariate feature in MLwiN 2.28 (Rasbash, Browne, Healy, Cameron, & Charlton, 2013). We used a two-level nested structure: within couple assessments of verbal aggression (neither-partner/victim-only/perpetrator-only/both-partner) each day made up Level 1, couple made up Level 2, and male and female reports of negative consequences the following day were treated as multivariate outcomes. This approach estimates two sets of equations simultaneously, one set for male outcomes and one

set for female outcomes, controlling for the correlation between the two. The method is statistically equivalent to other methods of analyzing dyadic daily diary data (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), and has been used in prior research (Derrick, Leonard, & Homish, 2013; Testa & Derrick, 2014). This method allows for straightforward tests of gender differences (a 1 $df \chi^2$ test). When the effects did not differ significantly by gender, we pooled the coefficients; otherwise, we report the results for men and women separately. We ran each set of analyses twice, once examining victim outcomes (male and female) and once examining perpetrator outcomes (male and female). We estimated the following equations simultaneously:

$$Y_{ijMt} = \beta_{0jM} + \beta_{1jM} Y_{t-1} + \beta_{2jM} P_{t-1} + \beta_{3jM} D_t + \beta_{4jM} BR_{t-1} + \beta_{5jM} VR_{t-1} + \beta_{6jM} PR_{t-1} + u_{7jM} \quad (1)$$

$$Y_{ijWt} = \beta_{0jW} + \beta_{1jW} Y_{t-1} + \beta_{2jW} P_{t-1} + \beta_{3jW} D_t + \beta_{4jW} BR_{t-1} + \beta_{5jW} VR_{t-1} + \beta_{6jW} PR_{t-1} + u_{7jW} \quad (2)$$

$$\beta_{0jM} = Y_{00M} + Y_{01M} TBR_M + Y_{02M} TVR_M + Y_{03M} TRP_M + r_{0jM} \quad (3)$$

$$\beta_{0jF} = Y_{00W} + Y_{01W} TBR_W + Y_{02W} TVR_W + Y_{03W} TRP_W + r_{0jW} \quad (4)$$

Equation 1 represents the Level 1 (i.e., daily level) effects on men's outcomes (M); Equation 2 represents the Level 1 effects on women's outcomes (W). We predicted one day's outcomes (Y) from a random intercept term (β_{0j} , the average level of that outcome for that day for couple j), yesterday's report on that outcome (β_{1j} , to control for autocorrelation), the partner's report on that outcome yesterday (β_{2j} , to control for partners' interdependence), day of the week (β_{3j} , dummy-coded), three dummy-codes representing today's reports of yesterday's aggression (both-partner reports [β_{4j}], victim-only reports [β_{5j}], and perpetrator-only reports [β_{6j}]), and an error term (u_{7j}) that reflects each person's deviation from his or her mean over time. All Level 1 slopes were treated as fixed effects. Dummy-coded Level 1 predictors were left uncentered, and continuous Level 1 predictors were person mean centered. Missing Level 1 data were considered to be missing at random (MAR) and handled using maximum likelihood estimation.

Equations 3 and 4 represent the Level 2 (i.e., couple level) effects on male outcomes and female outcomes, respectively. These equations contain an intercept term (γ_{00} , the average level of that outcome for the sample), the total number of both-partner reports (γ_{01}), victim-only reports (γ_{02}), and perpetrator-only reports (γ_{03}) per person over the diary period (to control for between-couple variability), and an error term (r_{0j}) that reflects the deviation of each couple's outcome from the average level of that outcome for the overall sample. The Level 2 predictors were grand mean centered.

Victim negative mood—Results for analyses examining the victim's negative mood are presented in the first column of Table 1. Those coefficients that differed significantly by gender are presented separately with subscripts designating male and female values; otherwise, coefficients were pooled across gender. Predicted values, pooled across gender,

are depicted in Figure 1 in dark bars. Reports in which partners agree regarding the occurrence of verbal aggression are presented in the panel on the left; reports in which partners disagree are presented in the panel on the right. Hypothesis 1a states that victims will experience greater negative mood on days when they report receiving verbal aggression the previous day (both-partner/victim-only) than on days when they do not (perpetrator-only/neither-partner). As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, both-partner reports and victim-only reports predicted significantly greater victim negative mood than neither-partner reports. Negative mood did not differ for perpetrator-only reports and neither-partner reports. In follow-up analyses with recoded dummy variables, both-partner reports predicted greater victim negative mood than victim-only reports, $b = .137$, 95% $CI = [.007, .267]$, $p = .038$, but both-partner reports and victim-only reports predicted significantly greater victim negative mood than perpetrator-only reports, $b = .365$, 95% $CI = [.235, .495]$, $p < .001$, and $b = .228$, 95% $CI = [.125, .331]$, $p < .001$, respectively. In other words, Hypothesis 1a was supported; victims reported worse mood on days when they reported receiving aggression the previous day. However, events that both partners reported predicted the worst consequences.

Perpetrator negative mood—Next we examined perpetrator's negative mood. Results are presented in the second column of Table 1. Predicted values are depicted in Figure 1 in light bars. Hypothesis 1b states that perpetrators will experience greater negative mood on days when they report perpetrating verbal aggression the previous day (both-partner/perpetrator-only) than on days when they do not (victim-only/neither-partner). As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, both-partner reports and perpetrator-only reports predicted significantly greater perpetrator negative mood than neither-partner reports. Negative mood did not differ for victim-only reports and neither-partner reports. In follow-up analyses, both-partner reports did not differ significantly from perpetrator-only reports, $b = .091$, 95% $CI = [-.037, .219]$, $p = .165$. However, both-partner reports and perpetrator-only reports were associated with significantly greater perpetrator negative mood than victim-only reports, $b = .316$, 95% $CI = [.186, .445]$, $p < .001$, and $b = .225$, 95% $CI = [.122, .328]$, $p < .001$, respectively. In other words, Hypothesis 1b was supported. Perpetrators reported worse mood on days when they reported perpetrating aggression the previous day. In this analysis, both-partner reports did not have more negative consequences than perpetrator-only reports.

Victim negative relationship perceptions—Results for analyses examining the victim's negative relationship perceptions are presented in the third column of Table 1. Predicted values are presented in Figure 2 in dark bars. Hypothesis 2a states that victims will experience greater negative relationship functioning on days when they report receiving verbal aggression the previous day (both-partner/victim-only) than on days when they do not (perpetrator-only/neither-partner). As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 2, both-partner, victim-only, and perpetrator-only reports were all associated with significantly greater victim negative relationship perceptions than neither-partner reports. Follow-up analyses revealed that victims reported more negative relationship perceptions on days after both-partner reports and victim-only reports than on days after perpetrator-only reports, $b = .421$, 95% $CI = [.303, .539]$, $p < .001$, and $b = .264$, 95% $CI = [.173, .356]$, $p < .001$, respectively. Both-partner reports were also associated with significantly greater victim negative

relationship perceptions than victim-only reports, $b = .157$, 95% $CI = [.038, .275]$, $p < .01$. In other words, Hypothesis 2a was supported; victims reported perceiving their relationship more negatively on days when they reported receiving aggression the previous day. Again, events that both partners reported predicted the worst consequences. Although perpetrator-only reports were associated with worse relationship functioning than neither-partner reports, the association was considerably weaker.

Perpetrator negative relationship perceptions—We repeated the analyses to examine the perpetrator's negative relationship perceptions (see Table 1, fourth column). Predicted values are presented in Figure 2 in light bars. Hypothesis 2b states that perpetrators will experience greater negative relationship functioning on days when they report perpetrating verbal aggression the previous day (both-partner/perpetrator-only) than on days when they do not (victim-only/neither-partner). As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 2, both-partner, perpetrator-only, and victim-only reports were all associated with significantly greater perpetrator negative relationship perceptions than neither-partner reports. Follow-up analyses revealed that perpetrators reported significantly greater negative relationship perceptions for both-partner reports and perpetrator-only reports than for victim-only reports, $b = .480$, 95% $CI = [.362, .598]$, $p < .001$, and $b = .270$, 95% $CI = [.179, .361]$, $p < .001$, respectively. Both-partner reports were also associated with significantly greater perpetrator negative relationship perceptions than perpetrator-only reports, $b = .210$, 95% $CI = [.092, .328]$, $p < .001$. In other words, Hypothesis 2b was supported, with results appearing as a mirror image of victimization findings. Perpetrators reported perceiving their relationship more negatively on days when they reported perpetrating aggression the previous day. Events that both partners reported predicted the worst consequences. Although victim-only reports were associated with worse relationship functioning than neither-partner reports, the association was considerably weaker.

Mutual Aggression

We hypothesized that the effects for perpetration would mirror those for victimization, reasoning that recognizing that one has perpetrated aggression should be distressing. Yet victimization and perpetration often co-occur (e.g., Straus, 2008), and this is the case for verbal aggression in the current data. Men reported only victimization on 77 days, only perpetration on 25 days, and mutual aggression on 187 days. Women reported only victimization on 48 days, only perpetration on 98 days, and mutual aggression on 251 days. Given the high rates of mutual aggression, it may be the case that the negative short-term consequences for perpetration observed here are an artifact of the association with victimization. To examine this possibility, we conducted supplemental analyses examining the effects of perpetration-only, victimization-only, and mutual aggression on mood and relationship perceptions. Mood and relationship perceptions were significantly worse when any type of aggression was reported for the previous day than when it was not, all $ps < .001$. The effects for perpetration-only and victimization-only did not differ significantly from mutual aggression, all $ps > .223$. Therefore, mutual aggression cannot completely account for the association between perpetration and negative consequences in the current study.

Exploratory Analyses: Individual Differences in Perception

To better understand why partners might interpret the same event differently, we examined individual characteristics that might influence sensitivity to negative behavior. Specifically, we examined gender, marital satisfaction, depression, emotion regulation, and aggressive anger expression as correlates of partner agreement regarding aggression. We conducted paired sample *t*-tests to determine whether the total number of episodes of verbal aggression reported over the diary period differed by gender. We found that there were significantly more victim-only reports of male perpetration (vs. female perpetration), $t(117) = -2.26, p = .026$, and perpetrator-only reports of female perpetration (vs. male perpetration), $t(117) = 3.50, p = .001$. In other words, as previously described in Testa and Derrick (2014) using a different form of analysis, women reported more of both victimization and perpetration than men.

We examined associations with the continuous variables by conducting multivariate analyses in MLwiN 2.28 (Rasbash et al., 2013). Each couple's total number of both-partner reports, victim-only reports, and perpetrator-only reports of verbal aggression over the 56-day diary period were entered simultaneously to predict each individual characteristic. We included the total number of conflicts reported by men and women as a covariate to control for individual differences in the likelihood of experiencing conflict. To be conservative, missing data in the diary were treated as zeroes when creating total conflict and aggression reports. One husbands' report of depression was missing, but there were no other missing data on the total scores for the self-report measures. Accordingly, we used list wise deletion.

First, we describe correlates of greater sensitivity to negative behavior (i.e., victim characteristics that predict victim-only reports and perpetrator characteristics that predict perpetrator-only reports). There were more days on which the victim but not the perpetrator reported verbal aggression when victims were less satisfied with their relationship, $b = -1.988, 95\% CI = [-2.826, -1.150], p < .001$, were higher in depression, $b = .049, 95\% CI = [.022, .076], p < .001$, had more difficulties in emotion regulation, $b = .052, 95\% CI = [.019, .085], p = .002$, and were higher in aggressive anger expression, $b = .261, 95\% CI = [.073, .449], p = .007$. There were more days on which the perpetrator but not the victim reported aggression when perpetrators were less satisfied with their relationship, $b = -1.280, 95\% CI = [-2.428, -0.132], p = .029$, were higher in depression, $b = .048, 95\% CI = [.011, .085], p = .012$, and had more difficulties in emotion regulation, $b = .046, 95\% CI = [.001, .091], p = .046$. None of the effects for greater sensitivity differed by gender.

Next, we describe correlates of experiencing weaker sensitivity to negative behavior (i.e., perpetrator characteristics that predict victim-only reports and victim characteristics that predict perpetrator-only reports). There were more days on which only the victim reported aggression when perpetrators were less satisfied with their relationship, $b = -1.429, 95\% CI = [-2.190, -0.668], p < .001$, when male (but not female) perpetrators had more difficulties in emotion regulation, $b = .068, 95\% CI = [.035, .101], p < .001$, and when perpetrators were higher in aggressive anger expression, $b = .220, 95\% CI = [.018, .422], p = .033$. There were more days on which only the perpetrator reported aggression when victims were less satisfied with their relationship, $b = -1.071, 95\% CI = [-2.127, -0.014], p = .047$, had more

difficulties in emotion regulation, $b = .044$, 95% $CI = [.001, .087]$, $p = .046$, and were higher in aggressive anger expression, $b = .415$, 95% $CI = .133, .697]$, $p = .004$. Only one effect (perpetrator emotion regulation) differed by gender. In brief, correlates of both types of partner discrepancy, greater and weaker sensitivity, were similar.

Discussion

The partner violence field has long recognized that partner reports of intimate partner aggression do not show perfect agreement. Yet, there has been a lack of research into the reasons for and consequences of these disagreements. In the current study, we examined the consequences of verbal aggression, reported by both partners in a daily diary study, for next-day individual and relationship well-being. Findings reveal that the short-term consequences of verbal aggression depend upon recognition and reporting of its occurrence. As predicted, victims reported worse mood (Hypothesis 1a) and poorer relationship functioning (Hypothesis 2a) on days when they reported verbal aggression the previous day (both-partner/victim-only) than on days when they did not (perpetrator-only/neither-partner). It was particularly striking that victim mood on days when perpetrators reported aggression the previous day and victims did not (perpetrator-only reports) was no more negative than days when neither partner reported aggression the previous day. Unless a victim recognized and reported receiving verbal aggression, it had no discernible effect on mood.

Although several studies have documented the effects of partner aggression on victims' outcomes (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2009), its effects on perpetrators have rarely been considered. The current study's dyadic design allowed us to consider the effects of aggression on the short-term outcomes of perpetrators as well as victims. We found that the pattern we observed for victims was mirrored for perpetrators. That is, perpetrators reported worse mood (Hypothesis 1b) and poorer relationship functioning (Hypothesis 2b) when they reported verbal aggression (both-partners/perpetrator-only) than when they did not (victim-only/neither-partner). We examined the possibility that these associations were actually driven by victimization, given that mutual aggression was common. We were able to rule out this possibility, suggesting that within this community sample, recognizing that one has perpetrated aggression is distressing. It may be the case that perpetrators experience guilt, shame, or remorse for their actions, increasing their negative mood. Additionally, they may report poorer relationship functioning because enacting aggression harms the relationship (e.g., Leopold, 2012).

We also found that events in which partners agreed that verbal aggression had occurred resulted in particularly negative consequences. Victims experienced worse mood and poorer relationship functioning when both partners agreed that aggression had occurred than when it was reported by only the victim. Similarly, perpetrators experienced poorer relationship functioning when both partners agreed that aggression had occurred than when it was reported by only the perpetrator. Thus, in three out of four sets of analyses, participants experienced worse consequences when both partners reported aggression than when only they, themselves reported that aggression had occurred the previous day. Because we do not know why these incidents predict worse outcomes, obtaining reports from only one partner or combining reports from both partners may result in the loss of important information.

Consistent with prior research suggesting that individuals with certain characteristics may be prone to greater sensitivity to conflict and negative behavior (e.g., Campbell et al., 2005; Murray et al., 2003), we found several characteristics that predicted victim-only and perpetrator-only reports: gender, depression, marital dissatisfaction, poor emotion regulation, and aggressive anger expression. As reported previously (Testa & Derrick, 2014), gender was differentially associated with sensitivity to negative behavior in that women reported both more victimization and more perpetration than men. Although we found these differences in terms of frequencies or mean levels of aggression, we did not find any gender differences in terms of the associations between reports of aggression and short-term negative consequences (i.e., no moderation). Thus, even though we have replicated the work of previous research showing that women report more aggression than men (e.g., Schafer et al., 2002; Testa et al., 2012), we also show that men are not necessarily less affected by aggression when they recognize it as such. Consistent with our exploratory hypotheses, depression was also associated with greater sensitivity (both victim and perpetrator) and was not associated with weaker sensitivity (neither victim nor perpetrator) to aggressive acts. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that depression is associated with greater bias for negative information (Mogg, Bradley, & Williams, 1995; Murphy et al., 1999). It is likely that people with greater depression have a lower threshold for labeling an ambiguous act as aggressive.

Unexpectedly, and contrary to previous research (Marshall et al., 2011), our results indicated that the other characteristics tended to predict both types of mismatches: reporting aggression when one's partner did not and not reporting aggression when one's partner did. Specifically, marital dissatisfaction and poor emotion regulation were associated with both greater and weaker victim sensitivity and both greater and weaker perpetrator sensitivity to aggressive acts. Aggressive anger expression was associated with both greater and weaker victim sensitivity and weaker (but not greater) perpetrator sensitivity to aggressive acts. Thus, people with these characteristics consistently interpret events in a different manner from their partner. Rather than experiencing different thresholds for interpretation (as with depression), people in these relationships seem to be "out of sync" with each other. Perhaps these characteristics impact the ability to accurately perceive and interpret the thoughts and emotions of others, leading people with these characteristics both to misinterpret their partner's intentions and to blithely ignore how their own behavior affects their partner.

Interpretation, Memory, or Social Desirability?

The ability to report aggression depends on 1) interpretation and encoding of an event as aggression; 2) retrieval of the event from memory; and 3) overcoming social desirability concerns surrounding the reporting of aggression. All three conditions have likely influenced participants' reports of aggression in prior research. Throughout this paper, we have discussed partner agreement regarding the occurrence of aggression as though interpretation/encoding is the primary mechanism by which disagreement occurs. We can have some confidence that, at least within our low violence community sample, disagreement is indeed a result of differential interpretation/encoding. First, we found that several individual characteristics were associated with both victim-only and perpetrator-only reports of aggression. Whether these associations are due to different thresholds (e.g.,

depression) or different person perception skills (e.g., difficulties with emotion regulation), these characteristics are associated with differential interpretation of an event. Therefore, people with these characteristics appear to “over-report” and “under-report” aggression relative to their partner, contributing to disagreement regarding the occurrence of aggression.

Second, disagreement in the current study likely is not due solely to forgetting. Obtaining daily reports of partner aggression has been recommended as a way of minimizing forgetting and increasing reporting accuracy relative to retrospective surveys (e.g., Follingstad & Rogers, 2013). Although participants in the current study may have been required to recall events for the past 24–48 hours, this timeframe is still a marked improvement over surveys that require participants to recall events that occurred over previous 1-, 6-, or 12-month periods. Finally, disagreement in the current study likely is not due to social desirability. Participants only demonstrated negative consequences of aggression when they reported that aggression had occurred the previous day (whether their partner reported it or not). If social desirability were the primary mechanism, we would expect mood and relationship functioning to decline equally when either partner reported aggression.

Although interpretation/encoding may be the primary mechanism for disagreement regarding the occurrence of aggression in our low violence community sample, this likely is not always the case. The behaviors assessed in the current study could be somewhat ambiguous (yelling, threatening, insulting), allowing for differences in interpretation. Even physically aggressive behaviors like pushing and grabbing may be somewhat ambiguous, and subject to interpretation. More severe forms of aggression, such as choking or using a weapon, are less ambiguous and therefore, should be interpreted and encoded as aggression. We cannot rule out the possibility that discrepancies in partner reports of these more severe types of behaviors reflect deliberate underreporting of aggression.

Limitations

Findings are based on a community sample of couples in which rates of conflict, verbal aggression, and particularly physical aggression were low. We were unable to consider physically aggressive incidents within the current framework because there were too few reports (only 5 “both-partner reports” each for male- and female-perpetrated aggression). Therefore, the current findings may not generalize to physical aggression. In addition, the sample was originally recruited for an alcohol administration study and hence, had to meet several selection criteria (moderate drinking, not dependent, no medical contraindications, no extremely severe partner violence) which may have unknown effects on results. Thus, generalizability is uncertain and the findings need to be replicated in other community, and especially clinical samples. These results might not generalize to battered women and their partners, for example.

Although daily diary methodology reduces retrospection, reports of aggression were made for the previous day; thus, it is possible that memory degraded, and agreement might have been higher if reports were made at the time of occurrence. Furthermore, mood and relationship functioning at the time of reporting may have influenced recall of aggression on the previous day, potentially inflating associations. Additionally, reports of aggression were

made only if the participant reported a conflict, consistent with the wording and conceptualization of the Conflict Tactics Scale. However, it is possible that some experiences of verbal aggression were not reported because the respondent did not perceive that a conflict had occurred.

Another potential limitation is that the associations between victim reports and victim outcomes (or perpetrator reports and perpetrator outcomes) were based on only one source, whereas the associations between perpetrators reports and victim outcomes (or victim reports and perpetrator outcomes) were based on two sources. The former associations are based on reports that share more method variance than the latter associations, potentially biasing the observed associations (Orth, 2013). The extent to which shared method variance is a problem in any given study is often exaggerated, however (Spector, 2006). In the current study, we controlled for the total number of both-partner reports, victim-only reports, and perpetrator-only reports for each couple in all analyses. Accordingly, the most commonly cited biases for self-reports—acquiescence bias, negative affectivity, and social desirability—are statistically controlled. We cannot entirely rule out the contribution of shared method variance to the current results, but this contribution is likely to be minimal.

Research Implications

Despite these limitations, our findings have important implications for assessment of partner aggression, in particular, for the common practice of pooling partner reports of aggression. Individual recognition that relationship aggression has occurred – distinct from partner reports of aggression – is a critical determinant of short-term individual and relationship functioning. In light of these findings, the common practice of pooling partner reports requires careful consideration. If the goal is to estimate the total amount of aggressive behavior within a couple, or to predict the occurrence of aggression within couples, pooling may be a reasonable approach. However, when considering the consequences of verbal aggression for an individual, that individual's perceptions, separate from those of the partner, may be preferable. In addition, many researchers obtain reports from only the victim. Although the victim's report of aggression might be considered more important when identifying consequences of aggression, we find in the current study that incidents in which partners agree that aggression occurred have more severe consequences than incidents in which only the victim reports. Obtaining reports from both partners may be the best practice even when the victim is the target of interest.

Clinical and Policy Implications

Although there are many research implications of the current study, there are also potential clinical implications for our findings. Specifically, the results of the current study speak quite clearly to the fact that partners perceive and experience events differently. When treating distressed couples, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that partners will not always agree on what has occurred, possibly even when discussing relatively more objective events. Rather than reflecting defensiveness or willful distortion, the “under-reporting” partner may simply have experienced the event differently, and may in fact have experienced very few negative consequences for the event itself.

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Figure 1.

Predicted values for analyses examining the effect of one day's verbal aggression on the next day's negative mood (pooled across gender). The dark bars portray effects on victim negative mood. The light bars portray effects on perpetrator negative mood. Reports in which partners agree regarding the occurrence of verbal aggression are depicted on the left. Reports in which partners disagree regarding the occurrence of verbal aggression are depicted on the right. Negative mood was assessed on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

Figure 2.

Predicted values for analyses examining the effect of one day's verbal aggression on the next day's negative relationship perceptions. The dark bars portray effects on victim relationship perceptions. The light bars portray effects on perpetrator relationship perceptions. Reports in which partners agree regarding the occurrence of verbal aggression are depicted on the left. Reports in which partners disagree regarding the occurrence of verbal aggression are depicted on the right. Negative relationship perceptions were assessed on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

Table 1

Perpetrator and victim outcomes as a function of verbal aggression.

	Victim Negative Mood		Perpetrator Negative Mood		Victim Negative Relationship Perceptions		Perpetrator Negative Relationship Perceptions	
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI
Intercept	1.431 ^{***} _M	[1.310 ^{***} _W , 1.513 ^{***} _M]	1.432 ^{***} _M	[1.351, 1.513 ^{***} _M]	1.108 ^{***}	[1.074, 1.142]	1.106 ^{***}	[1.071, 1.140]
Controlled DV – Victim	.014	[−.003, .032]	.013	[−.004, .030]	−.048 ^{***}	[−.066, −.031]	.040 ^{***}	[.022, .057]
Controlled DV – Perpetrator	.013	[−.004, .031]	.014	[−.004, .031]	.041 ^{***}	[.023, .058]	−.049 ^{***}	[−.066, −.031]
Weekday vs. Weekend	−.099 ^{***}	[−.126, −.071]	−.099 ^{***}	[−.127, −.071]	−.014	[−.040, .012]	−.014	[−.040, .011]
Both-Partner Reports	−.005	[−.052, .042]	.103 ^{***} _M	[.032, .173 ^{***} _M]	.009	[−.021, .038]	.070 ^{***} _M	[.029, .111 ^{***} _M]
Victim-Only Reports	.050 ^{***}	[.026, .074]	−.004	[−.030, .023]	.073 ^{***} _M	[.044, .101 ^{***} _M]	−.003	[−.019, .013]
Perpetrator-Only Reports	−.007	[−.035, .022]	.042 ^{***}	[.018, .067]	−.002	[−.019, .014]	.029 ^{***}	[.014, .045]
1 Verbal Aggression								
Both-Partner Reports	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Partner Reports	.378 ^{***}	[.271, .485]	.367 ^{***}	[.260, .473]	.547 ^{***}	[.448, .646]	.609 ^{***}	[.510, .708]
Victim-Only Reports	.240 ^{***}	[.160, .321]	.051	[−.030, .132]	.391 ^{***}	[.317, .465]	.129 ^{***}	[.055, .202]
Perpetrator-Only Reports	.013	[−.068, .094]	.276 ^{***}	[.196, .356]	.126 ^{***}	[.053, .200]	.399 ^{***}	[.325, .472]

Note: The possible range for negative mood and negative relationship perceptions is only from 1 to 5, and thus the test of the intercept's significance is not meaningful. Weekday is a dichotomous variable (Monday – Thursday) = Friday – Sunday. Lagged DV refers to dependent variables on Day t-1. Total Both-Partner Reports, Victim-Only Reports, and Perpetrator-Only Reports are grand mean totals recorded for each couple during the 56-day diary period. Level 1 Verbal aggression is a dummy-coded categorical variable reflecting agreement in verbal aggression on Day t-1. Neither Reports serves as the reference group. Coefficients that differed significantly by gender are marked with subscripts. M = men; W = women; b = unstandardized regression coefficient; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

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