



Published in final edited form as:

J Interpers Violence. 2012 October ; 27(15): 2980–2998. doi:10.1177/0886260512441079.

The Consequences of Perpetrating Psychological Aggression in Dating Relationships: A Descriptive Investigation

Ryan C. Shorey¹, Jeff R. Temple², Jeniimarie Febres¹, Hope Brasfield¹, Amanda E. Sherman¹, and Gregory L. Stuart¹

¹University of Tennessee–Knoxville, Knoxville, TN, USA

²UTMB Health, Galveston, TX, USA

Abstract

Psychological aggression is the most prevalent form of aggression in dating relationships, with women perpetrating as much, if not more, psychological aggression than men. Researchers have advocated for an examination of the consequences that follow psychological aggression for the perpetrator, in hopes that this will lead to innovative intervention programs aimed at ameliorating dating violence. The current study investigated the self-reported consequences of having perpetrated psychological aggression against a dating partner among female college students in a current dating relationship ($N = 115$). Participants endorsed numerous consequences as having followed their perpetration of psychological aggression, including both punishing and potentially reinforcing consequences. Furthermore, findings indicated that for some perpetrators, psychological aggression may function as a method of emotion regulation. Implications of these findings for future research and intervention are discussed.

Keywords

dating violence; psychological aggression; consequences; perpetration

Psychological aggression is increasingly being recognized as a destructive and harmful behavior that occurs within intimate relationships (Follingstad, 2007). Psychological aggression is the most common form of aggressive behavior across intimate relationships, including dating relationships (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008a). Theory (Bell & Naugle, 2008) and research (Bonem, Stanley-Kline, & Corbin, 2008; Shorey et al., 2008b) have called for the investigation of factors that immediately follow the perpetration of aggressive behavior, namely, the consequences of perpetrating aggression. Although numerous studies have examined potential causes of perpetration, research on the consequences that follow perpetrating psychological aggression is nonexistent. The current study examined the consequences of perpetrating psychological aggression against a dating partner in a sample

© The Author(s) 2012

Corresponding Author: Ryan C. Shorey, University of Tennessee, Department of Psychology, 1404 Circle Dr., Austin Peay Building, 311, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA rshorey@utk.edu.

Author's Note

Prior to her death, Dr. Deborah L. Rhatigan provided invaluable theoretical and methodological assistance on this project. Her contribution to this project cannot be overstated. We are forever grateful for all that she did and miss her every day. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NIAAA (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism) or the National Institutes of Health

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

of undergraduate women who were in a current dating relationship and had previously perpetrated psychological aggression.

Psychological Aggression in Dating Relationships

Historically, the field of domestic violence research, including dating violence, has largely focused its attention on physical aggression (Shorey et al., 2008a; Temple & Freeman, 2011). However, researchers and practitioners are increasingly recognizing the importance and negative consequences of psychological aggression (Follingstad, 2007). Psychological aggression refers to verbal and behavioral acts that are intended to humiliate, criticize, blame, dominate, isolate, intimidate, and threaten one's partner (Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005). Whereas physical aggression attacks one's bodily integrity with primarily acute effects, psychologically aggressive acts are often intended to attack a victim's sense of self and emotional well-being, leaving long-term psychological effects (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). Research with college students indicates that most dating relationships have some level of psychological aggression, with estimated annual prevalence rates consistently reaching 70% to 90% (Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010; Shorey et al., 2008a). In addition, levels of psychological aggression perpetration and victimization in dating relationships are comparable for men and women (Taft, Schumm, Orazem, Meis, & Pinto, 2010). Moreover, research has shown that psychological aggression rates remain consistent across time (Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003) even for as long as 10 years (Fritz & O'Leary, 2004). Furthermore, psychological aggression is one of the best and most consistent predictors of physical aggression perpetration (Baker & Stith, 2008; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989).

Psychological aggression results in a number of negative physical and mental health consequences for victims, regardless of gender. Although it has proven difficult to disentangle the effects of psychological aggression from physical aggression, psychological aggression victimization is associated with increased alcohol use (Shorey, Rhatigan, Fite, & Stuart, 2011), drug use (Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003), depressive symptoms (Simonelli & Ingram, 1998), anxiety symptoms (Shorey, Sherman et al., 2011), and somatic complaints (Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Prospero, 2007). Moreover, the negative health effects of psychological aggression often remain after statistically controlling for the effects of physical aggression (O'Leary, 1999). Thus, it is clear that psychological aggression is a widespread and devastating problem in dating relationships that warrants research and clinical attention.

Consequences of Dating Violence

The vast majority of research on dating violence has been either atheoretical or followed a feminist or social learning theory model (Shorey et al., 2008a). Recently, Bell and Naugle (2008) developed a comprehensive, parsimonious theoretical framework for intimate partner violence (IPV) that took into consideration existing theories (e.g., feminist theory, social learning, etc.) and also incorporated basic behavioral theory principles. Their theoretical model contains a number of components, including antecedents, motivating factors, verbal rules, behavioral repertoire, consequences, and so on. The current manuscript focuses on the one component of their model that has received scant empirical attention that has been hypothesized to perpetuate aggression: consequences.

Consequences of behaviors can be either reinforcing or punishing. Reinforcing consequences are outcomes that follow a target behavior (i.e., an act of psychological aggression) and increase the chances that the target behavior will occur again under similar circumstances (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Miltenberger, 2003). For instance, if an individual perpetrates psychological aggression and immediately feels *less angry*, then it is likely that the perpetrator's aggressive behavior has been negatively reinforced. Punishing

consequences are outcomes that follow the target behavior and decrease the chances that the target behavior will occur again under similar circumstances (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Miltenberger, 2003). For instance, if an individual perpetrates psychological aggression and his or her partner physically strikes him or her, it is possible that the perpetrator's aggressive behavior has been punished. Within a single episode of IPV, including psychological aggression, it is possible that a number of distinct consequences may occur and that unique consequences may be present for different perpetrators (Bell & Naugle, 2008). Although yet to be empirically examined, it has been speculated that perpetrators of psychological aggression may experience reinforcing consequences immediately following their aggressive behavior (Shorey, Cornelius, & Idema, 2011), which could therefore help to explain why psychological aggression remains stable over time (i.e., it is a behavior that is reinforced).

Although no known research has examined the consequences of perpetrating psychological aggression in dating relationships, a few studies have examined the perceived consequences of perpetrating physical aggression against a dating partner. For instance, Riggs and Caufield (1997) had male college students indicate whether they believed a list of self-reported consequences would occur if they were to perpetrate physical aggression against a dating partner. Findings demonstrated that men who had a history of perpetrating physical aggression perceived more potentially reinforcing consequences, such as winning an argument that led to aggression, than men without a history of physical aggression perpetration. Leisring (2009) had female college students report on their perceived consequences for perpetrating physical aggression, with findings demonstrating that women with a history of perpetrating physical aggression were more likely to perceive they would either get their way or win an argument as a result of aggression than women without a history of perpetration. It should be noted that women with a history of aggression also believed that they would feel guilty for perpetrating aggression and that their partner would retaliate.

Although the above studies provide information on college students' perceptions of what might occur following aggression, they are limited in that they did not examine the actual consequences of past aggressive behavior. To our knowledge, only one study has examined the actual consequences of perpetrating physical aggression against a dating partner. In a sample of male and female college students, Breslin, Riggs, O'Leary, and Arias (1990) found that men and women reported a number of consequences that could be either reinforcing or punishing. For example, students reported that their partner yelled at them, became angrier, and threatened violence against them as a result of their physical aggression perpetration (i.e., punishing). However, students also reported that they got along better with their partner and that they "got their way" following aggression perpetration (i.e., reinforcing). Thus, current evidence suggests that perpetrators of physical aggression against a dating partner perceive (Leisring, 2009) and report experiencing (Breslin et al., 1990) both punishing and reinforcing consequences following physical aggression perpetration. Although it is difficult to generalize these findings to psychological aggression, it is possible that similar consequences are occurring following psychological aggression perpetration.

Current Study

Due to psychological aggression being the most prevalent form of aggressive behavior in dating relationships, and the numerous negative consequences associated with being victimized by this type of aggression, the current study examined the consequences of perpetrating psychological aggression in a dating relationship in a sample of female college students. The current study represents the first attempt to examine the consequences of perpetrating psychological aggression. Using a self-report measure of possible consequences

designed specifically for the current study, we asked students who had previously perpetrated psychological aggression to report on the consequences that followed a recent aggressive episode. Based on previous research (Breslin et al., 1990; Leisring, 2009) and theory (Bell & Naugle, 2008), we expected perpetrators would report both punishing and reinforcing consequences following their perpetration of psychological aggression.

Method

Procedures

Female college students were screened for eligibility through an online survey website used specifically by researchers at a large Southeastern university. Students are made aware of this website and the opportunity to participate in research by their psychology professors. Interested students read a brief description of the current study that indicated they would be asked to complete questionnaires about “verbal disagreements” with their dating partner. Interested students then completed a screening questionnaire to determine their eligibility. To be eligible, students needed to be (a) 18 years of age or older, (b) in a current dating relationship of at least 1 month, (c) their current dating partner needed to be 18 years of age or older, and (d) they must have perpetrated at least one act of severe psychological aggression (i.e., “called partner fat/ugly,” “destroyed something belonging to partner,” “accused partner of being a lousy lover,” and “threatened to hit/ throw something at partner”) against their current dating partner in the previous 6 months, as defined by the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The decision to require the perpetration of severe psychological aggression was made to make sure that all students had perpetrated this form of aggression and because we believed that a more severe act of psychological aggression would be easier for students to recall. This method is consistent with previous research on dating violence in college students (e.g., Stets & Henderson, 1991).

When examining consequences of psychological aggression perpetration, we decided to limit our focus to each participant's most “troubling/distressing verbal disagreement” in the past 6 months where the perpetration of severe psychological aggression occurred. This was done because (a) we wanted to increase the chances participants would accurately recall the consequences of their perpetration, and (b) researchers have advocated for the examination of specific episodes of IPV, as this allows for a more concrete frame of reference for individuals to recall their aggressive behavior (Flynn & Graham, 2010). We further thought that limiting recall to a specific episode of aggression was especially important for psychological aggression, as this form of aggression occurs quite frequently in dating relationships (Shorey et al., 2008a), which might make it difficult for students to average the consequences that occurred across multiple episodes of minor to severe psychological aggression perpetration.

Eligible participants were sent an email asking them to participate in a study designed to ask them about a recent verbal disagreement with their current dating partner. This email contained a web link to a secure survey web-site that uses encryption to ensure confidentiality of responses. Students first completed an informed consent and then completed the measures described below and were compensated with partial course credit. Participants were provided with a list of referral services for domestic violence at the end of their assessment. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The procedures for this study have been reported elsewhere (Shorey, Febres, Brasfield, & Stuart, 2011).

Participants

A total of 143 women were deemed eligible for the current study and invited to participate, and 120 women (85%) eventually participated in the study. The 115 women who completed the measures of interest were retained for the current study and represent a subsample of women reported on previously (Shorey, Febres et al., 2011). The mean age of women was 18.6 ($SD = 1.0$), and the average length in months of women's current dating relationship was 11.1 ($SD = 11.0$, range = 1-48). Academically, 73% were freshman, 16.5% were sophomore, 7.8% were junior, 1.7% were senior, and 0.9% were postgraduate. Racially, the sample was comprised of 83.5% Caucasian, 10.4% African American, and 6.1% "Other" (e.g., Hispanic, Asian American, etc.). The majority of women were heterosexual (96.5%) and not living with their dating partner (93.9%).

Measures

Psychological aggression—Participants reported their perpetration of psychological aggression using the CTS2 (Straus et al., 1996) psychological aggression subscale, which consists of eight items, four of which can be classified into "severe" psychological aggression. Participants were asked to complete the psychological aggression items twice. First, participants were asked to think about their most "troubling/distressing verbal disagreement" during the previous 6 months with their dating partner and report which of the psychological aggression items they perpetrated during that incident using a Yes/No format. Next, women were asked to indicate how frequently they perpetrated each behavior during the previous 6 months using a 7-point scale (0 = *never*, 6 = *more than 20 times*). Items were recoded by taking the midpoint for each response (e.g., a "4" for the response "3 to 5 times"), with scores ranging from 0 to 25 for each item. All items were summed upon recoding to create a total score for psychological aggression perpetration (Straus, Hamby, & Warren, 2003). The CTS2 psychological aggression subscale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in female college student samples (e.g., Straus et al., 1996). The internal consistency of the psychological aggression subscale in the current study was .71.

Consequences of psychological aggression—A measure of consequences of perpetrating psychological aggression was created specifically for the current study. Based on Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework for IPV, research on consequences of perpetrating physical aggression in dating relationships (Breslin et al., 1990; Leisring, 2009; Riggs & Caufield, 1997); a review of psychological aggression conceptualizations, measures, and research (e.g., Follingstad, 2007; Follingstad et al., 2005; Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009; Murphy & Hoover, 1999; O'Leary, 1999; Straus et al., 1996); and consultation with two experts in the field of IPV, a list of 44 possible consequences of psychological aggression perpetration was generated, which we named the Consequences of Psychological Aggression Perpetration Scale (CPAPS). The list of possible consequences was limited to items that could be characterized as either reinforcing or punishing. Example items included whether "you felt more/less angry," "more/less powerful," "partner paid more/less attention to you," "felt more/less irritated," "partner called police," "partner became physically aggressive," "felt more/less sad," "felt bad for what you had done," "you and your partner stopped/continued arguing," and "partner avoided/did not avoid you."

Participants were instructed to think about their most "troubling/distressing verbal disagreement" where they had perpetrated psychological aggression, as defined by the CTS2, and indicate if any of the 44 possible consequences occurred *immediately* following their use of psychological aggression. Participants were provided with an option to select if a particular consequence did not apply to their specific episode of aggression. Participants were then asked to indicate, for each consequence endorsed, how that particular consequence made them feel on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very bad or unpleasant*) to 5

(*very good or pleasant*). Participants were provided with a detailed example of how to complete each item prior to responding to the 44 possible consequences.

Results

All analyses were run in SPSS 18.0. In the 6 months prior to the study, participants reported perpetrating a mean of 13.0 ($SD = 18.5$) acts of psychological aggression against their dating partner. During participants' most troubling/distressing verbal disagreement, 79.1% insulted or swore at their partner, 50.4% called their partner a derogatory name, 78.3% shouted or yelled at their partner, 53.9% stomped out of the house/yard, 20.9% threatened their partner with physical violence, 53.9% did something to spite their partner, 12.2% called their partner a lousy lover, and 10.4% destroyed something belonging to their partner. During this most troubling/distressing verbal disagreement, 90% of participants perpetrated more than one act of psychological aggression, with a mean number of acts of 3.6 ($SD = 1.7$).

Table 1 presents the percentage of participants who endorsed each consequence of perpetrating psychological aggression, ordered by consequences that were endorsed most often. The number of participants who selected "neither" for each consequence is not presented for clarity purposes. The most commonly endorsed consequences were having one's partner apologize for something he or she had done (67.3%), having one's partner stop annoying you (67.0%), having one's partner show that he or she cared for you more (57.9%), having one's partner stop doing something that upset you (57.4%), having one's partner continue to laugh at you (57.5%), having one's partner pay more attention to you (56.1%), and having one's partner agree to do what you wanted him or her to do (55.3%). Items that were endorsed by 25% or less of participants are not presented in the table for clarity purposes. These include felt good/bad because you got revenge, felt more/less sexually aroused, drank more/less alcohol, used more/less drugs, felt more/less jealous, partner continued/stopped crying, partner said he or she was/was not scared of you, partner complied/did not comply with request to have sex, you won/did not win the argument, and partner became more/less physically aggressive. In addition, it was relatively rare for participants to have their partner call the police on them (.9%) or to have their partner become physically aggressive (5.4%).

Many participants reported potential emotion regulation functions of perpetrating psychological aggression. For instance, 42.6% reported feeling less angry, 31.3% felt less frustrated, 31.3% felt less upset, 30.1% felt more calm, 25.7% were less stressed, 25.4% felt less irritated, and 17.7% felt less sad. In addition, a number of consequences that may be potentially punishing were also highly endorsed. For example, 36.6% of participants felt guilty, 33.9% thought they were wrong, 31.3% felt they were a bad person, and 29.8% felt ashamed for what they had done.

Table 1 also presents means and standard deviations for ratings of how participants felt after each consequence of psychological aggression perpetration. Scores could range from 1 to 5, and higher scores correspond to feeling *better* about the consequence that occurred. The consequences that produced the most positive feelings were feeling better about one's relationship ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 0.52$), felt less afraid that partner would leave you ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 0.61$), partner showed that he or she cared for you more ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 0.91$), you and partner stopped arguing ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.80$), and partner stopped annoying you ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.57$). Participants who reported feeling emotionally better after perpetrating psychological aggression also reported this being pleasant or good, such as feeling more calm ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.78$), less frustrated ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.51$), less upset ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.90$), less stressed ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.1$), and less angry ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 1.2$). A number of consequences reportedly caused participants to not feel very good or pleasant, including

one's partner showed that he or she cared for her less ($M = 1.1$, $SD = 0.35$), thought you were a bad person ($M = 1.1$, $SD = 0.40$), felt more sad ($M = 1.2$, $SD = 0.50$), partner paid less attention to you ($M = 1.2$, $SD = 0.56$), continued walking away from the conflict ($M = 1.2$, $SD = 0.46$), and felt more afraid one's partner might leave ($M = 1.2$, $SD = 0.50$).

Discussion

Within a sample of female college students, the current study examined the consequences of perpetrating psychological aggression against a dating partner. Recent theory on IPV (i.e., Bell & Naugle, 2008) has speculated that aggression perpetration may produce both reinforcing and punishing consequences and that reinforcing consequences may be one reason why aggression continues to occur in intimate relationships. Moreover, researchers have postulated that IPV, including psychological aggression, may serve an emotion regulation function for some perpetrators (e.g., Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002; Lawrence et al., 2009; Shorey et al., 2008b; Shorey, Cornelius et al., 2011). To our knowledge this is the first study to examine the consequences of psychological aggression perpetration, and results lend support to both theory and recent speculation on the role of aggression in intimate relationships.

Consistent with theory on IPV (Bell & Naugle, 2008), our results showed that participants reported a number of distinct consequences that followed psychological aggression perpetration, some of which may be potentially reinforcing and increase the likelihood that psychological aggression will continue to occur in their dating relationships. Although longitudinal research is needed to determine whether a particular consequence reinforces psychological aggression, which would be evident by that consequence predicting future aggression, our results lend preliminary support to the possibility that psychological aggression produces reinforcing consequences. For instance, a number of participants reported having a negative emotional state (e.g., anger, irritation, sadness, frustration, etc.) reduced following perpetration, which may have negatively reinforced psychological aggression perpetration due to the removal of an aversive state (Miltenberger, 2003). Researchers have speculated that psychological aggression, and IPV broadly, may serve to regulate negative emotions (e.g., Shorey et al., 2008b), and these findings provide the first evidence that this may indeed be occurring for psychological aggression specifically.

We also had participants rate how each particular consequence made them feel, with the belief that consequences that made participants feel *good* or *pleasant* would be more likely to reinforce aggressive behavior than consequences that did not produce positive feelings. A number of consequences produced good or pleasant feelings, or decreases in aversive feelings, in participants, such as feeling better about one's relationship, having one's partner stop annoying participants, and having a partner show that he or she cared about the participant(s) more. Individuals also rated the reduction of negative emotional states as good or pleasant. These findings speak to the importance of examining the potential function of psychological aggression and the resulting feelings they produce, for instance, if an individual is using psychological aggression to get his or her partner to show that he or she cares more about them, and this then produces positive feelings. Thus, intervention programs may benefit from teaching individuals nonaggressive methods to increase caring behaviors from their partner. Moreover, because a number of distinct consequences were rated as potentially reinforcing for participants, these findings indicate the need to examine individual differences in potential consequences for aggressive behavior, as not all participants will react similarly.

It should be noted that not all participants reported potentially reinforcing consequences following aggressive behavior. A number of participants reported feeling guilty, ashamed,

and thinking what they had done was wrong, for example. This is consistent with research on physical aggression in dating relationships, which has shown that some individuals believe they will, or have actually experienced, punishing consequences following aggression perpetration (e.g., Breslin et al., 1990; Leisring, 2009). In addition, very few participants reported that physical aggression occurred or increased after psychological aggression or their alcohol or drug use changed after aggression. These findings are slightly surprising, although continued research is needed to determine whether physical aggression concurrently occurred with psychological aggression and whether the consequences may have varied had physical aggression been present. As with the findings on potentially reinforcing consequences of aggression perpetration, longitudinal research is needed to determine whether punishing consequences decrease the chances that aggression will occur in the future, which would be expected based on theory.

Prevention Programming Implications

Although preliminary, results from the current study, in combination with previous research, may have potentially important implications for dating violence prevention programming. Our findings are consistent with research on physical aggression showing that deficiencies in emotion regulation abilities may be responsible for, and perpetuate, aggressive behavior in dating relationships (e.g., Shorey, Meltzer, & Cornelius, 2010). Because of this, researchers have advocated for dating violence prevention programs to increase adaptive emotion regulation skills in participants (Gratz, Paulson, Jakupcak, & Tull, 2009; Shorey et al., 2008b, 2010), an area that has been neglected in dating violence prevention programs (see Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007, for review). Teaching participants' strategies to regulate their emotions may provide them with long-lasting skills that are needed to refrain from using aggressive behavior when under negative emotional states.

In addition, the current study speaks to the importance of viewing each individual perpetrator of aggression as unique. Indeed, previous research has shown that individuals have multiple motivations for perpetrating physical aggression in dating relationships (e.g., Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991; Shorey et al., 2010) and this study suggests that perpetrators often have a number of consequences related to their psychological aggression perpetration. This suggests that dating violence intervention programs may benefit by tailoring to individual needs (Shorey et al., 2008b). Furthermore, when time permits, dating violence prevention program staff could conduct functional analyses of aggressive behavior in order to understand the unique motivating factors and consequences to aggression perpetration for each individual perpetrator (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Shorey et al., 2008b). This strategy would help researchers and clinicians to be aware of the points of intervention that may be most effective for each individual (Miltenberger, 2003) and ultimately result in decreased aggressive behavior.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study has a number of limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes the determination of causality among variables. Retrospective recall of consequences that followed a particular act of psychological aggression may have limited the ability of participants to accurately recall their experiences. Future research would benefit from using daily diary and longitudinal designs to examine the consequences that follow aggressive behavior. For instance, daily diary designs would allow researchers to ask participants to report on the consequences that followed aggressive behavior close in time to the actual act of aggression, reducing recall bias. Moreover, longitudinal designs will allow researchers to examine whether reinforcing/punishing consequences that follow psychological aggression perpetration predict future episodes of aggression perpetration (reinforcing consequences) or

desistance of aggression perpetration (punishing consequences). In addition, our sample consisted of primarily Caucasian women, limiting the generalizability of study findings to more diverse populations. The use of a college sample of women further limits the generalizability of findings. Moreover, a few participants were cohabitating with their partner at the time of the study, and some research has suggested that cohabitating couples may have more severe and frequent aggression than couples who are not cohabitating. Thus, in more detail, future research should examine the consequences of aggression for couples who live and do not live together.

Although we believe that focusing on only one instance of psychological aggression was important for a variety of reasons, this approach did not permit us to examine whether the consequences that followed perpetration were consistent across multiple episodes of aggression. Future research would benefit from examining this possibility. We also did not ask whether physical aggression occurred during participants' most troubling/distressing verbal disagreement, and it is possible that the consequences for psychological aggression were confounded with consequences for physical aggression. Future research should determine whether psychological and physical aggression that occur during the same incident have similar or different consequences.

Although the current study demonstrated that psychological aggression perpetration may have a number of reinforcing and punishing outcomes, our study only examined one instance of psychological aggression. Psychological aggression is a complex, multidimensional construct and has a myriad of factors that likely influence the expression of this aggressive behavior (Follingstad, 2007; O'Leary, 1999). Across situations, relationships, and interactions, individuals are likely to have a multitude of positive and negative consequences that collectively serve as reinforcement or punishment for perpetrating psychologically aggressive behavior. Continued research is needed that examines the complex set of factors that likely serve to maintain psychological aggression across situations and interactions.

In summary, the current study examined the consequences of perpetrating psychological aggression among a sample of female college students. Findings demonstrated that participants reported a number of distinct consequences following their psychological aggression perpetration, some of which may be potentially reinforcing or punishing. In addition, the reduction of negative emotional states was a common consequence of psychological aggression, providing preliminary evidence that psychological aggression may serve to help regulate emotions for some women in dating relationships. These findings suggest that dating violence prevention programs may want to consider targeting emotion regulation skills broadly as well as determine the functional aspects of psychological aggression in dating relationships in order to target the most salient risk factors for each individual.

Acknowledgments

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported, in part, by Grant K24AA019707 from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) awarded to the last author.

Biography

Ryan C. Shorey is a graduate student in clinical psychology at the University of Tennessee–Knoxville. He earned his MA in psychology from the University of Tennessee. His research

focuses primarily on intimate partner violence, with an emphasis on dating violence, psychological aggression, and substance use.

Jeff R. Temple, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. He has been conducting research on IPV since he began his graduate studies at the University of North Texas and later as a predoctoral intern and postdoctoral research fellow at Brown University. His research interests include violence prevention and intervention, and in addition, the mental and physical health effects of IPV and other factors that influence this relationship (e.g., substance misuse, social support).

Jeniimarie Febres, BA, is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Tennessee–Knoxville. She conducts research on risk and protective factors for intimate partner violence perpetration and victimization with the aim of better informing prevention and intervention strategies.

Hope Brasfield is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Tennessee. She received her MS in applied psychology from the University of South Alabama. Her interests are in intimate partner, dating, and sexual violence.

Amanda E. Sherman is a graduate student at the University of Tennessee. She received her MA in psychology from the University of Tennessee. Her research interests include impulsivity, substance abuse, and intimate partner violence.

Gregory L. Stuart, PhD, is a professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee–Knoxville and the director of family violence research at Butler Hospital. He is also a faculty member in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University. His research focuses primarily on the comorbidity of intimate partner violence and substance abuse. He is particularly interested in interventions that address both substance use and relationship aggression.

References

- Baker CR, Stith SM. Factors predicting dating violence perpetration among male and female college students. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma*. 2008; 17:227–244.
- Bell KM, Naugle AE. Intimate partner violence theoretical considerations: Moving towards a contextual framework. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 2008; 28:1906–1107.
- Bonem M, Stanley-Kime KL, Corbin M. A behavioral approach to understanding domestic violence: A functional assessment based on batterer identified contingencies. *Journal of Behavior Analysis Offender and Victim Treatment and Prevention*. 2008; 1:209–221.
- Breslin FC, Riggs DS, O'Leary KD, Arias I. Family precursors, expected and actual consequences of dating aggression. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 1990; 5:247–258.
- Capaldi DM, Shortt JW, Crosby L. Physical and psychological aggression in at-risk young couples: Stability and change in young adulthood. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*. 2003; 49:1–27.
- Cornelius TL, Resseguie N. Primary and secondary prevention programs for dating violence: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. 2007; 12:364–375.
- Cornelius TL, Shorey RC, Beebe SM. Self-reported communication variables and dating violence: Using Gottman's marital communication conceptualization. *Journal of Family Violence*. 2010; 25:439–448.
- Flynn A, Graham K. "Why did it happen?" A review and conceptual framework for research on perpetrators' and victims' explanations for intimate partner violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. 2010; 15:239–251. [PubMed: 20436933]
- Follingstad DR. Rethinking current approaches to psychological abuse: Conceptual and methodological issues. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. 2007; 12:439–458.

- Follingstad DR, Coyne S, Gambone L. A representative measure of psychological aggression and its severity. *Violence and Victims*. 2005; 20:25–38. [PubMed: 16047933]
- Follingstad DR, Wright S, Lloyd S, Sebastian JA. Sex differences in motivations and effects in dating violence. *Family Relations*. 1991; 40:51–57.
- Fritz PAT, O'Leary KD. Physical and psychological partner aggression across a decade: A growth curve analysis. *Violence and Victims*. 2004; 19:3–16. [PubMed: 15179743]
- Gratz KL, Paulson A, Jakupcak M, Tull MT. Exploring the relationship between childhood maltreatment and intimate partner abuse: Gender differences in the mediating role of emotion dysregulation. *Violence and Victims*. 2009; 24:68–82. [PubMed: 19297886]
- Jakupcak M, Lisak D, Roemer L. The role of masculine ideology and masculine gender role stress in man's perpetration of relationship violence. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*. 2002; 3:97–106.
- Kaura SA, Lohman BJ. Dating violence victimization, relationship satisfaction, mental health problems, and acceptability of violence: A comparison of men and women. *Journal of Family Violence*. 2007; 22:367–381.
- Lawrence E, Yoon J, Langer A, Ro E. Is psychological aggression as detrimental that physical aggression? The independent effects of psychological aggression on depression and anxiety symptoms. *Violence and Victims*. 2009; 24:20–35. [PubMed: 19297883]
- Leising PA. What will happen if I punch him? Expected consequences of female violence against male dating partners. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma*. 2009; 18:739–751.
- Miltenberger, RG. *Behavior modification: Principles and procedures*. 3rd ed.. Wadsworth; Belmont, CA: 2003.
- Murphy CM, Hoover SA. Measuring emotional abuse in dating relationships as a multifactorial construct. *Violence and Victims*. 1999; 14:39–53. [PubMed: 10397625]
- O'Leary KD. Psychological abuse: A variable deserving critical attention in domestic violence. *Violence and Victims*. 1999; 14:3–23. [PubMed: 10397623]
- Prospero M. Mental health symptoms among male victims or partner violence. *American Journal of Men's Health*. 2007; 1:269–277.
- Riggs DS, Caufield MB. Expected consequences of male violence against their female dating partners. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 1997; 12:229–240.
- Shorey RC, Cornelius TL, Bell KM. A critical review of theoretical frameworks for dating violence: Comparing the dating and marital fields. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*. 2008a; 13:185–194.
- Shorey RC, Cornelius TL, Bell KM. Behavior theory and dating violence: A framework for prevention programming. *Journal of Behavior Analysis of Offender and Victim Treatment and Prevention*. 2008b; 1:298–311.
- Shorey RC, Cornelius TL, Idema C. Trait anger as a mediator of difficulties with emotion regulation and female-perpetrated psychological aggression. *Violence and Victims*. 2011; 26:271–282. [PubMed: 21846017]
- Shorey RC, Febres J, Brasfield H, Stuart GL. A descriptive investigation of proximal factors to female perpetrated psychological aggression in dating relationships. *Partner Abuse*. 2011; 2:131–146.
- Shorey RC, Meltzer C, Cornelius TL. Motivations for self-defensive aggression in dating relationships. *Violence and Victims*. 2010; 25:662–676. [PubMed: 21061871]
- Shorey RC, Rhatigan DL, Fite PJ, Stuart GL. Dating violence victimization and alcohol problems: An examination of the stress-buffering hypothesis for perceived support. *Partner Abuse*. 2011; 2:31–45.
- Shorey RC, Sherman AE, Kivisto AJ, Elkins SR, Rhatigan DL, Moore TM. Gender differences in depression and anxiety among victims of intimate partner violence: The moderating effect of shame-proneness. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2011; 26:1834–1850. [PubMed: 20587460]
- Simonelli CJ, Ingram KM. Psychological distress among men experiencing physical and emotional abuse in heterosexual dating relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 1998; 13:667–681.
- Stets JE, Henderson DA. Contextual factors surrounding conflict resolution while dating: Results from a national study. *Family Relations*. 1991; 40:29–36.

- Straight ES, Harper FWK, Arias I. The impact of partner psychological abuse on health behaviors and health status in college women. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2003; 18:1035–1054. [PubMed: 19771708]
- Straus MA, Hamby SL, Boney-McCoy S, Sugarman DB. The revised conflict tactics scale (CTS2): Development and preliminary psychometric data. *Journal of Family Issues*. 1996; 17:283–316.
- Straus, MA.; Hamby, SL.; Warren, WL. *The Conflict Tactics Scales handbook*. Western Psychological Services; Los Angeles, CA: 2003.
- Taft CT, Schumm J, Orazem RJ, Meis L, Pinto LA. Examining the link between posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms and dating aggression perpetration. *Violence and Victims*. 2010; 25:456–469. [PubMed: 20712145]
- Temple JR, Freeman D. Dating violence and substance use among ethnically diverse adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2011; 26:701–718. [PubMed: 20587475]

Table 1
 Percentage of Endorsement and How Participants Felt After Each Consequence of Perpetrating Psychological Aggression

Consequence	%	M (SD)	Consequence	%	M (SD)
Felt less angry	42.6	3.1 (1.2)	Felt more angry	41.7	1.3 (0.64)
Partner stopped annoying you	67.0	4.3 (0.57)	Partner continued to annoy you	17.0	1.4 (0.51)
Partner stopped doing something that upset you	57.4	4.2 (0.88)	Partner continued to do something that was upsetting you	25.2	1.3 (0.60)
Felt less frustrated	31.3	4.0 (0.51)	Felt more frustrated	50.9	1.3 (0.59)
Partner apologized for something he or she had done	67.3	4.2 (0.83)	Partner did not apologize for something he or she had done	9.7	1.4 (0.68)
Partner continued to laugh at you	57.5	1.3 (0.57)	Partner stopped laughing at you	17.7	3.8 (0.64)
Felt less upset	31.3	3.9 (0.90)	Felt more upset	43.8	1.3 (0.64)
Partner paid more attention to you	56.1	4.3 (0.81)	Partner paid less attention to you	18.4	1.2 (0.56)
Partner agreed to do what you wanted him or her to do	55.3	4.0 (0.81)	Partner did not agree to do what you wanted him or her to do	19.3	1.5 (0.85)
Felt better about your relationship	45.1	4.7 (0.52)	Felt worse about your relationship	28.3	1.3 (0.57)
Thought you were a bad person	31.3	1.1 (0.40)	Did not think you were a bad person	41.1	3.4 (0.68)
Partner showed that he or she cared for you more	57.9	4.4 (0.91)	Partner showed that he or she cared for you less	13.2	1.1 (0.35)
Your partner avoided you	17.0	1.2 (0.56)	Partner did not avoid you	52.7	3.7 (0.86)
Did not feel guilty for what you had done	32.1	3.1 (0.82)	Felt guilty for what you had done	36.6	1.6 (0.70)
Partner agreed with you	43.9	4.1 (0.78)	Partner did not agree with you	23.7	1.7 (0.91)
Felt less sad	17.7	3.7 (0.85)	Felt more sad	49.6	1.2 (0.50)
Felt less irritated	25.4	3.8 (0.92)	Felt more irritated	41.2	1.5 (0.65)
Felt less calm	30.1	4.1 (0.78)	Felt more calm	36.3	1.9 (0.97)
Felt less stressed	25.7	3.9 (1.1)	Felt more stressed	40.2	1.4 (0.58)
Thought that you were right for what you had done	27.7	3.5 (0.81)	Thought you were wrong for what you had done	33.9	1.7 (0.89)
Partner left you alone	28.9	1.8 (0.98)	Partner did not leave you alone	31.6	3.6 (1.1)
Felt ashamed for what you had done	29.8	1.3 (0.60)	Did not feel ashamed for what you had done	29.8	3.2 (0.70)
Stopped walking away from the conflict	31.9	3.8 (0.94)	Continued to walk away from the conflict	23.9	1.2 (0.46)
Another person told what you had done was the right thing to do	40.7	3.6 (1.1)	Another person told you what you had done was wrong	13.3	1.6 (0.91)
Partner said he or she felt closer to you	23.0	4.3 (0.94)	Partner said he or she felt less close to you	31.0	1.4 (0.95)
Felt less afraid that your partner might leave you	17.7	4.4 (0.61)	Felt more afraid partner might leave you	31.0	1.2 (0.50)
Felt more in control	22.8	3.6 (1.1)	Less in control	23.7	1.2 (0.54)
You did what your partner wanted you to do	22.1	3.1 (1.1)	You did not do what your partner wanted you to do	20.4	3.3 (0.97)
Felt more powerful	18.3	3.4 (1.1)	Less powerful	23.5	1.4 (0.69)

Consequence	%	M (SD)	Consequence	%	M (SD)
Partner continued to call you names or yell at you	13.3	1.3 (.72)	Partner stopped calling you names or stopped yelling at you	26.5	3.9 (0.94)
You and partner stopped arguing	23.2	4.3 (0.80)	You and partner continued arguing	12.5	1.6 (0.67)
Your partner became more upset	18.6	1.8 (1.0)	Partner became less upset	15.0	4.0 (0.75)

Note: Scores can range from 1 to 5 (1 = *very bad or unpleasant*, 5 = *very good or pleasant*) for how participants felt.