The Relationship Between the Amount of Face-to-Face Contact and Partners’ Reports of Domestic Violence Frequency

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This investigation examines the relationship between partners’ amount of face-to-face contact and partners’ frequency of domestic violence. Men entering a domestic violence treatment program (N = 134) and their intimate partners were asked to complete the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) at the beginning of treatment and 12 months after treatment completion concerning partner violence during the previous year. Partners were also asked to identify days during the year before and the year after treatment during which they did not have face-to-face contact. Results indicated that at both baseline and 12-month posttreatment follow-up, the number of days of face-to-face contact was significantly related to verbal aggression and physical violence. However, after controlling for physical violence, the relationship between the number of days of face-to-face contact and verbal aggression was not significant; the relationship between the number of days of face-to-face contact and physical violence remained significant, even after controlling for verbal aggression.

*Keywords:* marriage, partner violence, measurement, interaction

Domestic violence is a public health concern of alarming proportions; recent nationally representative surveys indicate more than 2 million women are severely beaten by their partners each year (Straus & Gelles, 1986, 1990). As public awareness of the magnitude of spousal violence has increased, research into this problem has steadily risen over the past two decades. Among the many facets of this phenomenon currently under investigation, the assessment methods used to measure spousal violence have received greater scrutiny and have been a source of considerable disagreement and debate (Schafer, 1996).

Assessment of spousal violence has relied almost exclusively on the self-reports of perpetrators and victims of violence (Tolman & Bennett, 1990). Self-report measures have been widely used to assess the prevalence and frequency of partner violence in the general population and clinical samples, as well as changes in these behaviors in response to different interventions. The most widely used measure to estimate the prevalence and frequency of family violence is the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979), which is widely recognized as the “gold standard” in the field. Although the CTS has been used primarily in research settings, especially in large-scale surveys of family violence, it has also been adopted as part of general relationship and family assessment batteries (e.g., Biddle, 1993). Other measures of partner abuse that have been
used by researchers and clinicians include the Psychologi-
cal Maltreatment of Women Inventory (Tolman, 1989), the
Index of Spouse Abuse (Hudson & McIntosh, 1981), the
Measure of Wife Abuse (Rodenberg & Fantuzzo, 1993),
and the Abuse Risk Inventory for Women (Yegidis, 1989).

In our review of investigations that have used these and
other measures to assess domestic violence and published
critiques of various spousal violence assessment tools, we
have found no reports that have examined the effect of the
amount of face-to-face contact between partners on levels
of reported violence. It is plausible that more days of face-
to-face contact between partners would be positively re-
lated to the frequency of violence because of increased op-
portunity for such behaviors to occur. This would be
particularly true of physical aggression; partners can more
readily engage in verbally aggressive behavior by means
that do not require face-to-face contact (e.g., by telephone
calls, mail).

Furthermore, it is important to note that, for a variety of
reasons, partners who engage in domestic violence often
have significant periods of no face-to-face contact and,
within a given population under investigation, couples can
vary widely in the amount of face-to-face contact they
have during a given time interval. For example, several
studies examining the longitudinal outcomes of domesti-
cally violent couples indicate that one third to one half of
battered women end their relationships with their abusive
partner within a 2-year period (e.g., Gortner, Berns, Jacob-
son, & Gottman, 1997; Okun, 1986). Of course, in an ef-
fort by the abused partner to reduce or eliminate victimization from violence, relationship dissolution is of-
ten sought to reduce or eliminate face-to-face contact with
the batterer. Other examples of commonly occurring cir-
cumstances in which partners who have histories of do-
meestic violence may have reduced face-to-face contact
include incarceration or inpatient treatment stays for sub-
stance abuse or other mental health problems by one of
the partners. In addition, some victimized partners obtain civil
protection (restraining) orders against their spouses,
which are intended to reduce violence by either eliminat-
ing or greatly reducing face-to-face contact between them
(e.g., Meloy, Cowett, Parker, Hofland, & Friedland, 1997).
More benignly, partners may take separate vacations or
have jobs requiring travel that results in partners’ being
separated for extended periods (e.g., one partner employed
as a long-distance truck driver).

The problem faced by domestic violence investigators
is that if the frequency of violence is influenced by the
amount of face-to-face contact, it becomes more difficult
to interpret reported levels of violence behavior without
consideration of this variable. To illustrate the problem
with an extreme example, suppose two couples, A and B,
report three episodes of violence during a specified 1-year
period. In terms of violence frequency, these couples are
identical. However, suppose the partners in Couple A re-
port only 3 days of face-to-face contact over the 1-year in-
terval, whereas the partners in Couple B report 350 days
of face-to-face contact. The addition of information about
the amount of face-to-face contact would likely change the in-
terpretation of the violence information, with Couple A re-
porting a greater density of violence episodes per
opportunity compared to Couple B. In summary, couples
who have regular, perhaps daily, face-to-face contact and
have few or no episodes of verbal or physical aggression
may be substantively different from dyads with few or no
episodes of aggression who, in contrast, have limited op-
portunity for such behavior. Thus, the purpose of the pres-
ent investigation is to examine the relationship between
the amount of face-to-face contact and partners’ reported
levels of verbal and physical aggression.

METHOD

Participants

Men (N = 134) entering a spousal violence outpatient
treatment program, located in the northeastern United
States, along with their female partners, participated in
this investigation. Sociodemographic characteristics of
participants are shown in Table 1. One hundred sixty-four
consecutive male admissions were approached to partici-
pate in the study. Of these, 19 (12%) men refused to be in
the investigation, noting either (a) time constraints, (b) an
unwillingness to provide sufficiently detailed information
about episodes of physical aggression occurring in their
relationships, or (c) unwillingness to participate in
posttreatment interviews. The intimate partners of 8 men
(6%) who agreed to be in the study refused to participate
when the investigation was described; data from these cou-
ples were not included. Men in three couples (2%) who
agreed to participate dropped out of treatment before any
assessment data could be collected. Statistical compar-
sions of the sociodemographic characteristics of the 134
couples who participated and the 30 couples who did not,
using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and binomial tests,
revealed no significant differences between the groups
(i.e., all ps > .25).

Measures

Relationship violence. Partners were administered the
CTS to evaluate frequency of verbal aggression and over-
all physical violence during the previous year. Respon-
dents rated each of the items on a 7-point frequency scale
(0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = twice, 3 = 3-5 times, 4 = 4-10 times,
5 = 11-20 times, 6 = over 20 times) for self- and partner behavior in the past 12 months. Straus (1979) recommended scoring the frequency of violence using the middle of yearly frequency range for each CTS response category as follows: 0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = twice, 4 = 3-5 times, 8 = 6-10 times, 15 = 11-20 times, 25 = over 20 times. A combined self- and partner report was used. This approach is used frequently to address concerns about underreporting and tends to lead to higher prevalence rates than self-reports alone. For measuring frequency of violence in the past year, a combined report of the partners was constructed by summing the higher of the two partners’ reports on each CTS violence item.

As reported by Straus (1979), Cronbach’s alphas for the CTS ranged from .42 to .88 for the scales, eight studies confirmed the factor structure, and concurrent validity correlations (comparing reports obtained separately from the paired family relationships of spousal, parent-child) ranged from .19 to .80, with the approximate mean of .40.

For the present study, we examined scores on the Verbal Aggression and the Overall Physical Violence subscales. The Verbal Aggression subscale has six items (e.g., yelled and/or insulted, threatened to hit or throw something at partner). The Overall Violence subscale has eight items (e.g., threw something at partner, slapped partner). We calculated subscale scores for both male-to-female and female-to-male verbal aggression and overall violence, respectively.

### Table 1: Pretreatment Sociodemographic Characteristics of Men Entering Treatment for Battery and Their Intimate Partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male partners’ age (in years)</td>
<td>33.4 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female partners’ age (in years)</td>
<td>30.3 (8.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male partners’ education (in years)</td>
<td>12.2 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female partners’ education (in years)</td>
<td>12.9 (2.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years married (or cohabiting)</td>
<td>6.7 (4.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>1.1 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly family income (in U.S. dollars)</td>
<td>269.0 (144.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Procedure

Within 3 days of admission to the outpatient treatment program, consecutive admissions were approached and asked to participate in the study and were given a brief verbal overview of the study and the procedures to be used. The female partners of those patients agreeing to participate were then contacted, given a description of the study, and also asked to participate. Both partners had to agree to participate to be included in the investigation.

Within 7 days of program admission, male and female partners were each asked to complete the CTS. Using a standard U.S. calendar, partners were also interviewed and asked by a research assistant to identify specific days during the previous year on which they had no face-to-face contact. For each day identified as a day of no face-to-face contact, partners were asked to describe the primary reason why they did not have face-to-face contact.

Partners were informed that they would be contacted and interviewed on a quarterly basis during the 12 months after completing treatment to assess various aspects of their dyadic adjustment. They were told that, as part of these quarterly assessments, information would be collected on the amount of face-to-face contact they had with each other. When partners completed treatment, they were provided a standard U.S. calendar to take home and were asked to mark days on which they had no face-to-face contact.

At the baseline assessment, all partners completed the CTS and provided information about days of face-to-face contact. At the 12-month follow-up assessment, both partners in 101 (75%) of the couples completed the CTS and provided information about days of face-to-face contact. For 17 of the 33 remaining couples, only one of the partners provided CTS data and information about days of face-to-face contact. In those cases in which only one partner provided data, they were used in the subsequent analyses.
For 16 couples, neither partner completed the CTS at the 12-month follow-up and did not provide information about days of face-to-face contact during this interval. In these instances, CTS subscale scores and days of face-to-face contact were imputed using the estimation-maximization algorithm. Imputed scores were used in the subsequent analyses.

RESULTS

CTS Scores and Days of No Face-to-Face Contact

CTS Verbal Aggression and Overall Physical Violence subscale scores at baseline and 12-month follow-up are located in Table 2. At baseline and 12-month follow-up, the Verbal Aggression and Overall Physical Violence subscale scores were positively skewed. We used a logarithm transformation on the Verbal Aggression subscale scores at baseline and 12-month follow-up, which made these distributions more normally distributed. We used an inverse transformation on the Overall Physical Violence subscale scores at baseline and 12-month follow-up, which improved their distributions. The transformed variables were used in all subsequent analyses.

At baseline, 52 couples (39%) reported at least 1 day of no face-to-face contact during the year before entering treatment. Among the couples reporting 1 or more days of no face-to-face contact, 24 reported that they had been separated, 10 partners had been incarcerated, 4 had been hospitalized or placed in a residential setting for substance abuse treatment, and 21 partners had taken separate vacations, traveled separately as part of work, or were separated for other benign reasons. For our sample, the mean (SD) number of days of no face-to-face contact during the baseline period was 28.3 (45.2).

At 12-month follow-up, 72 couples (54%) reported at least 1 day of no face-to-face contact. Among these couples, 46 reported that they had been separated or divorced, 15 partners had protection orders, 12 partners had been incarcerated, 7 had been hospitalized or placed in a residential setting for substance abuse treatment, and 24 partners had taken separate vacations, traveled separately as part of work, or were separated for other benign reasons. The mean (SD) number of days of no face-to-face contact during the 12-month follow-up period was 40.6 (59.2).

Relationship Between CTS Scores and Days of No Face-to-Face Contact

To examine the relationship between days of face-to-face contact and CTS scores, we conducted two multivariate sequential general linear model analyses (Gorsuch, 1991), with separate models for the baseline and 12-month follow-up data. For each model, the male-to-female and female-to-male Verbal Aggression and Overall Physical Violence CTS subscales for the male and female partners were used as the criterion measures (i.e., there were four dependent measures in each model). The regressor in each model was number of days of face-to-face contact for the time interval under consideration (i.e., the baseline period or the 12-month follow-up period). Using this analysis, we evaluated (a) the omnibus relationship between number of days of face-to-face contact and the four violence measures, (b) the independent relationship of the number of days of face-to-face contact and each of the violence measures separately (i.e., product-moment correlations), and (c) the unique relationship of the number of days of no face-to-face contact and each of the violence measures, with the other three violence measures partialled out (partial correlations).

The approach of examining the independent and unique relationships of criterion measures and regressors in multivariate analyses is consistent with recommendations of several authors (e.g., Huberty & Morris, 1989; Wilkinson, 1975). Any interrelationships among the criterion measures are completely ignored when conducting multiple product-moment correlations. Although examining independent relationships among variables provides necessary information, it is not sufficient because it does not account for redundant information among criterion measures, particularly those that are not conceptually independent, as is the case with the criterion measures used in the present investigation (e.g., Biskin, 1990).

The results of these analyses for the baseline and 12-month follow-up are summarized in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. At baseline and follow-up, not only does the number of days of face-to-face contact have a significant overall relationship with violence scores but it also makes a significant independent contribution to the prediction of each of the violence scores (all rs < .05). However, the
**TABLE 3**
Summary of Correlations and Partial Correlations for Predicting Conflict Tactics Scale Violence Subscale Scores From Number of Days of Face-to-Face Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>Partial r</th>
<th>F(1, 30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male-to-female verbal aggression</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-to-female physical aggression</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>7.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-to-male verbal aggression</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-to-male physical aggression</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>5.96*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Overall $R^2 = .13 (N = 134, p < .001)$. Product-moment correlations (r) reflect the relationship between number of days of face-to-face contact and each Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) without controlling for or partialing out other CTSs. Partial rs reflect the unique relationship between number of days of face-to-face contact and each CTS with the other CTS scores partialled out. F tests were used to evaluate the significance of the unique contribution of number of days of face-to-face contact to the prediction of each CTS score, with the other CTS subscale scores partialled out. *p < .05. **p < .001.

**TABLE 4**
Summary of 12-Month Follow-Up Correlations and Partial Correlations Predicting Conflict Tactics Scale Violence Scores From Number of Days of Face-to-Face Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>Partial r</th>
<th>F(1, 30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male-to-female verbal aggression</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-to-female physical aggression</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>8.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-to-male verbal aggression</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female-to-male physical aggression</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>6.86**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Overall $R^2 = .23 (N = 134, p < .001)$. Product-moment correlations (r) reflect the relationship between number of days of face-to-face contact and each Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) without controlling for or partialing out the other CTSs. Partial rs reflect the unique relationship between number of days of face-to-face contact and each CTS with the other CTS scores partialled out. F tests were used to evaluate the significance of the unique contribution of number of days of face-to-face contact to the prediction of each CTS score, with the other CTS scores partialled out. *p < .05. **p < .001.

**DISCUSSION**

Given the increased opportunity for violence, it would seem plausible that the amount of face-to-face contact between intimate partners would be related to the frequency of physical violence and, to a lesser extent, to verbal aggression. However, studies to date have not examined these relationships or taken amount of face-to-face contact into account when evaluating violence frequency. In this investigation, we found that the number of days of face-to-face contact was significantly, albeit moderately, associated with the frequency of male-to-female and female-to-male verbal aggression and overall physical violence, both at the baseline and at 12-month follow-up assessment. After controlling for verbal aggression, the relationship between the number of days of face-to-face contact and overall physical aggression remained significant; however, the relationship between verbal aggression and face-to-face contact was no longer significant after controlling for physical violence. In addition, density of physical aggression during the pretreatment period was significantly related to posttreatment likelihood of both male-to-female and female-to-male physical aggression, even after controlling for frequency of these behaviors at pretreatment.
These findings support the notion that increased face-to-face contact between partners creates more opportunity for physical violence, thereby resulting in more frequent episodes of spousal violence. Thus, circumstances that decrease partner contact can, in turn, reduce frequency of violence. It should also be noted, however, that strategies designed to reduce face-to-face contact between partners are not always successful. For example, it is common for batterers to violate protection orders. Although most studies have found that protection orders were effective in reducing harm (e.g., Chaudhuri & Daly, 1990; Kaci, 1994), other studies have shown mixed results (e.g., Berk, Berk, Loseke, & Rauma, 1983; Sherman & Berk, 1984). The effectiveness of protection orders appears to vary as a function of severity of violence of the perpetrator and laxity of enforcement of the protection order (Meloy et al., 1997).

The finding that verbal aggression was no longer significantly related to face-to-face contact after controlling for physical violence indicates that verbal aggression is not independent of physical violence. More specifically, verbal aggression between partners occurs frequently during episodes of physical violence. Thus, because the amount of face-to-face contact is positively related to physical violence, it would also be positively related to verbal aggression. However, the finding that verbal aggression is not significantly associated with the amount of face-to-face contact between partners after controlling for physical violence suggests that, as opposed to physical violence, face-to-face contact is not required for episodes of verbal aggression. Partners can engage in significant verbal aggression in contexts that do not require face-to-face contact, such as telephone calls, electronic mail, and standard mail.

Our findings suggest that the amount of face-to-face contact between partners may be an important variable to consider when interpreting frequency of interpartner violence and its likelihood in the future. For example, when evaluating domestic violence outcomes of a treatment program (e.g., outpatient domestic violence program, alcoholism program), it is common for investigators to report reductions in frequency of domestic violence 1 year after treatment or to report the proportion of participants who do not engage in violence during the posttreatment period. Yet without accounting for amount of face-to-face contact between partners and simply reporting aggregate data across participants, interpreting the findings becomes difficult. Two couples may report that they have not engaged in any partner violence during the posttreatment period. However, interpretation of that information for each of those dyads would likely be different if one of the couples lived together and had face-to-face contact virtually every day of the posttreatment period, whereas the other couple had essentially no face-to-face contact after one of the partners fled to another geographic location after being threatened with violence.

Certainly, some would argue that the outcomes were equally positive for both couples and, if the only variable of interest is whether or not violence occurred, this is a defensible position. However, it is also important to understand the strategies used by the couples to attain the outcomes observed. Partners who have limited face-to-face contact and do not engage in domestic violence are using different coping strategies to deal with violence than those couples who have significant amounts of contact and also do not engage in domestic violence.

Considering the amount of face-to-face contact allows investigators not only to determine the frequency of violence over a given interval but also to calculate the density of violence. A new measure of domestic violence, the Timeline Followback Spousal Violence Interview (TLFB-SV) (Fals-Stewart, Birchler, & Kelley, in press) uses a calendar method to assess frequency of violence. Participants are interviewed and asked about days in a given interval during which episodes of domestic violence occurred. In addition, they are asked to identify the days in the interval during which they did not have any face-to-face contact for any reason. Although it is a relatively labor-intensive method of assessing domestic violence frequency, the TLFB-SV has the advantage of allowing investigators to calculate the frequency of partner violence (in terms of the number of days of physical aggression) and the percentage of days of violence, which is calculated by dividing the number of days of violence by the days of contact in the specified interval. This provides a more precise measure of violence density than the one used in the present study with the CTS and also allows for examination of changes in violence over a specified time interval.

This investigation had some important strengths that should be noted. Violence was evaluated with the widely used and psychometrically sound CTS. We recruited a relatively large sample of participants and retained a relatively large proportion of participants throughout the follow-up period. We also used slightly different methods to assess face-to-face contact. At baseline, we asked participants to identify days during the past year that they did not have face-to-face contact; in the follow-up period, we used a more intensive approach, with participants' keeping track of face-to-face contact on provided calendars and reporting this information every 3 months. During the posttreatment period, we also used monthly reminder calls to participants to increase data collection compliance. In retrospect, the less intensive method of simply asking participants about the amount of face-to-face contact, used at the baseline assessment, appeared to be reasonably effec-
tive for determining this information. Thus, it is possible for investigators to collect this information in a way that is both practical and economical.

Certain limitations of the investigation should also be noted. Perhaps most noteworthy is how we operation-alized a day of face-to-face contact. If partners had any face-to-face contact on a given day, that was counted as a day of face-to-face contact. Thus, if one partner had a protection order against another partner but, on any given day, the partners met for several minutes for one partner to drop off or to pick up children, it was counted as a day of face-to-face contact. Thus, there was no distinction between this type of minimal contact on a given day and a day in which partners spent 24 hours together. Certainly, small amounts of contact on a given day represent a more limited opportunity for physical violence to occur than on days where more prolonged contact occurred. Failure to account for the amount of contact on a given day in the analytic models could have attenuated the strength of the associations observed.

We also recruited a convenience sample from one out-patient treatment program for domestic violence. It is not clear how these findings would generalize to other settings and other populations of domestically violent participants (e.g., substance-abusing patients). We used one measure of domestic violence, the CTS, because of its wide use in the field. It is not clear how the findings we obtained in the present study would be influenced by other measures of domestic violence or how the findings might change if we used the revised CTS (CTS2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996).

In future investigations, it might also be interesting to explore the effect of density of contact on the type of violent act committed. It is plausible that increased contact may be associated with lower levels of violence committed frequently, whereas reduced contact may be associated with more extreme types of violence. Certainly, the lay press has reported episodes in which partners engage in extreme episodes of violence, sometimes culminating in homicide, after prolonged separation due to incarceration or restraining orders. This type of qualitative analysis was not conducted as part of the present investigation, and the hypothesis about the relationship of amount of face-to-face contact and violence type should be explored in a future investigation.

Amount of face-to-face contact between partners is a potentially important variable to consider when interpreting frequency of partner violence. Our study suggests that this information can be collected in a relatively economical way, allowing investigators to understand the effect of this variable on outcomes. Given its impact on violence, it would appear that such information should be collected and reported by investigators to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of violence outcomes.

NOTE

1. The estimation-maximization (EM) algorithm (Little & Rubin, 1987) is based on the idea that guesses are made about the missing data and then the guesses are used to make estimates of the sums, sums of squares, and cross products (the E step). One then uses these sufficient statistics to calculate the covariance matrix (the M step) and then uses the updated covariance matrix to estimate the missing values during the next E step. This process continues until the elements of the covariance matrix cease when the elements of the covariance matrix stop changing to a meaningful extent.

We also used listwise deletion (i.e., using only cases with complete data and ignoring the rest) and obtained the same pattern of results. Although listwise deletion is a very common approach used to deal with missing data, we chose not to report results using this method. Listwise deletion produces biased parameter estimates, particularly in instances in which more than 5% of cases have missing data, whereas reduced contact may be associated with lower levels of violence committed.

REFERENCES


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