

# Factors Associated With Acceptance of Psychological Aggression Against Women

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Are emotionally aggressive conflicts perceived to be more unacceptable than conflicts involving verbal or baseline levels of psychological aggression? Participants ( $n = 189$ ) read a hypothetical marital conflict that varied the husband's level of aggression. Results show that participants did not perceive the perpetrator's behavior in the emotional aggression condition to be any worse than the verbal aggression condition and, in most cases, no worse than the baseline condition. More traditional participants and participants who were perpetrators of psychological aggression had more positive perceptions of the perpetrator; just world beliefs and participant sex did not predict perceptions. This study suggests that people do not perceive emotional aggression to be nearly as harmful as it actually is.

**Keywords:** *emotional aggression; individual differences; perceptions; verbal aggression*

In the past two to three decades, substantial partner aggression research has focused on physically aggressive acts. Only recently has more been learned about other types of relationship aggression, such as psychological aggression (i.e., verbally and emotionally aggressive behaviors, as defined below; O'Leary, 1999). Psychological aggression is pervasive (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989), and the effects are extremely negative; 72% of physically abused women rated psychological aggression as having a more negative effect on them than the physical aggression (Follingstad et al., 1990). Additionally, psychological aggression has been linked to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Arias & Pape, 1999; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997; Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Given the high prevalence and severe consequences of psychological aggression, much remains to be done toward understanding the factors that promote psychological aggression (O'Leary, 1999).

The current research examined such a factor, namely, perceptions that aggression is "acceptable" or tolerable in relationships. Many studies have concluded that physical

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aggression is perceived to be serious and unacceptable (e.g., Lane & Knowles, 2000; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Shlien-Dellinger, Huss, & Kramer, 2004; Pavlou & Knowles, 2001), but little is known about whether psychological aggression is tolerated. The primary aim of this research was to examine whether people find psychological aggression to be unacceptable. Also, we were interested in whether certain beliefs and past experiences would predict perceptions of psychological aggression, namely, traditional gender role beliefs and just world beliefs as well as past experiences as a perpetrator of psychological aggression in one's own romantic relationship.

## Why Is It Important to Examine Perceptions of Psychological Aggression?

### *Psychological Aggression Is a Serious Problem*

Currently there are few good estimates of the prevalence of psychological aggression in the United States, although existing estimates suggest it is pervasive (O'Leary, 1999). A major obstacle to identifying precise estimates concerns a lack of agreement over exactly what psychological aggression is. Throughout this article, we will use the term *psychological aggression* as the overarching label that encompasses both verbal and emotional components. Factor analyses of psychological aggression self-reports support a distinction between mild psychological aggression in the form of *verbal aggression* (including yelling, swearing, mild to moderate criticism) versus more severe psychological aggression in the form of *emotional aggression*, which involves control tactics meant to dominate another person (including threatening, derogating, belittling, ridiculing, humiliating, and isolating from others, as well as denying needed economic resources; Caudfield & Riggs, 1992; Hamby & Sugarman, 1999; Pan, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994).

Emotional aggression has more negative consequences for victims than verbal aggression (Coker et al., 2002; Johnson, 1995). Also, emotional aggression can be more difficult to cope with than physical aggression (Follingstad et al., 1990; Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991) and poses a risk factor for physical aggression and injuries (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989), suggesting that it is as much a serious problem as is physical aggression.

### *Accepting Aggression Breeds Further Aggression*

Because of the negative effects of psychological aggression and its pervasiveness based on initial estimates, it becomes important to examine whether people perceive it to be acceptable. Why should we study acceptability? We suggest that if people perceive psychological aggression to be acceptable, this creates a societal climate that breeds further psychological aggression. Feminist theorists argue that the patriarchal nature of many societies leads to social norms that allow for a man to physically or emotionally abuse his wife. When men are dominant members of their

society, it is acceptable and even expected in some circumstances for them to use aggression as a means to control and dominate their female partner (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Sellers, Cochran, & Branch, 2005). If society generally tolerates such actions, then aggression becomes more likely to continue as aggressive men fail to be punished and abused women fail to get much needed support.

Extant research suggests that acceptability of physical aggression encourages acts of physical aggression (Archer & Graham-Kevan, 2003; Schwartz & Dekeseredy, 2000; Smith, 1991). It stands to reason that acceptance of psychological aggression may encourage it to occur. We next examine factors that may predict whether people perceive psychological aggression to be a problem.

### **Individual Factors That Predict Perceptions of Partner Aggression**

Research to date has focused primarily on factors that predict the acceptability of *physical* aggression. Numerous studies have examined characteristics reflecting individual differences among the perceivers (e.g., Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990). Traditional gender beliefs are associated with increased sympathy for perpetrators of physical aggression (Pavlou & Knowles, 2001; Willis, Hallinan, & Melby, 1996), less blame for perpetrators (Hillier & Foddy, 1993; Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990; Pavlou & Knowles, 2001), and lower perceptions that the behaviors are abusive (Willis et al., 1996). Similarly, people with more traditional gender role beliefs are also more accepting of perpetrators of sexual aggression (e.g., Muehlenhard, Friedman, & Thomas, 1985).

Numerous studies have also examined whether stronger beliefs in a just world are associated with more acceptance of physical and sexual aggression, but have found mixed support. The just world hypothesis suggests that a commonly adopted belief is that the world is a fair and just place, where people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). If the world is a just place, then there must be a justifiable reason that a person perpetrates an aggressive act, absolving the person of any personal responsibility (e.g., he hit her because she deserved it or she did something to provoke it). Some studies have found that individuals who adopt more just world beliefs perceive a perpetrator as less culpable (Kleinke & Meyer, 1990; Rubin & Peplau, 1975), whereas other studies have not found this association (Hammock & Richardson, 1993; Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990; Lambert & Raichle, 2000).

Perceptions of physical aggression may also be associated with one's own past experiences with aggression. One study with men (Bryant & Spencer, 2003) and another with women (Cauffman, Feldman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000) revealed that people who used physical aggression in their own relationships were more accepting of physical aggression by others.

Despite advances in our understanding of how physical aggression is perceived, questions remain regarding perceptions of psychological aggression. Is psychological aggression perceived to be unacceptable? Do perceiver characteristics—namely,

traditional gender role beliefs, just world beliefs, and own use of aggression—predict perceptions of psychological aggression?

## Is Psychological Aggression Perceived to Be Unacceptable?

Very little research exists on perceptions of acceptability of psychological aggression. One study by Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2004) examined perceptions of physical and psychological aggression. Participants viewed one of two videos depicting either a psychologically aggressive incident or an incident that involved both psychological and physical aggression. Viewing physical aggression added to the perception of seriousness, above and beyond the effect of psychological aggression. However, both conditions included psychological aggression, making it impossible to interpret its effect.

Capezza and Arriaga (2008) directly examined the effect of psychological aggression. Participants read one of six scenarios of a marital conflict that varied the husband's level of physical aggression (absent, low, high) as well as psychological aggression (low, high). Perceptions consistently were influenced by increases in the husband's physical aggression, but the effect of increasing his psychological aggression was highly conditional (e.g., for only some, but not all, perceptions of acceptability). These two studies provide only initial information about perceptions of psychological aggression; a more systematic analysis is needed.

## Current Research

The current study addressed two major limitations in existing research. First, the two existing studies that examined psychological aggression did not distinguish between verbal versus emotional aggression, and yet these are different phenomena with different outcomes (Coker et al., 2002). Given the negative effects of emotional aggression on victims, we anticipated that this type of psychological aggression would be the least acceptable:

*Hypothesis 1:* Compared to behaviors that involve only minimal (baseline) aggression or verbal aggression, emotionally aggressive conflict behaviors will lead to perceptions that the perpetrator's behavior is unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive.

The second limitation is that neither of the previous studies examined individual difference variables, and yet there is substantial evidence in other forms of aggression that individual differences in beliefs and past experiences predict perceptions. Following the pattern that has been established in other forms of partner aggression, we anticipated that

*Hypothesis 2:* Higher endorsement of traditional gender role beliefs should be associated with perceiving the perpetrator's behavior to be less unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive.

*Hypothesis 3:* Higher endorsement of just world beliefs should be associated with perceiving the perpetrator's behavior to be less unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive.

*Hypothesis 4:* More use of psychological aggression in one's own relationships should be associated with perceiving the perpetrator's behavior to be less unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive.

We also sought to establish more elaborate measures of perceptions of psychological aggression than have been used in previous research. First, with respect to perceptions of the perpetrator's behavior, we examined four variables that we anticipate will be correlated and yet are distinct: unacceptability, negative, blameworthy, and abusive. Second, we examined perceptions concerning the conflict situation, namely, whether it was perceived to be severe and violent. Importantly, we added a third set of perceptions concerning the various consequences that might result following the conflict, including the likelihood that physical force or a similar conflict would occur, or that the police would become involved. This provides a window into whether people perceive psychological aggression to be a "one-time thing," or instead a persistent pattern of behavior that is not likely to desist quickly. Our rationale for examining three sets of perception variables was to explore whether the same pattern emerges across different types of perceptions and whether individual beliefs and past experiences would be associated with all perceptions the same.

In addition to manipulating the perpetrator's level of psychological aggression, we also manipulated the level of physical aggression. It is possible that when a perpetrator is physically aggressive, this overwhelms perceptions of other behaviors, which would make the presence of psychological aggression less important in comparison. It is important to test whether people perceive psychological aggression to be just as negative as, if not more negative than, physical aggression.

We examined variations in levels of partner aggression within a context in which a husband is aggressive toward his wife. The reasoning outlined above suggests that aggression may be most acceptable under conditions that reflect strong patriarchal norms: relationships following traditional gender roles in which the male partner has more power relative to the female partner. Thus, we used a scenario that may be most plausible to lay persons, one in which a husband is potentially physically aggressive toward his wife (Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). Importantly, we kept constant this gender context across conditions to isolate the effect of varying levels of aggression. We do not intend to suggest that women are never aggressive toward men; more simply, varying perceptions based on the perpetrator's gender was beyond the scope of examining perceptions of the different acts.

## Method

### Design and Participants

This study was a  $3 \times 3$  between-subjects experiment, in which participants were randomly assigned to read one of nine hypothetical scenarios depicting a married couple's conflict. Three levels of psychological aggression (baseline, verbal, and emotional) were crossed with three levels of physical aggression (absent, low, and high). The sample was 189 participants (109 females, 80 males) from a large university in the Midwestern region of the United States, who participated in exchange for course credit. This was described as a study on conflict in relationships. The mean age was 19.6 years ( $SD = 2.45$ ), and most participants were White (83%; 10% Asian American; 3% Hispanic, 3% African American, and 1% Other).

### Procedure

Data collection sessions were conducted in a classroom; approximately 15 participants took part in each session. After providing written consent, participants completed a questionnaire packet that contained all study materials. Participants first read a scenario depicting a marital conflict. Participants then completed scales to assess perceptions of each couple member's actions, perceptions of the conflict, and perceptions of future problems. They also completed scales to assess traditional gender role beliefs, just world beliefs, and their own perpetration of psychological aggression. Finally, participants completed demographic characteristics. Sessions lasted approximately 45 minutes. At the end of the session, the experimenter debriefed and thanked participants.

### Manipulation

The manipulation was modeled after the one used by Capezza and Arriaga (2008). Participants read a written hypothetical scenario (one and one third single-spaced pages in length) that described a conflict between John and Sue, a married couple. The couple held fairly traditional family roles; Sue was responsible for cooking and cleaning, and John was responsible for paying bills. Sue had recently started a new job (volunteering for a fashion show) that took more of her time and required John to help out with some of her household chores (e.g., washing dishes), which was a source of marital tension. The conflict began when John failed to wash the dishes. Sue became frustrated, and the conflict escalated into an argument. In all conditions, both John and Sue engaged in some conflict behaviors (e.g., arguing) that often occur during marital conflicts to provide a "baseline" conflict level that is present in all conditions.

Sue's behavior did not vary across conditions. In all conditions, Sue's behavior involved mild yelling as is common in many marital conflicts.

John's conflict behavior varied across conditions. The 3 × 3 design entailed creating nine different scenarios that crossed (a) baseline versus verbal versus emotional psychological aggression manipulation of his behavior, with (b) no versus low versus high physical aggression manipulation of his behavior.

In the baseline *psychological aggression* condition (regardless of the physical aggression condition), John was mildly critical of Sue: "*Look . . .*" he said, "*you brought this on yourself. Things were fine until you decided to take on this fashion show thing. If you can't handle it, maybe you should just stop.*" At the end of the scenario, John stormed out of the room.

In contrast, in conditions in which John was verbally or emotionally psychologically aggressive, all of the behaviors in the baseline psychological aggression conditions were intensified. The two psychological aggression conditions reflected variations that have been made in the extant literature between verbal versus emotional aggression (Caudfield & Riggs, 1992; Hamby & Sugarman, 1999; Pan et al., 1994). The verbal aggression manipulation was based on items from the Conflict Tactics Scale or CTS (Straus, 1979), namely, "yelled, insulted, or swore at your partner"; "sulking or refused to talk about an issue"; and "stomped out of the room." Specifically, in the verbal aggression condition, John said to Sue, "*You go ahead and get upset, d— it! I'm being unreasonable? You're the one that is doing whatever the hell you want to do and making me pick up after you. You expect too f\$%#ing much from me lately. You're turning into a f\$%#ing bitch . . .*" Also, before storming out of the room, John yells, "*I'm so tired of fighting over this bullsh\$%.*" The verbal aggression manipulation involved increased levels of yelling and swearing but did not include highly detrimental forms of psychological aggression, such as threatening or belittling; these behaviors were captured in the emotional aggression manipulation.

The emotional aggression manipulation was based on items from the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory or PMWI (Tolman, 1989), which includes two subscales, an isolation/domination component (e.g., "my partner monitored my time and made me account for my whereabouts") and an emotional/verbal component (e.g., "my partner called me names"; "my partner treated me like an inferior"; "my partner told me my feelings were irrational or crazy"; and "my partner tried to make me feel crazy"). The isolation/domination aspect was captured in the scenario as follows: "*John asked, 'Where are you going?' Lately, since Sue had recently been out and about more, John was quicker to ask where exactly she was going, what she was doing, and who she was going to see. He figured he deserved to know the whereabouts of his wife.*" In addition to monitoring Sue's actions, John belittled Sue: "*Personally I think you're losing it under pressure. You've been a damn mental case lately and I don't think you have what it takes to be a working girl.*" John also called her names and made her appear worthless: "*You go ahead and get upset, d— it! Even better, you just try leaving me!! You are such a demanding b— no one else is ever gonna put up with you! Honestly, I don't even know why I put up with this bull \$%#! If you can't handle your side of the marriage bargain then have a \$%#ing*

*happy life alone!! I oughta just put you in your place, you ugly piece of sh\*!\$!"* In addition, prior to storming out of the room, John used threats to frighten Sue, as indicated in the following text: *"John threw a dish right at her, barely missing her head. Then he lifted a stack of dishes and smashed them to the floor, causing Sue to jump in fear. 'You are such a \$#%ing cry baby!!! You keep this up and I'll really give you something to cry about!!!"*

In the *no physical aggression* condition (regardless of the psychological aggression condition), both John and Sue continued to argue until John stormed out of the room. In the *low physical aggression* condition, prior to leaving the room, John *"slapped her hard across the face."* In the *high physical aggression* condition, *"John launched himself toward Sue, sending her down to the floor. Sue, on her stomach, was struggling to push herself back up when John pushed her back down, sat on her back, and grabbed her hair from behind. Then he knocked her head hard onto the floor."* The actions in each condition correspond with actions that factor analyses have shown to capture low levels of physical aggression versus high levels of physical aggression (Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, O'Leary, & Slep, 1999; Pan et al., 1994).

## Measures

### *Perceptions of Perpetrator's Behavior*

Items were combined into four specific variables tapping perceptions of the perpetrator's behavior. All items assessing these perceptions employed a 5-point response scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

Eight items were averaged to capture the extent to which the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to be unacceptable and unjustified ( $\alpha = .79$ ), where higher numbers reflected more unacceptable behavior. Items included rating how unacceptable John's behavior was at specific points in the scenario that corresponded to each condition, as well as other items assessing unacceptability.

Six items were averaged to capture the extent to which the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to be negative and destructive ( $\alpha = .80$ ), where higher numbers reflected more negative behavior. Items included rating how negative, positive (reverse-coded), and destructive the perpetrator's behavior was, as well as other items assessing negativity.

Three items were averaged to capture the extent to which the perpetrator was perceived to be blameworthy and responsible for the conflict ( $\alpha = .70$ ), where higher numbers reflected more blame. Items included rating how much John was to blame for the conflict, and other items assessing blame.

One item assessed the extent to which the perpetrator's behavior warranted the label *abuse*. Higher numbers reflected perceiving the perpetrator as more abusive.



### *Perceptions of the Conflict*

One item assessed the *perceived severity* of the conflict and another item assessed the *perceived violence* of the conflict; each item used a 5-point response scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*), where higher numbers reflect more severity and violence.

### *Perceptions of Future Problems*

Future problems were assessed using three items: (a) John would use physical force against Sue, (b) a similar conflict would occur again, and (c) the police would intervene. Because these items were designed to capture discrete outcomes, they were analyzed individually rather than averaged together. All items employed a 5-point response scale (1 = *not at all likely*, 5 = *extremely likely*), where higher numbers reflected worse consequences.

### *Traditional Gender Role Beliefs*

Traditional gender role beliefs were assessed using seven items taken from two different scales. Three items assessing egalitarian sex role attitudes were taken from the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children (e.g., “It is more important for a wife to help her husband’s career than to have one herself”; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). The remaining four items were from the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; e.g., “Women should worry less about being equal with men”; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973). All items employed a 7-point response scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*) and were averaged ( $\alpha = .84$ ), where higher numbers reflected more traditional beliefs.

### *Just World Beliefs*

Beliefs in a just world were assessed using 10 items from the Beliefs in a Just World (BJW) scale (e.g., “I feel that the world treats people fairly”; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). All items employed a 7-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Two items—“Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded” and “Many people suffer through absolutely no fault of their own”—were eliminated because they did not correlate well with the other items. The remaining eight items were averaged ( $\alpha = .70$ ), where higher numbers reflected stronger beliefs in a just world.

### *Participant’s Perpetration of Psychological Aggression*

Only participants who reported currently being in a relationship ( $n = 131$ ) completed the measure for psychological aggression in one’s own relationship. Participants were asked to rate how often they engaged in various behaviors in their own relationship. The measure included 11 items taken from various sources. Five items were modified from the PMWI (e.g., “get jealous or possessive”; “discourage your partner from seeing friends or family members”; Tolman, 1989). Four items were from various versions of the CTS (e.g., “shout or yell at your partner”; “insult or swear at your partner”; Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The final two items

we created: “make your partner feel bad about himself or herself” and “make your partner feel like he or she doesn’t deserve much.” All items employed a 7-point response scale (1 = *I never do this*, 7 = *I always do this*). The 11 items were averaged, where higher numbers reflected more perpetration of psychological aggression in one’s own relationship ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

### **Validity of the Manipulations**

Through pilot testing, we determined that the manipulations of John’s psychologically aggressive behaviors had the intended effects (all manipulation checks were significant,  $p < .01$ ). Specifically, participants reported that John (a) yelled in the verbal and emotional aggression conditions more than in the baseline condition; (b) belittled Sue more in the verbal aggression than baseline condition and more in the emotional than verbal aggression condition; (c) was threatening to Sue, (d) threw something at Sue, and (e) restricted Sue’s access to money more in the emotional aggression condition than in the other two conditions.

Also through pilot testing, we determined that the manipulations of John’s physically aggressive behaviors had the intended effects (all manipulation checks were significant,  $p < .01$ ). Specifically, participants were more likely to report that John (a) slapped Sue in the low physical aggression condition than in the no or high physical aggression conditions and (b) pushed Sue to the ground in the high physical aggression condition than in the low or no physical aggression conditions.

## **Results**

### **Data Analysis Overview**

We examined three sets of dependent variables: (a) perceptions of the perpetrator’s behavior, which is the main focus of the article and hypotheses; (b) perceptions of the conflict; and (c) perceptions of future problems. For each set of dependent variables, we first performed a MANOVA with all dependent variables in that set and all relevant independent variables (psychological aggression and physical aggression for Hypothesis 1, as well as individual difference variables for other hypotheses, and all higher order interactions for each set of independent variables). We examined all main and interaction effects involving participant sex, none of which was significant unless otherwise specified.

### **Perceptions of the Perpetrator’s Behavior**

In all of the MANOVA analyses below, there were four dependent variables (unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive). Across all conditions, the perpetrator’s

**Table 1**  
**Mean Perceptions of the Perpetrator's Behavior, the Conflict, and**  
**Future Problems, for Each Level of Psychological Aggression**

	Psychological Aggression		
	Absent ( <i>n</i> = 62)	Verbal ( <i>n</i> = 62)	Emotional ( <i>n</i> = 64)
Perceptions of the perpetrator			
Unacceptable	4.12 (0.64) <sub>a</sub>	4.44 (0.39) <sub>b</sub>	4.52 (0.52) <sub>b</sub>
Negative	4.39 (0.54) <sub>a</sub>	4.56 (0.46) <sub>a</sub>	4.56 (0.64) <sub>a</sub>
Blameworthy	3.75 (0.60) <sub>a</sub>	3.77 (0.73) <sub>a</sub>	3.78 (0.75) <sub>a</sub>
Abusive	3.79 (1.37) <sub>a</sub>	4.19 (1.05) <sub>b</sub>	4.50 (0.84) <sub>b</sub>
Perceptions of the conflict			
Severity	3.81 (0.97) <sub>a</sub>	4.05 (0.89) <sub>ab</sub>	4.34 (0.82) <sub>b</sub>
Violence	3.26 (1.42) <sub>a</sub>	3.63 (1.17) <sub>b</sub>	4.33 (1.09) <sub>c</sub>
Perceptions of future problems			
Physical force	3.21 (1.38) <sub>a</sub>	3.55 (1.26) <sub>a</sub>	4.09 (1.09) <sub>b</sub>
Police will intervene	2.14 (1.08) <sub>a</sub>	2.13 (1.07) <sub>a</sub>	2.50 (0.97) <sub>a</sub>
Similar conflict	4.14 (0.81) <sub>a</sub>	4.05 (0.79) <sub>a</sub>	4.17 (0.65) <sub>a</sub>

Note: Table values are mean perceptions for each level of psychological aggression. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. Within rows, mean values with different subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ), as indicated by results of Tukey multiple-range tests.

actions were seen as largely unacceptable ( $M = 4.36$ ), negative ( $M = 4.50$ ), blameworthy ( $M = 3.77$ ), and abusive ( $M = 4.16$ ) on a scale from 1 to 5 (higher numbers reflect more unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive).

### *Hypothesis 1*

Hypothesis 1 suggested that emotionally aggressive conflict behaviors will be seen as more unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive than verbally or minimally aggressive behaviors. The MANOVA revealed a multivariate main effect for psychological aggression,  $F(8, 352) = 3.85, p < .001$ ; as well as a multivariate interaction with physical aggression,  $F(16, 538) = 2.09, p = .008$ .

At the univariate level, the main effect of the psychological aggression manipulation was significant for unacceptable,  $F(2, 179) = 10.20, p < .001$ . As can be seen in Table 1, participants in the verbal and the emotional aggression conditions perceived the perpetrator's behavior to be more unacceptable than participants in the baseline condition, and verbal and emotional aggression did not differ from each other. There was also a significant main effect for perceiving the perpetrator as abusive (similar to the effect for unacceptable),  $F(2, 179) = 9.79, p < .001$ ; but it was moderated by an interaction with physical aggression,  $F(4, 179) = 4.79, p = .001$ . As can be seen in the first row of Table 2, participants viewed the perpetrator as more

**Table 2**  
**Mean Perceptions of Perpetrator Labeled Abusive, Severity, Violence, and Using Physical Force in the Future, for Each Level of Physical and Psychological Aggression**

Perceptions	Physical Aggression											
	Absent (n = 64)				Low (n = 62)				High (n = 63)			
	Psychological Aggression		Emotional		Psychological Aggression		Emotional		Psychological Aggression		Emotional	
	Absent	Verbal	Emotional	Absent	Verbal	Emotional	Absent	Verbal	Emotional	Absent	Verbal	Emotional
Abusive	2.52 <sub>a</sub>	3.48 <sub>b</sub>	3.18 <sub>b</sub>	4.05 <sub>a</sub>	4.30 <sub>a</sub>	4.52 <sub>a</sub>	4.81 <sub>a</sub>	4.81 <sub>a</sub>	4.81 <sub>a</sub>	4.81 <sub>a</sub>	4.81 <sub>a</sub>	4.81 <sub>a</sub>
Severity	3.09 <sub>a</sub>	3.81 <sub>b</sub>	4.18 <sub>b</sub>	4.00 <sub>a</sub>	3.81 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.52 <sub>a</sub>	4.52 <sub>a</sub>
Violence	1.66 <sub>d</sub>	2.57 <sub>b</sub>	3.86 <sub>c</sub>	3.80 <sub>a</sub>	3.71 <sub>a</sub>	4.52 <sub>b</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.62 <sub>a</sub>	4.62 <sub>a</sub>
Physical force	1.81 <sub>d</sub>	2.33 <sub>a</sub>	3.73 <sub>b</sub>	3.85 <sub>a</sub>	3.95 <sub>a</sub>	4.33 <sub>a</sub>	4.00 <sub>a</sub>	4.00 <sub>a</sub>	4.00 <sub>a</sub>	4.00 <sub>a</sub>	4.40 <sub>a</sub>	4.24 <sub>a</sub>

Note: Table values are means for each level of physical and psychological aggression. Within rows for each level of physical aggression, mean values with different subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ), as indicated by results of Tukey multiple-range tests.

**Table 3**  
**Mean Perceptions of the Perpetrator's Behavior, the Conflict, and**  
**Future Problems, for Each Level of Physical Aggression**

	Physical Aggression		
	Absent ( <i>n</i> = 64)	Low ( <i>n</i> = 62)	High ( <i>n</i> = 63)
Perceptions of the perpetrator			
Unacceptable	4.21 (0.69) <sub>a</sub>	4.39 (0.45) <sub>ab</sub>	4.48 (0.43) <sub>b</sub>
Negative	4.37 (0.65) <sub>a</sub>	4.47 (0.55) <sub>ab</sub>	4.67 (0.40) <sub>b</sub>
Blameworthy	3.67 (0.71) <sub>a</sub>	3.78 (0.67) <sub>a</sub>	3.86 (0.69) <sub>a</sub>
Abusive	3.41 (1.31) <sub>a</sub>	4.29 (0.95) <sub>b</sub>	4.81 (0.50) <sub>c</sub>
Perceptions of the conflict			
Severity	3.70 (1.00) <sub>a</sub>	4.05 (0.84) <sub>b</sub>	4.46 (0.69) <sub>c</sub>
Violence	2.72 (1.28) <sub>a</sub>	4.02 (0.88) <sub>b</sub>	4.52 (0.67) <sub>c</sub>
Perceptions of future problems			
Physical force	2.64 (1.28) <sub>a</sub>	4.05 (1.01) <sub>b</sub>	4.21 (0.94) <sub>b</sub>
Police will intervene	1.78 (0.86) <sub>a</sub>	2.24 (0.97) <sub>b</sub>	2.76 (1.09) <sub>c</sub>
Similar conflict	4.06 (0.71) <sub>ab</sub>	3.98 (0.76) <sub>a</sub>	4.32 (0.76) <sub>b</sub>

Note: Table values are mean perceptions for each level of physical aggression. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses. Within rows, mean values with different subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ), as indicated by results of Tukey multiple-range tests.

abusive when he was verbally or emotionally aggressive but only if he was *not* physically aggressive (first column); once any physical aggression occurred (second and third columns), no significant differences emerged between the three levels of psychological aggression.

Replicating prior research, the MANOVA also yielded a multivariate main effect of perpetrator physical aggression,  $F(8, 352) = 9.67, p < .001$ . At the univariate level, and as can be seen in Table 3, increasing levels of physical aggression caused increased perceptions that the perpetrator's behavior was unacceptable,  $F(2, 179) = 4.65, p = .011$ ; negative,  $F(2, 179) = 5.31, p = .006$ ; and abusive,  $F(2, 179) = 39.99, p < .001$ . In short, the psychological aggression manipulation had a significant effect on unacceptability, a conditional effect on abusive, and no effect on negative and blameworthy; the physical aggression manipulation had a robust and significant effect on all but blameworthy.

### *Hypothesis 2*

The MANOVA (traditional gender role beliefs, the two manipulations, and the higher order interaction of each manipulation with gender role beliefs) yielded a multivariate main effect for traditional gender role beliefs,  $F(4, 175) = 8.38, p < .001$ , and no higher order interactions, suggesting that the link between traditional gender

**Table 4**  
**Correlations of Traditional Gender Role Beliefs, Just World Beliefs,**  
**and Perpetration of Psychological Aggression With Perceptions**  
**of the Perpetrator's Behavior**

	Traditional Beliefs	Just World	Perpetration of Aggression
Perceptions of the perpetrator			
Unacceptable	-.29***	-.15**	-.31***
Negative	-.21**	-.15**	-.31***
Blameworthy	-.16**	-.12	-.09
Abusive	-.12*	-.05	-.15*

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

role beliefs and perpetrator perceptions did not vary across conditions of aggression. At the univariate level, the effect was significant for unacceptable,  $F(1, 182) = 27.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ; negative,  $F(1, 182) = 12.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ; blameworthy,  $F(1, 182) = 5.52$ ,  $p = .019$ ; and abusive,  $F(1, 182) = 7.86$ ,  $p = .006$ . As shown in Table 4, simple correlations revealed support for Hypothesis 2: Greater endorsement of traditional gender role beliefs was associated with perceiving the perpetrator's behavior to be less unacceptable, less negative, less blameworthy, and less abusive.

### *Hypothesis 3*

This hypothesis suggested that participants with more just world beliefs will perceive the perpetrator's behavior to be less unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive than participants with less just world beliefs. The MANOVA did not yield any significant main or interaction effects. Although the MANOVA main effect was not significant, two of four simple correlations were significant, as shown in Table 4. Thus, there is some evidence that greater endorsement of just world beliefs was associated with perceiving the perpetrator's behavior to be less unacceptable and less negative, but these findings are tentative.

### *Hypothesis 4*

The MANOVA (perpetration of psychological aggression, the two manipulations, and the higher order interaction of each manipulation with perpetration of psychological aggression) yielded a multivariate main effect for perpetration of psychological aggression,  $F(4, 118) = 5.24$ ,  $p < .001$ . None of the higher order interactions was significant; that is, the link between own past aggression and perceptions of the perpetrator did not vary across aggression conditions. At the univariate level, the effect was significant for unacceptable,  $F(1, 125) = 16.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ; negative  $F(1, 125) = 15.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and abusive,  $F(1, 125) = 5.43$ ,  $p = .021$ . As shown in Table 4, simple correlations revealed support for Hypothesis 4: More use of psychological aggression in one's

own relationship was associated with perceiving the perpetrator's behavior to be less unacceptable, less negative, and less abusive.

## Perceptions of the Conflict

We explored perceptions of the overall conflict (in contrast to perceptions of the perpetrator's behavior). In all of the MANOVA analyses below, there were two dependent variables (severity and violence). Across all conditions, the conflict was seen as largely severe ( $M = 4.07$ ) and violent ( $M = 3.75$ ) on a scale from 1 to 5 (higher numbers reflect greater severity and violence).

### *Perpetrator Aggression Manipulations*

The MANOVA revealed effects for psychological aggression,  $F(4, 358) = 13.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ; physical aggression,  $F(4, 358) = 37.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and their interaction,  $F(8, 358) = 4.70$ ,  $p < .001$ .

At the univariate level, the effect of the psychological aggression manipulation was significant for severity,  $F(2, 180) = 6.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and violence,  $F(2, 180) = 28.97$ ,  $p < .001$ , but these effects were moderated by a significant interaction with physical aggression [severity,  $F(4, 180) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .032$ ; violence,  $F(4, 180) = 9.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Perceptions of the conflict worsened as the level of psychological aggression increased (see Table 1), but this was more the case at lower levels of physical aggression and not when the perpetrator was highly physically aggressive (see Table 2).

At the univariate level, the effect of the physical aggression manipulation was significant for severity,  $F(2, 180) = 14.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and violence,  $F(2, 180) = 87.46$ ,  $p < .001$ , and these main effects were present across all psychological aggression conditions. As can be seen in Table 3, all three physical aggression conditions differed significantly from each other, with the most severe and violent ratings occurring in the high physical aggression condition and the least in the no physical aggression condition. In short, the effects of the psychological aggression manipulation were conditional, and the effects of physical aggression were robust.

### *Individual Difference Variables*

We explored whether any individual differences were associated with perceptions of the conflict. The two MANOVAs—one for traditional gender role beliefs and another for just world beliefs—did not yield any significant main or interaction effects. For the third MANOVA including participants' own use of psychological aggression (and higher order interactions as independent variables), the interaction between own psychological aggression use and the psychological aggression manipulation was significant,  $F(4, 238) = 4.00$ ,  $p = .004$ ; as was the univariate interaction for violence,  $F(2, 120) = 5.30$ ,  $p = .006$ . In follow-up analyses to interpret this interaction, the correlation between own use of psychological aggression and perceived violence was negative and significant for the emotional aggression manipulation

( $r = -.39$ ), but not for the baseline ( $r = .16$ ) or verbal aggression manipulation ( $r = .18$ ); only participants in the emotional aggression condition were less likely to perceive the conflict as violent the more they had used psychological aggression in their own relationships.

## Perceptions of Future Problems

We also explored perceptions of future problems. In all of the MANOVA analyses below, there were three dependent variables (physical force, similar conflict, and police involvement). Across all conditions, the use of physical force in the future was moderately likely ( $M = 3.62$ ), a similar conflict was largely likely to occur ( $M = 4.12$ ), and police involvement was relatively unlikely ( $M = 2.26$ ) on a scale from 1 to 5 (higher numbers reflect greater likelihood of physical force, a similar conflict, and that the police would become involved).

### *Perpetrator Aggression Manipulations*

The MANOVA revealed effects for psychological aggression,  $F(6, 354) = 5.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ; physical aggression,  $F(6, 354) = 19.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and their interaction,  $F(12, 468) = 3.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . At the univariate level, the psychological aggression manipulation had a main effect on police involvement,  $F(2, 179) = 3.15$ ,  $p = .045$ , but the Tukey test (a conservative test) revealed no significant differences between the three levels of psychological aggression (see Table 1). The trend was that the police were perceived as more likely to become involved in the emotional aggression condition than in either of the other two conditions. The psychological aggression manipulation also had a main effect on physical force,  $F(2, 179) = 12.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ; but it was moderated by an interaction with physical aggression,  $F(4, 179) = 5.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . As can be seen in Table 2, the perpetrator was perceived as more likely to use physical force in the emotional aggression condition only when *no* physical aggression was present; once any physical aggression occurred, no significant differences emerged between the three levels of psychological aggression. Thus, the effect of the psychological aggression was not robust.

At the univariate level, the physical aggression manipulation had a significant main effect on all variables: physical force,  $F(2, 179) = 49.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ; similar conflict,  $F(2, 179) = 3.66$ ,  $p = .028$ ; and police involvement,  $F(2, 179) = 16.28$ ,  $p < .001$ . As can be seen in Table 3, there was a higher perceived likelihood of (a) future physical force once any physical aggression was present, (b) future police intervention as levels of physical aggression increased, and (c) a future similar conflict when physical aggression was high versus low. In short, physical aggression, and particularly high levels, caused participants to assume worse outcomes in the future.

### *Individual Difference Variables*

When we explored whether any individual differences were associated with perceptions of future problems, there were no significant multivariate effects for



traditional gender role beliefs, just world beliefs, or own use of psychological aggression. However, there was a multivariate main effect for participant sex,  $F(3, 176) = 6.18, p < .001$ . At the univariate level, males were less likely than females to assume future physical force,  $F(1, 178) = 4.33, p = .038$  (males,  $M = 3.37, SD = 1.34$ ; females,  $M = 3.80, SD = 1.23$ ); and similar conflicts,  $F(1, 178) = 4.48, p = .035$  (males,  $M = 4.00, SD = 0.83$ ; females,  $M = 4.21, SD = 0.68$ ); but more likely to assume police involvement,  $F(1, 178) = 5.61, p = .019$  (males,  $M = 2.41, SD = 1.09$ ; females,  $M = 2.14, SD = 1.02$ ).

## Discussion

The two aims of this study were (a) to determine whether people would perceive emotional aggression to be more unacceptable and violent, and as leading to more future problems for the couple, compared to verbal or minimally psychologically aggressive behaviors; and (b) to examine individual differences in perceptions of psychologically aggressive conflicts.

### Is Psychological Aggression Unacceptable?

Given the mounting evidence that emotional aggression can lead to devastating consequences (Arias & Pape, 1999; Follingstad et al., 1990; Sackett & Saunders, 1999), we expected that emotionally aggressive acts would be perceived to be more unacceptable, negative, blameworthy, and abusive compared to less aggressive behaviors (Hypothesis 1), but we found little support for this hypothesis. In no cases was emotional aggression seen as worse than verbal aggression, despite clear differences in these two manipulations. When *any* psychological aggression was present (verbal or emotional), participants perceived the perpetrator's behavior to be more unacceptable only; the effect on other perceptions was conditional or absent. More specifically, when the perpetrator was not physically aggressive, adding any psychological aggression (verbal or emotional) led participants to see the perpetrator as more abusive, the conflict as more severe and violent, and the future as holding more negative consequences. However, these effects all but disappeared in conditions in which the perpetrator was physically aggressive (low or high levels). In only one case did emotional aggression have an impact when physical aggression was present, namely, for perceptions of conflict violence. There were no effects of psychological aggression on negativity or blameworthiness.

The absence of an effect for the psychological aggression manipulation when physical aggression was present might be interpreted as showing the overwhelming effect of physical aggression. When physical aggression was present, there was little variation in many of the perception variables—that is, there was a ceiling effect such that perceptions were uniformly negative.

What is disturbing is the absence of a unique effect of emotional aggression (beyond verbal aggression, or independent of physical aggression), particularly given that the condition involving emotional aggression was extreme and much more negative than the verbal aggression condition. In contrast to verbal aggression, emotional aggression by the perpetrator involved unambiguously belittling the victim; threatening her in extreme ways; throwing a dish at her; restricting her access to money; and precisely the types of severely psychologically aggressive acts that have been linked to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Arias & Pape, 1999; Sackett & Saunders, 1999).

These results suggest that psychological aggression is not perceived to be nearly as unacceptable as the literature suggests it should be given the negative consequences (see also Capezza & Arriaga, 2008). It may be the case that the general public lacks awareness of the negative impact of psychological aggression, a topic that warrants further study. At a broader level, if people do not think that emotional aggression is harmful, then very little may be done to try to stop such aggression from taking place. To the extent that psychological aggression is tolerated, there needs to be more effort toward devising media messages and programs that inform the public about the negative consequences of psychological aggression. These messages might make the public aware that emotional aggression can be just as, if not more, harmful to the victim than physical aggression, and suggest nonviolent ways of resolving conflicts. Similar to public policies that have been created to deter physical aggression, programs should be devised to deter psychological aggression.

### **Are Individual Differences Associated With Perceptions?**

We were also interested in whether certain beliefs or past experiences would predict perceptions of a psychologically aggressive conflict. Consistent with our predictions, people with more traditional gender role beliefs perceived the perpetrator's behavior to be more acceptable, more positive, less blameworthy, and less abusive than people with less traditional gender role beliefs. However, traditional beliefs were not associated with perceptions of the conflict or future problems. These findings support the theory that those who adopt patriarchal gender roles see partner aggression as acceptable, yet they are as likely as those with patriarchal roles to see the conflict as serious or leading to future problems. It may be that those with traditional gender role beliefs do not attribute the violence to the perpetrator, and instead attribute it to the victim's actions, as has been shown in other research (e.g., Hillier & Foddy, 1993).

The links between just world beliefs and seeing violence as acceptable was weak in this study. The multivariate effect was not significant, making it difficult to interpret support in the two (of four) significant univariate correlations. Given that past results have been mixed in regards to the effect of just world beliefs, our findings support the notion that just world beliefs may play into perceptions of aggression but do not consistently predict them.

Participants who had perpetrated relatively higher levels of psychological aggression in their own relationships saw the perpetrator's behavior as more acceptable, less negative, and less abusive, regardless of his level of psychological or physical aggression. They also viewed the conflict depicting emotional aggression as less violent than individuals who had not perpetrated psychological aggression in their own relationships. Their perceptions of how severe the conflict was or whether there would be problems in the future did not differ. Overall, these findings suggest a link between use of psychological aggression and acceptance of such behaviors, which parallels research on physical aggression (Archer & Graham-Kevan, 2003). It is unclear which came first—whether people first find aggression to be acceptable and then adopt such behaviors in their own relationships, or instead whether people who unexpectedly become aggressive shift their attitudes to be in line with their behavior. It is likely that aggressive behaviors and attitudes accepting aggression reinforce each other. If this is the case, a major step toward ending aggression would require interventions that make it unacceptable, even if it has occurred in one's relationship in the past.

Finally, it is worth noting that men and women generally did not differ in their perceptions; the only sex differences that emerged were in perceptions of what might occur in the future (women saw future similar conflicts and future use of physical force more likely, whereas men saw police involvement as more likely). These findings suggest that perceiver's sex may not play a large role in perceptions of aggressive conflicts, but rather may play a minor role in specific types of perceptions.

Taken as a whole, traditional gender role beliefs and past experiences with aggression were associated with perceptions of the perpetrator while just world beliefs and participant sex were not. Thus, certain types of individuals may be more prone to positive perceptions of perpetrators. Interestingly, the associations of gender role beliefs and past perpetration with current perceptions were consistent across different levels of the aggression manipulations, suggesting general tendencies to view conflicts in more benign ways, regardless of whether the conflict involves psychological or physical aggression.

## Limitations

Although this research provides important contributions to the study of how partner aggression is perceived, it has limitations. One limitation is that we examined only some aspects of emotional aggression, but not other aspects (e.g., public humiliation, extreme isolation). Future research should explore other aspects of emotional aggression to determine if *any* acts would be deemed severe, violent, and unacceptable. A second limitation concerns the use of written scenarios, as compared to a more realistic presentation medium. It is possible that if participants were to observe a live interaction involving psychological aggression, they may find it to be more unacceptable and violent, and as leading to worse consequences. However, participants did find physical aggression to be unacceptable and violent, and to result in

worse consequences using the current manner of presentation, so it is unlikely that the method accounted for the lack of findings regarding psychological aggression. Third, we limited our focus to a conflict in which a man was aggressive toward a woman. It would be interesting to explore whether the same aggressive acts would be more or less acceptable when perpetrated by women against men, women against women, and men against men.

There are also limitations with the sample of participants we obtained. Although we sampled young adults, this was a convenience sample of college students, most of whom were white. As such, these results should not be used to draw more general inferences about all young adults in the United States or to the population in general. However, rates of psychological aggression are exceedingly high even in college samples, suggesting that the issues raised in this study pertain to college students as well as others (Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003).

## Conclusions

This study has important implications for understanding perceptions of partner aggression. Consistent with past research, we found that participants who hold traditional gender role beliefs or who have perpetrated psychological aggression in their own relationships had more positive perceptions of the perpetrator. The novel findings in this research are that participants did not perceive emotional aggression to be nearly as negative or harmful as the literature indicates it actually is. The psychological aggression manipulation was not nearly as robust as the physical aggression manipulation, suggesting that people do recognize the harmful effects of physical aggression, but not psychological aggression, which many may consider a “normal” part of couples’ conflicts. It is important to examine perceptions about the acceptability of psychological aggression because such beliefs contribute to conditions that allow for psychological aggression to remain pervasive. Much more needs to be done toward educating people about the negative consequences of psychological aggression, particularly emotional aggression, and identifying ways to deter it.

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