Motivations and Justifications for Partner Aggression in a Sample of African American College Women

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Abstract

Little is known about African-American college women’s use, experience, and conceptualizations of interpersonal violence (IPV). The current study addressed this gap in the literature by investigating a sample of African-American college women’s motivations for perpetration of psychological and physical IPV and justifications for hypothetical aggressive behavior. Using factors derived from a factor analysis of the Motivations and Effects Questionnaire (Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991), results revealed that African-American women in the current sample were using IPV primarily as a destructive method of communication. Furthermore, justifications for aggression, in general, were significantly related to the perpetration of minor physical aggression. Implications of the study for the prevention of dating violence among college women are discussed.

Key words: Interpersonal violence (IPV), Cognitions, Reasons for IPV, Minority population
Motivations and Justifications for Partner Aggression in a Sample of African-American College Women

Research on women’s perpetration of interpersonal violence (IPV) is an area that has slowly but steadily grown in the last decade. Generally, research has strongly supported that women are engaging in physical IPV at rates similar to, and in some instances, greater than men (for review, see Archer, 2000). There have, however, been consistent findings that women’s use of IPV almost always occurs in the context of their own victimization (Cercone, Beach, & Arias, 2005; Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Orcutt, Garcia, & Pickett, 2005; Swan & Snow, 2003; Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005). Moreover, several studies have found that male aggression is a strong predictor of women’s use of aggressive behavior (e.g., Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005; Graves, Sechrist, White, & Paradise, 2005). Critics have pointed out that males’ aggression toward women is typically more severe and injurious than women’s aggression toward men (e.g., Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992) and worry that investigations of women’s aggression may be inadvertently regarded as an excuse for males’ aggression (Kurtz, 1993). Collectively, these concerns may have slowed of our understanding of women’s use of aggression.

A major criticism of the research suggesting that women are equally as aggressive as men has focused on possible differences in women’s motivations for engaging in partner aggression. There is, however, a lack of consensus in the literature regarding women’s motivations for IPV. Some researchers have argued that, even if aggressive, women typically are acting in self-defense (e.g., Currie, 1998, DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Osthoff, 2002). Indeed, studies that have investigated women’s motivations for IPV generally support this claim, finding that women, when compared to men, are more likely to use IPV in self-defense and/or in retaliation.
for previous physical and emotional assaults against them (e.g., Barnett, Lee, & Thelen, 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Hamberger, Lohr, & Bonge, 1994; Saunders, 1988). Although studies indicate that self-defense is a primary motivation for women’s aggressive behavior, it is not the only motivation reported by women. For example, Hamberger (2005), Kernsmith (2005), and Stuart et al. (2006) reported that some women use violence to dominate and control their partner because of anger toward their partner, to get their partner’s attention, and because the women believed their partner provoked violence. Moreover, Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, and Sebastian (1991) reported that men and women were equally likely to identify not knowing how to express themselves verbally and needing to protect themselves (i.e., self-defense) as reasons for their use of IPV. Furthermore, Follingstad et al. reported that both male and female perpetrators of IPV identified retaliation for emotional hurt or expression of anger as the strongest motivation for their physical aggression. Thus, motivations for women’s use of IPV appear to be more varied than previously presumed. Furthermore, previous studies of women’s motivations have been descriptive in nature. In fact, to date only one study (DeKeseredy, Saunders, Schwartz, & Alvi, 1997) has specifically investigated the relationship of motivations to actual perpetration. Thus, the continued investigation of women’s motivations and their relationship to perpetration of IPV is essential.

In addition to the need to broaden understanding of women’s motivations for IPV, studies point to the likely importance of considering women’s general attitudes toward violence. For example, previous research has supported that acceptance of the use of violence was an important determinant for males’ use of aggressive behavior (e.g., Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987). Furthermore, in a sample of college students, Cauffman, Feldman, Jensen, and Arnett (2000) found that college students who were more accepting of violence were more likely to engage in
violent behavior, and that dating violence was perceived as more acceptable when females were 
the aggressors than when males were the aggressors, regardless of sex of the respondent. 
Cauffman et al. (2000) also reported that justifications of aggressive behavior that could be 
classified as reactive (i.e., defense and response to provocation) were perceived as more 
acceptable. Furthermore, Archer and Graham-Kevan’s study (as cited in Nabors, Dietz, & 
Jasinski, 2006) found that beliefs supportive of domestic violence are more predictive of abuse in 
intimate relationships among college students than among either women in domestic violence 
shelters or men in prison convicted of physically abusing their partners. Thus, the investigation 
of college women’s views on aggression against a partner, in general, may be vital to not only 
understanding their use of IPV but also in predicting future aggressive behavior.

A limitation of the generalizability of some studies investigating women’s use of 
aggression as well as their motivations is that most have examined samples of women who are in 
long-term relationships and experiencing severe, long-term violence (i.e., primarily battered 
women or women court-ordered to domestic violence treatment; e.g., see Barnett et al., 1997; 
Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Hamberger, 1997; Saunders, 1986). While some studies have 
evaluated motivations for aggressive behavior in college-aged populations (e.g., DeKeseredy et 
el., 1997; Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997; Follingstad et al., 1991; Makepeace, 1986), in general this 
area of the literature is limited. Research examining dating violence is critical, as aggression in 
young people’s dating relationships is often the foundation of future violence in marital 
relationships (Roscoe & Benaske, 1985). Moreover, studies that have focused on IPV in college-
aged populations indicate that dating couples are more likely to be aggressive than married 
couples (e.g., Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989), and that IPV is widespread on college campuses, 
both in the United States and internationally (Straus, 2004).
Although current studies have indicated that the prevalence of dating aggression is high, one limitation of US studies in particular is that the samples have consisted primarily of White, middle-class, college and university students (for a review, see Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). As a result, relatively little is known about the prevalence and nature of dating aggression among minority populations (Jackson, 1999; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989; West & Rose, 2000). Nevertheless, what is known about IPV in minority samples strongly suggests a need for greater attention from researchers. For example, West (2002) suggested that African-American women are at higher risk for IPV; indeed, a recent study reported that the leading cause of death among young African-American women between the ages of 15 and 45 is murder by an intimate partner (West, 2004). West (2004) further noted that in a nationally representative sample from the US, when compared to their European-American counterparts African-American women consistently reported higher rates of partner abuse. This research, however, has focused largely on African-Americans of lower socioeconomic status. Few studies, with the exception of Clark, Beckett, Wells, and Dungee-Anderson (1994) and DeMaris (1990), have investigated college-aged, African-Americans’ perpetration and experience of aggression in dating relationships, and these studies did not specifically investigate women’s use of aggression. Furthermore, only one study (Swan & Snow, 2003) has specifically investigated women’s motivations for IPV in a sample in which the majority were African-American, with results suggesting patterns of motivation similar to those found in non-minority samples (e.g., Barnet et al., 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Hamberger et al., 1994; Saunders, 1988). That is, the majority (75%) of participants reported using violence in self-defense at least some of the time while 45% reported using violence for purposes of retribution. In addition, 38% reported using violence to control their partners. This sample, however, was largely limited to older (25 to 40 years old), lower income
(69% of the sample earned less than $10,000 per year) women. To date, there are no studies specifically investigating motivations for aggressive behavior in African-American, college-aged women.

The current study contributes to the literature by assessing associations between motivations for partner aggression, global attitudes toward partner aggression (i.e., justifications), and perpetration of and victimization from partner aggression. This study extended the use of Follingstad et al.’s (1991) Motivations and Effects Questionnaire with a sample of African-American college-aged women who had engaged in some form of aggressive behavior in the past year. Moreover, the current study performed an exploratory factor analysis, utilizing principal component analysis, to determine the simpler factor structure of the MEQ’s 13 motivations for aggression. These factors are briefly described here to provide the basis for the study hypotheses. The Expression of Negative Emotions factor refers to motivations to use aggression to convey negative emotional states, such as jealousy and anger. The second factor, Aggression as Response, is comprised of motives related to retaliation, self-defense, and punishment. The final two components were Communication, in which aggression is used to get the partner’s attention or because the aggressor cannot express herself verbally, and Expression of Positive Emotions, which included motivations linked to using aggression as a way of communicating affection or becoming sexually aroused.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are based upon previous research indicating that women’s primary motivations for aggression are often self-defensive and/or retaliatory (e.g., Currie, 1998; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Osthoff, 2002), although women have also reported other motives, such as domination and control, anger, and to get their partner’s attention (e.g.,
Hamberger, 2005; Kernsmith, 2005). Research also supports the predictive value of justifications for aggression for perpetration of aggressive behavior (e.g., Archer & Graham-Kevan, 2003, as cited in Nabors et al., 2006).

1. As a replication of previous findings, it is hypothesized that there will be a significant positive correlation between participants’ reported perpetration of partner-specific aggression and their experience of partner-specific aggression.

2. There will be a significant positive relationship between the Aggression as Response and Expression of Negative Emotions motivation factors.

3. The Aggression as Response and Expression of Negative Emotions factors will be positively related to the perpetration of aggressive behavior.

4. The more justifications women have for aggression against a partner in general, the more motives they will have for their own perpetration of aggressive behavior.

5. There will be a positive relationship between justifications for aggressive behavior and perpetration of aggressive behavior.

Method

Procedures

Participants were recruited through flyers posted around the three campuses soliciting volunteers for a paid research study on aggressive behavior, or through solicitation in psychology courses in which extra credit in the course was offered. Interested participants contacted the research laboratory and either underwent a telephone screen or completed a paper questionnaire screening of their behavior in the past year. Because the current study was focused on women who use aggression, in order to be included in the study participants had to report one physical or verbal act of aggression (victim unspecified) in the past year. One hundred and forty-two
Motivations and Justifications

potential participants were screened, and 88% of those screened \( n = 125 \) met criteria for participation in the study. Of those who met criteria for participation, 57\% \( n = 81 \) committed one or more acts of verbal aggression only in the past year, while the remainder committed one or more acts of verbal and physical aggression in the past year. Of the screened respondents, 66\% \( n = 82 \) agreed to participate in the current study.

Following completion of the study measures, participants, if warranted, were provided a list of referrals for psychological intervention (i.e., campuses’ counseling centers, community agencies) and the primary investigator’s phone numbers to call in case they had any questions or were upset. Participants were either monetarily compensated or received extra course credit for their participation.

Participants

The sample consisted of 82 African-American, female college students recruited from three urban institutions. The majority of the sample (74\%) was recruited from a small, historically black women’s college while the remainder of the participants (26\%) was recruited from two large, co-educational universities, all in the southeastern United States. Participants’ ages ranged from 18-32 years old \( M = 20.13, SD = 2.09 \). Participants were primarily heterosexual (96.3\%) and single (96.4\%). Approximately 94\% \( n = 77 \) of the sample reported having no children, while two participants reported having one child, two additional participants reported having two children, and one participant reported having three children.

Measures

Use and experience of partner-specific aggressive behavior. The Conflict Tactics Scale Revised (CTS-2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) was used to assess participants’ reported use and experience of partner-specific aggressive behavior. The CTS-2 is a
78-item scale used to assess physical and psychological aggression and victimization, sexual coercion and victimization, injury (inflicted and sustained), and negotiation behaviors within the context of intimate relationships. The current study reports participants’ use and experience of psychological and physical aggression. The CTS-2 also divides the behavior into two categories: “minor” and “severe.”

To complete the measure, participants indicated how many times they have engaged in (perpetration) or experienced (victimization) psychological and physical aggression in the past year on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (more than 20 times), with a score of 7 indicating that perpetration or victimization had not occurred in the past year but had happened before. Items for minor psychological aggression included: “I insulted or swore at my partner,” “I shouted or yelled at my partner,” “I stomped out of the room or house or yard during a disagreement,” and “I did something to spite my partner.” Items for severe psychological aggression included: “I called my partner fat or ugly,” “I destroyed something belonging to my partner,” “I accused my partner of being a lousy lover,” and “I threatened to hit or throw something at my partner.” Items for minor physical aggression included: “I threw something at my partner that could hurt,” “I twisted my partner’s arm or hair,” “I pushed or shoved my partner,” “I grabbed my partner,” and “I slapped my partner.” Items for severe physical aggression included: “I used a knife or gun on my partner,” “I punched or hit my partner with something that could hurt,” “I choked my partner,” “I slammed my partner against a wall,” “I beat up my partner,” “I burned or scalded my partner on purpose,” and “I kicked my partner.” All items assessing victimization were worded identically except “I” was changed to “My partner.” The CTS-2 is a widely used measure of self-reported interpersonal psychological and physical aggressive behavior with high internal consistency and adequate construct and discriminant validity (Straus et al., 1996). Alpha
coefficients of the psychological and physical aggression perpetration subscales in the present study were .64 and .70, respectively, while the psychological and physical aggression victimization subscales were .44 and .69, respectively.

Responses on the CTS-2 were scored in two ways. Consistent with the scoring recommendations of Straus et al. (1996), responses were assigned a value corresponding to the midpoint value (Never=0, Once=1, Twice=2, 3-5 times=4, 6-10 times=8, 11-20 times = 15, More than 20 times=25, Not in the past year, but it has happened before=0) of each frequency category and then summed to provide subscales scores of the frequency of aggressive behavior over the past year. In addition to this typical manner of scoring, responses were dummy-coded to indicate whether a behavior had occurred in the past year or not and the percentage of participants who had engaged in the subscale behaviors was calculated.

Women’s motivations and effects of aggressive behavior. To assess participants’ motivations for their use of physical aggression toward their partners, as well as their perceptions of their partners’ motivations for using physical aggression against them, the Motivations and Effects Questionnaire (MEQ; Follingstad et al., 1991) was used. This measure also assessed self-reported effects of physical aggression on self and partners. The MEQ is a 13-item checklist assessing motives for and effects of physical force in a romantic relationship. Participants indicate whether they have “ever used physical force in a romantic relationship” and whether they have “ever been the victim of physical force in a romantic relationship.”

Participants who reported the use of physical force were instructed to “check the reason you used physical force against your partner.” Participants then checked all motives that applied to their use of physical force and left blank those motives that did not apply. Additionally, of all the identified motivations for their physical aggression participants were asked to identify the
“strongest” motivation for their aggression. The MEQ includes “motives” such as using physical violence “to show anger,” “due to jealousy,” “self-defense,” and “to control the other person.” All items are shown in Table 1. Likewise, if participants answered “yes” to the question of experiencing “physical force” from their partners, they were asked to “check the reason you think the person used physical force against you” and “the strongest motivation for your partner’s aggressive behavior.” Participants’ identified motivations and perceived partner motivations were coded as yes (“1”) if endorsed and no (“0”) if the item was left blank; furthermore, participants’ strongest motivation and the strongest perceived motivation for their partners’ aggressive behavior were tallied. The internal consistency of the MEQ (participants’ motivations) was $\alpha = .58$.

<<Insert Table 1 about here>>

*Women’s justifications for aggressive behavior.* To assess participants’ perception of justifiable reasons for the use of hypothetical physical aggression, the Justification for Physical Aggression Scale (JUST; Follingstad, Rutledge, Polek, & McNeill-Harkins, 1988) was used. The JUST is different from the MEQ in that on the JUST scale participants are rating their agreement/disagreement with possible reasons to use physical aggression rather than identifying their own justifications for their own aggression.

The JUST contains 24 possible reasons why someone might use physical force against a boyfriend/girlfriend. Participants rate whether each item is a justifiable reason for the use of physical force on a four-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Participants rated justifications such as “loss of temper,” “mental illness,” “hate,” “need for control,” “as a reaction to verbal provocation,” “love,” and “in response for being hit first.” The JUST showed very strong internal consistency in the present study ($\alpha = .95$).
Results

Factor Structure of the MEQ

In order to investigate factor structure of the motivations associated with women’s use of aggression, the 13 motivations of the MEQ were subjected to principal components analysis (PCA). Prior to performing PCA, the suitability of data for factor analysis was assessed. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of .3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin value was .61, exceeding the recommended value of .6 (Kaiser, 1970, 1974) and the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix.

A factor analysis performed in previous research (Kernsmith, 2005) revealed three factors (striking back for abuse, disciplining partner, and exerting power). The current PCA revealed the presence of four components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 33%, 18%, 12%, and 10% of the variance, respectively (see Table 2). A decision was made to retain all four components for further investigation. To aid in the interpretation of this component, Varimax rotation was performed. The rotated solution revealed the presence of a simple structure, with the components showing all variables loading substantially on the four components. All items loaded above .50 on each factor.

<<Insert Table 2 about here>>

Perpetration and Victimization of Aggression: Descriptive Findings

In order to be considered for inclusion in the present study, participants had to have perpetrated at least one act of physical or verbal aggression in the past year; however, the victim was not specified. The frequency of women’s perpetration (and victimization) of psychological and physical aggression specifically against (and from) a romantic partner was assessed using the
CTS-2. The majority of the sample (87%; \( n = 71 \)) reported both perpetrating and being the victim of psychological or physical aggression from an intimate partner in the past year (Both Perpetrator/Victim); while 11% denied either perpetrating or being the victim of either type of aggressive behavior from an intimate partner \( (n = 9) \). One participant reported perpetrating only and one reported victimization only.

Fifty-seven percent of the sample reported perpetrating both physical and psychological aggression against a romantic partner in the past year \( (n = 47) \) while approximately 31% of the sample reported using psychological aggression only \( (n = 25) \). Furthermore, 51% of the sample \( (n = 42) \) reported being the victim of both psychological and physical aggression from a romantic partner while 37% \( (n = 30) \) reported being the victim of psychological aggression only.

Information pertaining to participants’ perpetration (and victimization) of physical aggression against (and from) a romantic partner at any point in their lives was also obtained using the MEQ. Over half (51%, \( n =42 \)) reported the use of physical aggression against a romantic partner, while 41.5% \( (n =34) \) reported being the victim of physical aggression from a romantic partner. From this point forward, the term “aggression” will denote “physical or psychological aggression against (or sustained from) a romantic partner.”

Paired sample t-tests revealed that participants reported perpetrating significantly more minor psychological \([t(78) = 3.70, p < .001]\), severe psychological \([t(79) = 2.13, p < .05]\), and minor physical aggression \([t(80) = 2.51, p < .05]\) than they received. There was no significant difference in perpetrating and receiving severe physical aggression, \( t=.31, \) ns.

Motivations and Justifications for Violence: Descriptive Findings

Although 47 participants reported using both psychological and physical aggression against an intimate partner, 89% \( (n = 42) \) completed the MEQ to indicate their motives for use of
physical aggression against their partners. Participants endorsed an average of 2.07 motivations ($SD = 2.56$, range: 0-10). “To show anger” (26.2%, $n = 11$) was the most frequently endorsed “strongest” motivation for the perpetration of aggression. Furthermore, “inability to express [your] self verbally” (14.3%, $n = 7$) and “in retaliation for emotional hurt” (11.9%, $n = 5$) and “get attention” (11.9%, $n = 5$) as the second and third, respectively, most frequently endorsed strongest motivations for their aggression. Notably, only 9.4% of the sample ($n = 4$) identified “protect self” as the strongest motive for aggression, and only 4.8% ($n = 2$) said their aggression was “in retaliation for being hit first.” Frequencies of all other identified strongest motivations are presented in Table 1. Participants also endorsed an average of 1.81 ($SD = 2.57$, range: 0-8) perceived motivations for their partners’ aggression against them. The strongest perceived motivation for their partner’s aggression was an “inability to express [self] verbally” (18%, $n = 6$), while the second and third, respectively, most frequently identified strongest perceived motivations were “in retaliation for being hit first” (15%; $n = 5$) and “in retaliation for emotional hurt” (12%, $n = 4$) (see Table 1).

To explore general attitudes toward physical aggression against a partner, participants reported their agreement or disagreement with 24 potential justifications for the use of aggression. Binomial tests indicated that of the 24 rated justifications, the majority of participants (72%, $n = 58$) significantly agreed with only one as a justifiable reason for the use of physical force, “in response for being hit first” ($p < .001$).

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypothesis that participants’ use of partner-specific aggression would be associated with their experience of partner-specific aggression, correlations between perpetration and victimization from minor and severe forms of both psychological and physical aggression
were calculated. Results largely supported this hypothesis (see Table 3). Almost all forms of perpetration were significantly and positively correlated with all forms of victimization, with the exception of two correlations (between minor psychological perpetration and severe psychological victimization, and between minor psychological perpetration and severe physical victimization).

The second hypothesis, that there would be a significant positive relationship between the Aggression as Response and Expression of Negative Emotions MEQ factors, was supported. Correlations between the four factors revealed that the Aggression as Response factor was significantly associated with Expression of Negative Emotions, \( r = .47, p < .01 \). Although it was not hypothesized, Aggression as Response was also correlated with Communication, \( r = .46, p < .01 \). The Communication and Expression of Positive Emotions factors were also correlated, \( r = .28, p < .05 \). All other correlations were not significant (\( r \)'s ranged from .02 to .10).

The third hypothesis, that Aggression as Response and Expression of Negative Emotions would be positively related to the perpetration of aggressive behavior, was partially supported. Multiple regression analyses were performed with perpetration of aggression (i.e., minor and severe psychological and physical aggression) as the dependent variables and the four motivation factors (i.e., Expression of Negative Emotions, Communication, Aggression as Response, and Expression of Positive Emotions factors) as independent variables (see Tables 4 & 5). Given the strong correlation between perpetration and victimization, victimization (i.e., experience of minor and severe psychological and physical aggression) was a covariate in all the regression analyses. The final regression models for minor physical aggression \( R^2 = .71, F(5, 80) = 36.36, p < .001 \), severe psychological \( R^2 = .35, F(5, 79) = 7.81, p < .001 \), and severe physical
aggression \[ R^2 = .43, F(5, 76) = 10.85, p < .001 \] were significant (see Tables 4 & 5). The final model for minor psychological aggression was not significant, \[ R^2 = .67, F(5, 78) = 29.58, ns. \] Specifically, the Expression of Negative Emotions factor significantly predicted minor physical aggression (\( \beta = .36, p < .001 \)), severe psychological aggression (\( \beta = .52, p < .001 \)), and severe physical aggression (\( \beta = .43, p < .001 \)). None of the final models for the remaining three motives, Aggression as Response, Communication, and Expression of Positive Emotions, were significant (Tables 4 & 5).

The fourth hypothesis, that the more justifications women had for aggression against a partner in general, the more motives they would have for their own perpetration of aggressive behavior, was supported. The correlation between the summed total for motivations (MEQ) and summed totals for justifications (JUST) revealed a significant positive relationship, \( r = .40, p < .01 \). That is, as the number of justifications for hypothetical aggressive behavior increased, the number of motivations for participants’ specific aggressive behavior also increased.

The final hypothesis, that there would be a positive relationship between justifications and perpetration of aggressive behavior, was partially supported. Summed justifications were significantly positively correlated with minor physical aggression, \( r = .36, p < .01 \). There were no other significant correlations.

Discussion

The current study adds to the scant literature investigating the use, experience, and conceptualization of violence in African-American college-aged women. Similar to other studies identifying high rates of dating violence in college samples, the African-American women in the current sample perpetrated and experienced high rates of IPV. Furthermore, as in previous
studies (e.g., Orcutt et al., 2005; Straus, 2004), the current sample perpetrated and experienced similar frequencies of aggression; in fact, there were significant moderate to strong positive relationships between perpetration of aggression and victimization in the present study. The current results support the findings of previous studies (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger & Potente, 1994; Swan & Snow, 2006) that women’s perpetration almost always occurs in the context of their own victimization (only one person in the current sample who perpetrated reported no victimization). The finding that women reported perpetrating significantly more minor and severe psychological and minor physical aggression than they received from their partners may be due, in part, to the study’s sampling strategy. Recall that to be included in the study, participants had to report one physical or verbal act of aggression (victim unspecified) in the past year. These women, selected based on their recent use of aggression, likely have engaged in more aggression than would be found in a general sample of college women.

However, the finding that women used more aggression against their partners than their partners used against them is also consistent with several other studies of college students (Allen, Swan, & Raghavan, in press; Cercone et al., 2005; Grave et al., 2005; Straus, 2004). These include studies with female samples (similar to the present study), which found that women reported a greater frequency of physical aggression against partners than partners’ aggression against them (Grave et al.), as well as studies with male and female samples in which women reported committing more physical aggression against partners than men (Allen et al.; Cercone et al.; Grave et al.; Straus). The results of the current study regarding African American women’s greater aggression is also consistent with Archer’s (2000) meta-analysis finding that women self-reported committing slightly more physical aggression against partners than men.
The findings of previous research (e.g., Barnett et al., 1997) would suggest that women in the current sample should primarily be acting in “self-defense” or in retaliation for previous physical and emotional assaults against them; however, the findings of the current study did not support this assertion. That is, only 9.5% of the sample endorsed self-defense, identified on the MEQ as “to protect self,” as the strongest motivation for their perpetration. Furthermore, even though some women identified self-defense as a motive, the Aggression as Response factor, which included “to protect self,” was unrelated to women’s perpetration of aggressive behavior. In contrast, the Expression of Negative Emotions factor was the only factor that was predictive of the perpetration of aggressive behavior. These findings suggest that it is the communication of negative emotions that are predominately driving African-American women’s severe psychological and minor and severe physical aggressive behavior in the current sample.

Moreover, while African-American college women used their own aggressive behavior as a means of communicating negative emotions, the strongest motivations perceived for their partner’s aggression against them were the inability to express themselves verbally, in retaliation for being hit first, and in retaliation for emotional hurt. Collectively, these findings suggest that the African-American women in the current sample were more likely to use violence, not as defensive or even in retaliation for previous aggression against them, but primarily as a method of expressing negative emotions. Furthermore, the finding that women conceptualized their partners’ violence against them as due to the partners’ inability to express themselves verbally imply that African-American college women may view violence in their relationships largely as a means of communicating, either through their own expression of negative emotions or their partners’ use of violence to express themselves.
Nabors et al. (2006) asserted that holding beliefs supportive of violence against a partner is strongly associated with committing violent acts against partners. This idea, however, has not been tested with college-aged women, and more specifically, African-American women. In the current sample, the assertion was supported: increased justifications for aggression were associated with the perpetration of minor physical aggression, providing support for previous research that has suggested that acceptance of the use of violence is an important determinant for use of aggressive behavior (e.g., Cauffman et al., 2000; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987).

Still, the relationship between African-American women’s justifications for aggression and their own motivations for aggression may be more complex than anticipated. On the one hand, the more motivations participants had for their own aggression, the more justifications they had for aggression in general; however, when rating the acceptability of various reasons for aggression, the only item that was endorsed by a statistically significant proportion of the sample as a justifiable reason to use aggression against a partner was “in retaliation for being hit first.” Thus, it appears that African-American women, at least in the current sample, are engaging in aggression for reasons that they themselves do not view as justifiable. These findings raise important questions about the relationship between general attitudes toward aggressive behavior and the actual act of engaging in aggressive behavior, in that the relationship may not be as linear as perceived. Social psychological research on the relationship between general, non-specific attitudes and behavior has supported that the link between general attitudes and behavior is, at best, weak; however, it is equally clear that our attitudes towards specific behaviors do exert important influence on those behaviors (Fiske, 2003). This complexity, particularly in the current sample, suggests that in therapeutic treatments with women who use violence toward their partners, more attention should be placed on exploring and addressing African-American
women’s attitudes about aggression in addition to their actual behavior. A Motivational Interviewing/cognitive dissonance framework may be helpful as a method of pointing out inconsistencies between a woman’s belief that violence against a partner is only justified if one is hit first, and her behavior is inconsistent with this belief (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Motivational Interviewing has been used with court-mandated male perpetrators of IPV (Eckhardt & Utschig, 2007; Neighbors, Walker, Roffman, Mbilinyi, & Edelson, 2008). Furthermore, focusing on women’s attitudes toward aggression, even with women who have not engaged in the behavior, may serve to prevent future aggression.

On the one hand, it is positive that of the 24 possible justifications for violence, a statistically significant proportion of participants only perceived one justification, “in retaliation for being hit first,” as acceptable. On the other hand, it is concerning that 72% of participants identified this as a justifiable reason for aggression. The belief that using violence is an appropriate response to violence against them may be putting these women at risk for retaliation from their partners. Indeed, when participants were asked what they believed their partners’ motivations for using violence against them was, one of the primary perceived motivations for their partners’ aggression against them was “in retaliation for being hit first.” Participants’ belief that violence is justifiable in response to being hit first is particularly disturbing when coupled with the high levels of women’s aggression against their partners. Thus, women in the current sample appear to be engaging in behavior that is harmful to their partners and may put the women themselves at risk for retaliation from their partners. Given the findings of previous research that has supported that men’s use of aggression against women is more severe and injurious than women’s aggression against their male partners (e.g., Cascardi et al., 1992), this
approval of violence in retaliation may actually serve to put African-American women at greater risk for victimization and injury. This claim is an obvious area for future research.

Although providing rich initial information about African-American college women’s use, experience, and conceptualization of IPV, the current study also has some limitations. First, the sample of women self-selected based upon recruitment materials specifically soliciting “aggressive” women (i.e., materials stated that the researchers were looking for women for a paid study on aggressive behavior). In addition, due to an interest in motivations for aggressive behavior specifically, only women who reported the use of some form of aggressive behavior in the past year were included in the study. Thus, the current findings may not be generalizable to a broad population of African-American college-aged women. Future studies should investigate these variables in a more varied sample of African-American women. Second, the reliability of some measures was low (specifically psychological perpetration and victimization, as well as the motives measure). In spite of these shortcomings, however, the current findings provide valuable information regarding African-American college-aged women and IPV, information that is sorely lacking.

The findings of the current study add significantly to our understanding of IPV in a continually underrepresented group, African-American women. The women in this study used IPV primarily as a destructive method of communication. This suggests that treatments aimed at women who perpetrate IPV focusing on teaching communication skills may be warranted. Furthermore, the acceptance of violence as retaliation in the current sample serves to put women at increased risk for victimization and injury, as well as allow African-American women to excuse their partners’ violence if it is in retaliation for the women’s previous aggression. Thus, an area of emphasis in the prevention of dating violence is to convey the message of the non-
acceptability of violence in relationships, regardless of the reason. Prevention messages should focus on more adaptive responses to conflict in relationships and teach young people that violence as a means of communication is never acceptable, and that violence as self-defense should be an absolute last resort, not a first response.
References


Osthoff, S. (2002). But, Gertrude, I beg to differ. A hit is not a hit is not a hit: When battered women are arrested for assaulting their partners. *Violence Against Women, 8*(12), 1521-1544.


Author Note

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Author Bios

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Acknowledgment. This research was supported by the Extramural Associates Research Development Award with funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Grant No. HD30762). The authors wish to acknowledge the important contribution of Jamila Rivers for her contribution to the data collection and analysis process.
Table 1

*Frequencies of Own and Perceived Partner “Strongest” Motivations for Aggressive Behavior*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Own Motivations</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Partner’s Motivations</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n = 42)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 34)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show anger</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to express self verbally</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In retaliation for emotional hurt</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get attention</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect self</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger displaced onto partner</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In retaliation for being hit first</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it was sexually arousing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More power</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get control over other person</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of jealousy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment for wrong behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To prove love</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Motives shown here are those identified by participants as the “strongest” motivations for their/their partner’s aggression. Forty participants did not complete the MEQ measure. Five had missing data, and 35 neither used nor experienced physical aggression against/from an intimate partner.
Table 2

*Motivations Factor Analysis (Variance Explained)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression of Negative Emotions (33%)</th>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because of jealousy</td>
<td>.853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get control over other person</td>
<td>.821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger displaced onto partner</td>
<td>.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In retaliation for emotional hurt</td>
<td>.526</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Aggression as Response (18%)**

| In retaliation for being hit first                                       | .884            |
| To protect self                                                          | .870            |
| Punishment for wrong behavior                                            | .708            |
| Show anger                                                               | .512            |

**Communication (12%)**

| Unable to express self verbally                                         | .833            |
| More power                                                               | .783            |
| To get attention                                                         | .684            |

**Expression of Positive Emotions (9.8%)**

| Because it was sexually arousing                                         | .883            |
| To prove love                                                            | .738            |
Table 3

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Perpetration (P)/Victimization (V) on CTS-2 Subscales*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><em>M</em></th>
<th><em>SD</em></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Minor Psy. (P)</td>
<td>25.73</td>
<td>25.61</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>3.8 * *</td>
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<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Severe Psy. (P)</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>8.93</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.41 * *</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Minor Phys. (P)</td>
<td>8.29</td>
<td>13.96</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.77 * *</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Severe Phys. (P)</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>4.54</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>3.8 * *</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Minor Psy. (V)</td>
<td>19.45</td>
<td>20.05</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>.32**</td>
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<td>6.</td>
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<td>3.49</td>
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<td>.53 * *</td>
<td>.63**</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Minor Phys. (V)</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>11.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Severe Phys. (V)</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>4.34</td>
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<td>--</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**p < .01, * p < .05
### Table 4

**Summary of Regression Analysis for Motivation Factors and Perpetration of Psychological Aggression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>Minor Psychological Aggression</th>
<th>Severe Psychological Aggression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \beta ) &amp; ( B ) &amp; ( SE ) &amp; ( CI ) &amp; ( \beta ) &amp; ( B ) &amp; ( SE ) &amp; ( CI )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of Negative Emotions</td>
<td>.10 &amp; 2.34 &amp; 1.77 &amp; -1.19 to 5.87 &amp; .52** &amp; 4.05 &amp; .85 &amp; 2.36 to 5.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression as Response</td>
<td>-.05 &amp; -1.48 &amp; 2.71 &amp; -6.88 to 3.92 &amp; -.24 &amp; -2.65 &amp; 1.34 &amp; -5.32 to .03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>-.06 &amp; -1.84 &amp; 2.39 &amp; -6.61 to 2.93 &amp; -.00 &amp; -0.01 &amp; 1.19 &amp; -2.39 to 2.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of Positive Emotions</td>
<td>.09 &amp; 4.61 &amp; 3.82 &amp; -3.01 to 12.23 &amp; -.01 &amp; -.14 &amp; 1.85 &amp; -3.83 to 3.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** t-value = \( p < .001 \)
Table 5

Summary of Regression Analysis for Motivation Factors and Perpetration of Physical Aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>Minor Physical Aggression</th>
<th>Severe Physical Aggression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of Negative Emotions</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression as Response</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of Positive Emotions</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-1.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** t-value = p < .001