

Female Domestic Violence Toward Male Partners: Exploring Conflict Responses and Outcomes

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The general purpose of this study was to investigate domestic violence within a conflict framework. Specifically, the association between conflict-based, communication response and outcome behaviors and the frequency and severity of female domestic violence towards male partners was examined. Participants were 153 female volunteers who reported on a range of communication responses and outcomes for both self and partner. The contribution of relationship distress was controlled for and also examined as a moderator. Relationship distress was *not* found to be a significant moderator. Results showed that seven communication response variables and four outcome variables were significantly associated with the frequency and/or severity of female domestic violence. Relative to nonviolent relationships, relationships with female violence had more male and female unilateral verbal aggression, more mutual verbal aggression, more male verbal aggression/female calms things down, more male demand/partner withdraw, more mutual avoidance, and less constructive relative to destructive communication. Relationships with female violence also had poorer resolution of problems and more emotional distance after problem arguments and discussions than their nonviolent counterparts.

KEY WORDS: domestic violence; family violence; interpersonal conflict; spouse abuse.

The past decade has witnessed a heightened public awareness of the frequency of domestic violence and its deleterious effect on individual and family well-being. More than two decades of work by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles (Gelles, 1974; Straus & Gelles, 1986, 1990; Straus *et al.*, 1980) suggests that a person is more likely to be hit or even killed in his or her own home by another family member than anywhere else or by anyone else. Physical violence and abuse between adult partners, which is the focus of this paper, has received increasing attention within the areas of research, practice, and social policy (see Feldman & Ridley, 1995, for overview). The general consensus among family violence researchers is that domestic violence between intimate partners is multidetermined and caused by a combination of risk factors rather than any single factor operating in isolation. Recent

reviews suggest that the strongest and most consistent factors include experiencing and/or witnessing parental violence, low socio-economic status, frequent alcohol use, low assertiveness, low self-esteem, poor relationship adjustment/satisfaction, verbal aggression, and marital conflict (Feldman & Ridley, 1995). A number of domestic violence researchers have noted that most research on determinants and correlates of domestic violence has overemphasized both distal factors (e.g., early exposure to violence) and individual traits (e.g., alcohol abuse, self-esteem), and has substantially underemphasized relational patterns and proximal interaction processes (Feldman & Ridley, 1995; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Lloyd, 1990; Margolin *et al.*, 1988). Specifically, family violence researchers have pointed to the need to examine conflict response and communication patterns in relationships which exhibit partner violence (Jacobson *et al.*, 1994; Lloyd, 1996; Margolin *et al.*, 1996; Sabourin, 1996).

Although conflict perspectives have largely been used to explain a variety of marital outcomes (e.g., distress, satisfaction, divorce), domestic violence may be viewed as a mode of resolving or processing conflict when other

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modes of pursuing individual or group interests break down due to faulty conflict management processes, skills, or options. While there is no uniform theory of interpersonal conflict and violence, interpersonal conflict models do share at least three central concepts. The first concept is that conflict is essentially “normative” and inevitable in all close relationships because of the inherent relational characteristics of interdependence, incompatible needs/goals/interests, and limited resources (Kelley, 1983). The second concept is that conflict is neither inherently bad nor good, but rather can have either destructive or constructive relational outcomes. The third concept is that conflict is a process, with four distinct components (Gottman, 1994; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Markman *et al.*, 1993; Peterson, 1983). *Conflicts of interest* exist when one perceives opinions, viewpoints, goals, or interests to be incompatible, in conflict, or in disagreement. *Conflict orientations* refer to one’s attitudes and evaluations regarding conflict in terms of one’s tolerance or acceptance of it, and predisposed style of responding to it. *Conflict responses* include a broad range of overt behavioral reactions to, methods of resolving, or ways of handling conflicts of interest, commonly referred to as conflict management, conflict tactics, or conflict strategies. Conflict responses include behaviors which may maintain, escalate, or resolve conflicts of interest. *Conflict outcomes* encompass a number of elements including whether the conflict issue was resolved or not, the nature of the resolution (i.e. unilateral, mutual), and an evaluation of the specific conflict processes as increasing or decreasing emotional closeness within the relationship. As part of a broad-based investigation of interpersonal conflict and domestic violence, the current paper will focus on the two most often identified components of the conflict model, conflict responses and conflict outcomes. In regard to conflict responses, much of the conceptual and empirical literature has identified three broad categories of responses: verbal aggression, problem-solving/cooperation, and avoidance/withdraw (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984; Lloyd, 1987). In regard to conflict outcomes, two general dimensions have been identified: conflict resolution status and relational status (i.e., closeness–distance; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984; Lloyd, 1987, 1990). The study reported here will examine eight specific conflict response variables and four specific conflict outcome variables and their ability to predict both the frequency and severity of domestic violence toward adult intimate partners. Additionally, it is important to assess relationship distress when studying factors presumed to be characteristic or predictive of interpartner violence and abuse (Feldman & Ridley, 1995; Lloyd, 1990, 1996; O’Leary, 1988). Therefore, in this study, the impact of relationship

distress will be both controlled for and assessed as a potential moderator of the relationship between conflict-based communication behavior and domestic violence.

This study is an extension of research on male domestic violence to research on female domestic violence. In the previous study, results showed that eight conflict response and four conflict outcome variables were significantly associated with the frequency and/or severity of male domestic violence toward their female partners (Feldman & Ridley, 2000). Relative to nonviolent relationships, relationships with male violence had more male and female unilateral verbal aggression, more mutual verbal aggression, more male demand/partner withdraw, less constructive relative to destructive communication, and less mutual problem-solving. Relationships with male violence also had poorer resolution of problems and more emotional distance after problem arguments and discussions than their nonviolent counterparts. Little attention has been paid to female aggression toward a male partner, however, a limited number of incidence and prevalence studies suggest that it does occur in close relationships. In two representative national surveys (Straus *et al.*, 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1986), approximately equal percentages of males (11%) and females (12%) reported being physically aggressive toward their spouses at least once in the past year. O’Leary *et al.* (1989) reported that among 272 couples planning on marrying, more women than men reported being physically aggressive toward their partners at premarriage (44% vs. 31%), at 18 months postmarriage (36% vs. 27%), and at 30 months postmarriage (32% vs. 25%). These differences between men and women’s rates held true when the data were based on a combination of self and partner reports. In both of the studies above, the most prevalent pattern was found to be one of bilateral violence in the relationship, where both partners used relatively less severe aggression (e.g., pushing, grabbing, shoving). A third study used a sample 30 couples where the man had been referred to a group for assaultive men and found that husbands’ rating of their own and their wives violence as equivalent for most types of violence. However, wives rated themselves as significantly less violent than their husbands for most types of violence (Browning & Dutton, 1986).

Although a limited number of studies suggest that female physical aggression may be a significant issue, the dearth of literature on the etiology of female aggression in the context of close relationships may be understandable for several reasons. First, as noted by Straus and colleagues, males tend to engage in more severe forms of aggression than female partners and inflict far greater physical harm. Therefore research and clinical focus has been understandably on risk factors and prevention of male

violence toward female partners. Second, when both males and females are assessed as subjects in research studies on domestic violence, domestic violence information is typically collected only on male partners and/or the relationship is defined as violent based upon the male's behavior—even if the female partner was physically aggressive as well. Third, female domestic violence is presumed to occur only in reaction to male violence and thereby in self-defense. Counter to this presumption, O'Leary *et al.* (1989) found that the percentages of men and women who engaged in exclusive or nonreciprocal aggression across the three points in time (respectively) were 13, 8, and 9% for men and 26, 17, and 16% for women. This leaves the issue of unilateral female aggression in question. Finally, the dearth of research on female aggression may relate to predominant cultural norms which assign women the role of caretaker and nurturer and therefore unlikely to be physically aggressive. To this point what we know is based upon male self-reports and is therefore only a partial understanding of the nature of the relationship between conflict-based communication and domestic violence.

This study addresses the extent to which these patterns of conflict and violence apply to women's domestic violence, when women are reporting on (a) their own violence toward male partners, (b) their partner's violence toward them, and (c) the conflict and communication patterns in their relationships with male partners. Using the women's report of her male partner's violence, we will also address the relative cooccurrence of male versus female violence and how the paired violent acts are associated with conflict response and outcome patterns.

RESEARCH ON CONFLICT AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Although there are virtually no studies that address female domestic violence and conflict, there are a number of studies which support the importance of communication responses and outcomes in domestic violence. The empirical research regarding conflict and adult interpartner violence is summarized below in terms of each of three conflict response types: verbal aggression, problem-solving/cooperation, and avoidance/withdraw. This is followed by a summary of the empirical research on conflict outcomes.

Conflict Responses

Verbal Aggression

A number of studies have investigated verbally aggressive communication via observation (Burman *et al.*,

1992, 1993; Cordova *et al.*, 1993; Jacobson *et al.*, 1994; Margolin *et al.*, 1988; Sabourin, 1995), and via self-report (Infante, 1987; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Sabourin *et al.*, 1993). Across these studies, domestically violent persons, in contrast to both their distressed and nondistressed, non-violent counterparts, were found to have (a) a higher frequency of verbal aggression on the part of both husbands and wives; (b) a greater reciprocity of verbal aggression (mutual verbal aggression); and (c) feelings of anger, frustration, and contempt that were both stronger and longer lasting during conflict-based communication interactions. An interesting finding regarding the pattern of reciprocity of verbal aggression is that couples with male violence appear to counter verbal aggression with either verbal attacks or verbally defending behavior. In contrast, nonviolent couples appear to counter verbal aggression with either verbally defending or withdrawing behavior. Finally, the few longitudinal studies also provide evidence that verbal aggression may be characteristic of relationships that become physically aggressive at some later point in time, as well as those which exhibit stable, repeated episodes of aggression (Lloyd, 1996; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989).

Problem-Solving/Cooperation

The empirical work on the association between problem-solving/cooperation communication and domestic violence is relatively limited. Lloyd (1990) found that distressed couples, both violent and nonviolent, reported significantly *less* negotiation/compromise (e.g., I—we negotiate, I—we compromise, talk it over, discuss the issue calmly, try to find a mutual solution) than nondistressed couples, both violent and nonviolent. This suggests that low levels of compromise/negotiation are particularly characteristic of *distress*, rather than *violence*. Lloyd *et al.* (1989) found that neither compromise nor logic (e.g., reason with partner, state the importance of what I want) were significant discriminators of violent, as compared to nonviolent, relationships. The results of these two studies suggest that problem-solving/cooperation communication is either primarily characteristic of distress, rather than violence, or is equally characteristic of distress *and* violence.

Avoidance/Withdraw

The empirical work on the association between avoidance/withdraw communication and domestic violence has focused almost exclusively on the pattern of demand/withdraw. Two self-report studies (Babcock *et al.*, 1993; Holzworth-Munroe *et al.*, 1998) found that couples

with male violence had *higher levels* of both husband demand/wife withdraw and wife demand/husband withdraw than did nonviolent, nondistressed couples. However, when couples with male violence were compared to distressed, nonviolent couples, a differential pattern emerged whereby the levels of wife demand/husband withdraw were similar between violent couples and distressed, nonviolent couples. However, the level of husband demand/wife withdraw remained significantly higher among violent than among distressed, nonviolent couples. An observational study which assessed demand and withdraw behavior separately (Berns *et al.*, 1999) found that both husband and wife demand were higher among couples with male violence than distressed, nonviolent couples. Additionally, the study reported that violent husbands withdrew more than their nonviolent counterparts (distressed and nondistressed) and more than their wives. Wives of the violent men were not more or less withdrawing than any other groups.

An additional study (Lloyd, 1990) investigated withdraw (e.g., leave the scene, stop talking about the issue) and avoidance responses (e.g., avoid the issue, refuse to talk about the issue). Lloyd found that *withdraw* responses among violent–distressed, violent–nondistressed, and nonviolent–distressed couples differed from their nonviolent–nondistressed counterparts, but not from each other. This suggests that *withdraw* may be characteristic of either violence *or* distress. For *avoidance* responses, no significant differences were found among any of the groups.

Conflict Outcomes

Limited empirical work was uncovered on conflict outcomes and domestic violence. One study by Lloyd (1990) examined resolution status and stability of disagreements among four groups of couples: violent–distressed, violent–nondistressed, nonviolent–distressed, and nonviolent–nondistressed. Results indicated that the distressed couples, both violent and nonviolent, had significantly more heated arguments with the “same old issue” resurfacing than their nondistressed counterparts. The nonviolent–nondistressed couples were significantly more likely to report resolution than any of the other three groups.

Research Questions

This study is concerned, in a general sense, with the role that women see that they play in the conflict response and outcome process, and the extent to which they become

physically violent in the context of a close relationship. Some of the general questions to be addressed are as follows:

1. Are women who are more severely physically aggressive more likely to be verbally aggressive than their less violent and nonviolent counterparts?
2. When women are physically aggressive are there indications that they enact mutual problem-solving during conflict interactions?
3. When women are physically aggressive are there indications that they enact withdrawal/avoidance or demand/withdraw during conflict interactions?
4. Do more physically aggressive women experience more negative conflict outcomes than their less violent and nonviolent counterparts?

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

A total of 153 female volunteers participated in this study and were recruited for a project on “conflict and disagreements” in which they were each paid \$15 upon completion of the study questionnaire. Participants were recruited from a public health clinic (PHC) administered by the County. The PHC provides a range of low cost preventative health-related services (e.g., screenings, vaccinations) available to any individual without regard to income or other qualifying criteria. The criterion for eligibility in the study was being in a relationship with a man for at least 6 months during the last 12 months that was more than just casual dating. This criterion was chosen to ensure that (a) the study would be generalizable to relatively close romantic relationships, in contrast to dating relationships or intimate friendships; and (b) a reasonable duration of time was sampled in order to operationalize domestic violence behavior. In regard to demographic information, the average age of the participants was 26.9 years, with an age range from 18 to 57 years. The large majority of participants were in their teens (24.8%) and twenties (41.2%) with those in their thirties (22.2%) representing the next largest segment, and a smaller percentage of participants in their forties (10.5%) and fifties (1.3%). Caucasian (42.7%) and Hispanic (39.3%) participants each constituted a substantial percentage of the sample, with a smaller percentage of African Americans (10.7%), native Americans (2.0%) and Asian Americans (1.3%). The median income range was \$10,000–\$14,999, with 87.5% of the participants making under \$25,000 per year. High school was the highest level of education completed for 45.4% of the sample, with

an additional 44.1% completing some college, and 10.5% completing college or beyond. This is a relatively young sample with a fairly large Hispanic component and relatively low median income reflective of the community from which it was drawn. For example, the city has a median individual income of approximately \$23,500 and a Hispanic population of about 40%.

In regard to relationship information, 77% of the participants were currently in a relationship with the target male, while 23% had ended that relationship. Among those currently in an ongoing relationship, 17.8% were married, 22.9% were engaged, 1.7% were divorced, and 46.6% were currently living together in the same household. For all target relationships, either ongoing or ended, 64% had been living together at some time in the past, the average length of time in the relationship during the last 12 months was 9.4 months, with the average total length of relationship being 2.9 years in duration. The seriousness of the relationship, rated on a Likert scale from 1 (*only a little serious*) to 10 (*very serious*), had a mean of 7.9. Only 22.8% of participants had biological children with the target male, however 40.1% were taking care of one or more children between the two of them.

Measures

Although data were collected on a wide range of measures (e.g., individual and relationship demographics, self-esteem, adult attachment, interpersonal power and closeness), only those measures that were used to assess female domestic violence towards partners, conflict responses,

conflict outcomes, and relationship distress are described here.

Abusive Behavior Inventory (ABI)

The ABI (Shepard & Campbell, 1992) is a 30-item inventory which assesses the occurrence and frequency of respondents' acts of physical and psychological aggression toward a partner over the previous 12 months. Two versions of the ABI were completed by respondents: Self and Partner versions. The Self version asked respondents to assess their frequency of acts of physical and psychological aggression toward the *target male partner*. The Partner version contained the identical items, but asked respondents to assess their partner's frequency of acts of physical and psychological aggression toward *her*. Only the physical abuse subscale, consisting of the physically aggressive items, was employed for the purposes of this study (See Table I). Internal consistency reliability, construct validity, and criterion-related validity have been established and reported for the ABI (Shepard & Campbell, 1992). In the current sample, the alpha coefficient for the ABI was .85.

Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ)

The CPQ (Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) is a 35-item, self-report measure that assesses partners' perception of dyadic communication patterns during three stages of conflict: (a) "when some problem in the relationship arises"; (b) "during an argument or discussion of some relationship problem"; and (c) "after an

Table I. Descriptive Statistics for Domestic Violence Toward Partner

ABI item	% of respondents reporting one or more occurrences	Frequency of occurrence			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Pushed, grabbed, shoved or held him down (mild)	45.1	3.07	5.99	0.0	25.0
Slapped, hit, or bit him (mild)	41.2	2.09	4.68	0.0	25.0
Scratched her, pulled his hair, spit at him, or pinched him (mild)	35.2	1.84	4.12	0.0	25.0
Punched him (severe)	33.9	1.58	3.80	0.0	25.0
Threw something at him (mild)	33.3	1.83	4.76	0.0	25.0
Kicked him (severe)	20.2	1.25	4.12	0.0	25.0
Physically prevented him from coming or going somewhere (mild)	17.6	0.79	3.13	0.0	25.0
Threatened him with a knife, gun, or other weapon (severe)	11.7	0.46	1.70	0.0	8.0
Choked or strangled him (severe)	9.1	0.34	1.59	0.0	15.0
Threw him around (severe)	8.4	0.43	2.25	0.0	25.0
Physically attacked the sexual parts of his body (severe)	7.1	0.43	2.48	0.0	25.0
Used a knife, gun, or other weapon against him (severe)	7.8	0.19	0.93	0.0	8.0
Physically forced him to have sex (severe)	2.6	0.06	0.47	0.0	4.0
All items above	67.3	14.43	27.19	0.0	157.0

Note. ABI: Abusive Behavior Inventory. *N*s range from 150 to 153.

argument or discussion of some relationship problem." For the purposes of this study, those items of the CPQ which assess the first two stages of conflict served as a measure of conflict responses and the items from the third stage served as a measure of conflict outcomes. The CPQ is a self-report alternative to observational coding systems and has been used in several studies (Christensen, 1987, 1988; Christensen & Heavey, 1990, 1993; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Noller & White, 1990). Heavey *et al.* (1996) correlated spouses' reports of constructive communication using the CPQ with observer ratings of constructive communication during two videotaped problem-solving discussions and found correlations of .70 for husbands and .62 for wives. Among the strengths of the CPQ are its (a) behavioral specificity (e.g., I call her names, ridicule her, swear at her, or attack her character, competence, or appearance, while he does not); (b) ability to measure both symmetrical (e.g., we both offer possible solutions or compromises) and nonsymmetrical (e.g., I repeatedly complain and demand while he withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further) behavior; (c) ability to identify and assess specific types of interaction patterns (e.g., demand/withdraw); and (d) ability to sample patterns or predominant response styles over multiple conversations and contexts. The reliability and validity of the CPQ and its primary subscales (Demand-Withdraw, Mutual Avoidance, Constructive Communication) have been presented in several published reports (Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984; Heavey *et al.*, 1996; Noller & White, 1990).

In the study reported here, the CPQ was used largely as it was originally developed. Christensen and colleagues have most often focused on two patterns derived from the CPQ: Constructive Communication and Demand/Withdraw. Constructive Communication has been defined as three items assessing mutual problem-solving (i.e., mutual discussion, mutual expression, and mutual negotiation) *minus* three items assessing verbal aggression (i.e., mutual blame, mutual threat, and mutual verbal aggression). The Constructive Communication subscale will be used here following Christensen's operational definition (Heavey, *et al.*, 1996). In the current sample, the alpha coefficient for the Constructive Communication subscale was .80. Demand/Withdraw has been defined as a subscale consisting of three items (Christensen, 1988): (a) nags and demands while the other withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further; (b) tries to start a discussion while the other tries to avoid a discussion; and (c) criticizes while the other defends themselves. For the purpose of this study, female demand/partner withdraw and partner demand/female withdraw was operationally defined using the first item only, in order to produce a

clearer, less confounded (e.g., avoidance, verbal aggression) definition of demand/withdraw.

In addition to the three patterns noted above (*constructive communication*, *female demand/partner withdraw*, and *partner demand/female withdraw*), we were interested in several others which can be derived from the CPQ, but have received little attention. Specifically, these were: (a) *mutual problem-solving* defined as three items involving both partners discussing the problem, expressing their feelings in words, and offering solutions/compromises ($\alpha = .78$); (b) *mutual verbal aggression* defined as three items involving both partners blaming, accusing, criticizing, threatening something negative, name calling, ridiculing, swearing, and putting down ($\alpha = .78$); (c) *unilateral female verbal aggression* and *unilateral partner verbal aggression* defined as three items involving one partner blaming, accusing, criticizing, threatening something negative, name calling, ridiculing, swearing, putting down while the other does not ($\alpha = .69$ female, .80 partner); and (d) *mutual avoidance* defined as one item involving both partners avoiding discussing the problem. In all, eight communication response variables were examined. One additional pattern that is a logical extension of the CPQ is that of *female verbal aggression/partner calms things down* and *partner verbal aggression/female calms things down* defined as one item, respectively, involving one partner blaming, accusing, and criticizing while the other tries to calm things down and do more listening. This pattern was added to the CPQ in order to have an indicator of an accommodation process identified by Rusbult *et al.* (1998).

Four conflict outcome patterns were derived from the CPQ. They were (a) mutual problem resolution, defined as three items related to both partners understanding the other's point, having a say in the problem, and believing the problem was solved ($\alpha = .78$); (b) mutual emotional distance, defined as three items related to both partners acting distant and withdrawn, feeling discouraged/hopeless, and withholding support, attention, sex, and warmth ($\alpha = .61$); (c) unilateral problem resolution (six items; $\alpha = .79$); and (d) unilateral emotional distance (six items; $\alpha = .71$). In the two unilateral outcomes, the same dimensions were assessed, but only one person in the couple affirmed the dimension while the other did not.

Marital Opinion Questionnaire (MOQ)

The MOQ (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991) is a self-report measure of marital/relationship satisfaction which was adapted from an earlier measure of life satisfaction (Campbell *et al.*, 1976). The MOQ is an 11-item

instrument consisting of two parts. The first part included 10 semantic differential items rated on a 7-point semantic scale employing bipolar adjective pairs. They were (a) Enjoyable–Miserable; (b) Hopeful–Discouraging; (c) Free–Tied Down; (d) Full–Empty; (e) Interesting–Boring; (f) Rewarding–Disappointing; (g) Brings out the best in me–Brings out the worst in me; (h) Connected–Lonely; (i) Easy–Hard; and (j) Worthwhile–Useless. The second part included a single item rating the global relationship on a 7-point Likert scale with anchors from *Completely Dissatisfied* to *Completely Satisfied*. Respondents were asked to consider the last month of their relationship when making their evaluations.

The MOQ was scored according to the procedure described by its authors (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). The overall MOQ score is computed by summing the mean rating of the 10 semantic differential items and the rating of the global satisfaction item, thereby weighing each section equally. The overall scale score was inverted ($1 = \text{lowest distress}$, $7 = \text{highest distress}$) in the current study and used as a metric measure of relationship distress rather than satisfaction. For all participants, relationship distress had a mean of 3.4 and standard deviation of 1.7. For nonviolent participants only, relationships distress had a mean of 3.0 and standard deviation of 1.7. The MOQ has been found to be internally consistent (Huston *et al.*, 1986; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). In the current sample, the alpha coefficient for the MOQ was .94.

RESULTS

Results will be presented in the following order: (a) descriptive statistics regarding domestic violence and the formation of domestic violence groups; (b) the co-occurrence of male and female violence in the relationships, (c) assessment of the moderating effect of relationship distress; and (d) the pattern of results for the conflict communication responses and outcomes, controlling for the effect of relationship distress, (e) conflict communication variables and the relationship between self and partner physical aggression.

Descriptive Statistics Regarding Domestic Violence and the Formation of Groups

Domestic violence was defined in terms of two dimensions, the frequency of occurrence of domestically aggressive acts and the severity of the acts. *Frequency* was operationalized as the number of acts perpetrated during a 12-month period toward the intimate partner,

utilizing data collected from the ABI. Although studies assessing the *severity* of domestic violence are limited, researchers have made a distinction between mild and severe forms of domestic violence, based upon conceptual work, prevalence studies, and factor analytic analyses (Barling *et al.*, 1987; Pan *et al.*, 1994; Straus, 1979). On the basis of this work, the 14 acts of domestic violence, drawn from ABI, were categorized as either mild or severe. Table I displays the descriptive statistics for domestic violence toward partners during the last 12 months, identifying the 14 violent acts as either mild or severe. Inspection of these data indicates that 67.3% of participants reported at least one occurrence of domestically violent behavior, with an overall average of 14.4 instances of violence per year. The most frequently reported types of violence were pushing/grabbing/shoving/holding down (45.1%) and slapping/hitting/biting (41.2%), with milder forms of violence generally employed more frequently and by a greater percentage of women than severe forms. In order to determine how best to categorize the *frequency* of domestic violence, the distributions were inspected and a median split was computed. On the basis of the median split, a low frequency of violence group was determined to represent between 1 and 5 instances of domestic violence, while a high frequency of violence group was determined to represent 6 or more instances of violence. In order to determine how best to categorize the *severity* of domestic violence, a logical distinction was drawn between those respondents perpetrating only mild acts and those respondents perpetrating one or more severe acts. Virtually all respondents who perpetrated severe acts also perpetrated some mild acts as well. Five groups were then formed combining the frequency and severity of *female* domestic violence (See Table II). They were (a) *nonviolent* ($n = 50$); (b) *limited* ($n = 33$); (c) *moderate-A* ($n = 17$); (d) *moderate-B* ($n = 10$); and (e) *extreme* ($n = 43$). The *nonviolent* group represents the most conservative operational definition of nonviolent controls based upon respondents having *both*: (a) zero instances of domestic violence during the past 12 months toward their partners; and (b) zero instances of domestic violence during the past 12 months toward others (i.e., previous boyfriends, ex-partners, ex-husbands, male or female friends, co-workers, relatives, or strangers). The remaining four groups each evidenced one or more instances of domestic violence toward partners. The *limited* group was identified as low frequency, with only mild acts of violence. The *moderate-A* group was identified as low frequency, with both severe and mild acts of violence. The *moderate-B* group was identified as high frequency, with only mild acts of violence. The *extreme* group was identified as high frequency, with both severe and mild acts of violence. A validity check

Table II. Domestic Violence Groups

Domestic violence group	N	Total acts			Mild acts			Severe acts		
		Min	Max	M	Min	Max	M	Min	Max	M
Nonviolent	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	—	—	—	—	—	—
Limited	33.0	1.0	5.0	2.1	1.0	5.0	2.1	—	—	—
Moderate-A	17.0	1.0	5.0	3.5	0.0	4.0	2.0	1.0	4.0	1.5
Moderate-B	10.0	6.0	29.0	11.9	6.0	29.0	11.9	—	—	—
Extreme	43.0	6.0	157.0	45.6	0.0	100.0	29.1	2.0	80.0	16.4

was conducted to insure that the five groups were significantly different from each other in frequency and severity of violent acts, as intended. Results of ANOVAS and subsequent post hoc comparison tests indicated that the nonviolent group, low frequency, and high frequency groups did differ significantly from each other, $F(2, 152) = 59.9$, $p < .001$, as did the nonviolent, mild, and severe groups, $F(2, 152) = 26.3$, $p < .001$.

An additional five groups were formed combining the frequency and severity of *male* domestic violence, based upon their female partner's self report. They were (a) *nonviolent* ($n = 69$); (b) *limited* ($n = 18$); (c) *moderate-A* ($n = 10$); (d) *moderate-B* ($n = 4$); and (e) *extreme* ($n = 51$). These groups were operationalized in the exact same way as above. Table III compares her own and her partner's physical aggression in terms of these groups. For women who are nonviolent or in the extreme violent group, their partners tend to parallel them. Specifically, 84% of nonviolent women also had nonviolent partners, and 81% of the extreme violent women also had extreme violent partners. For those that were neither extreme nor nonviolent, partners are often divergent in their physically aggressive behavior. On the basis of the actual frequency of violence rather than violence group membership, the percentage of women that had more violent acts than their male partners was approximately equal to the percentage of males that had more violent acts than their female partners. However, male partners had a greater percentage of severe acts (42.4%) than their female partners (22.8%).

The Effect of Relationship Distress

As noted at the outset, a number of family violence scholars have specifically pointed to the need to account for, or control for, relationship distress when studying factors presumed to be characteristic or predictive of inter-partner violence (Feldman & Ridley, 1995; Lloyd, 1990, 1996; O'Leary, 1988). In the current study, the potential impact of relationship distress was addressed in two ways. First, the direct effects of distress on domestic violence were examined, assuming that the five domestic violence groups would not be equivalent on distress. Unexpectedly, relationship distress was not found to be significantly different across the five domestic violence groups (nonviolent, $M = 3.0$; limited, $M = 3.5$; moderate-A, $M = 3.2$; moderate-B, $M = 3.4$; extreme, $M = 4.0$). Given this, we explored relationship distress in a number of ways. Distress scores ranged from 1 to 7, with 37.5% of participants rating their relationship as distressed, based upon a 4.0 cut-off point. We also compared distressed across domestic violence groups using only the highest and lowest quartiles for distress and found no difference across groups. Finally, we compared distress across domestic violence groups but now defined in terms of his physical aggression, rather than hers. Using these criteria, relationship distress was found to be significantly higher for the extreme ($M = 4.2$) than the nonviolent group, $M = 2.9$, $F(4, 152) = 4.58$, $p < .01$. No significant differences were found among any other groups (limited, $M = 3.3$; moderate-A, $M = 3.4$, ;

Table III. Percentage of Females Who Report Male Partner Violence by Violence Groups

Female violence	Male violence					
	Nonviolent ($n = 69$)	Limited ($n = 18$)	Moderate-A ($n = 10$)	Moderate-B ($n = 4$)	Extreme ($n = 51$)	
Nonviolent ($n = 50$)	84.0	10.0	6.0	0.0	0.0	100
Limited ($n = 33$)	48.5	15.2	6.1	3.0	27.3	100
Moderate-A ($n = 17$)	23.5	23.5	17.6	0.0	35.3	100
Moderate-B ($n = 10$)	30.0	20.0	20.0	10.0	20.0	100
Extreme ($n = 43$)	9.5	4.8	0.0	4.8	81.0	100

moderate-B, $M = 3.6$). Given the above, the direct effects of distress on domestic violence were statistically controlled for. This was accomplished in this study through the use of hierarchical discriminant analysis, given that domestic violence groups were conceptualized as the dependent variable and communication response behavior was conceptualized as the independent variable. The main effect of each communication variable on the domestic violence groups was assessed after controlling for the main effect of distress, as a covariate (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989, pp. 505–596.). A post hoc multiple comparison test within the discriminant analysis was used to determine which specific domestic violence groups differed from each other, adjusting for inflated Type I error. The results of these analyses are reported in the next section.

The second way in which the potential impact of relationship distress was addressed was as a moderating variable. The conceptual question being tested was whether the relationship between communication behavior and domestic violence is different (i.e., eliminated, reduced, magnified) under different conditions of distress. In previous studies, moderation has been tested by developing groups which crossed violence/nonviolence and distress/nondistress. Although not inappropriate, this method has at least two limitations. First, one must collapse distress on the basis of some clinical cutoff for distress/nondistress and it does not allow for testing differences at different levels of distress. Second, to correctly test the moderating effect one must compare how *pairs* of groups differs from other *pairs* of groups, which is often either not done or is assessed subjectively rather than statistically. In this study, the interaction between distress and each communication variable (i.e., the moderational effect of distress) was specified (e.g., Distress \times Verbal Aggression)

and tested directly within the hierarchical discriminant analysis after the main effects of distress and each communication variable were entered (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Holmbeck, 1997). Results testing relationship distress as a moderator indicated that the level of distress did **not** moderate the relationship between any of the communication response/outcome variables and domestic violence frequency and severity. That is, the relationship between each of the communication response/outcome behaviors and domestic violence was statistically equivalent *across differing levels* of relationship distress. The direct implication is that the results described in the next sections concerning the communication response/outcome variables and the domestic violence groups hold true across differing levels of relationship distress.

The Relationship Between Communication Response Variables and Domestic Violence

Table IV displays the results of discriminant analyses for the eight communication response variables, above and beyond the effect of relationship distress. The F and η^2 values refer to the main effect of the specific communication response variable after adjusting for the contribution of distress. All communication response variables were found to significantly discriminate one or more of the violent groups from the nonviolent group, with the exception of mutual problem-solving. Focusing on verbally aggressive communication, the extreme group differed from each of the other four groups in reporting more mutual verbal aggression, unilateral female verbal aggression, and unilateral partner verbal aggression. The extreme group also differed from the nonviolent group

Table IV. Hierarchical Discriminant Analysis Comparing Mean Differences on Eight Communication Response Behaviors Among Five Subgroups of Domestic Violence

Communication response	Domestic violence subgroup: $M(SD)$					F	η^2
	Nonviolent ($n = 50$)	Limited ($n = 33$)	Moderate A ($n = 17$)	Moderate B ($n = 10$)	Extreme ($n = 43$)		
Mutual verbal aggression	2.4 ^a (1.8)	2.8 ^a (1.8)	2.8 ^a (1.5)	2.8 ^a (1.5)	5.4 ^b (2.2)	17.4***	0.32
Unilateral female verbal aggression	2.2 ^a (1.5)	2.8 ^a (1.6)	2.9 ^a (1.4)	2.6 ^a (1.3)	4.6 ^b (1.7)	14.8***	0.29
Unilateral partner verbal aggression	2.4 ^a (1.6)	3.3 ^a (2.0)	3.9 ^b (2.4)	3.1 ^{ab} (2.4)	5.4 ^c (2.2)	13.7***	0.27
Female verbal aggression/partner calms things down	2.3 ^a (1.9)	3.1 ^a (1.9)	2.6 ^a (1.6)	3.6 ^a (1.9)	3.4 ^a (2.6)	1.9	0.05
Partner verbal aggression/female calms things down	3.2 ^a (2.7)	4.2 ^{ab} (2.5)	4.1 ^{ab} (2.5)	3.1 ^{ab} (1.4)	4.8 ^b (2.9)	2.7*	0.07
Constructive communication	3.7 ^a (2.9)	3.3 ^a (3.2)	3.0 ^a (3.3)	3.2 ^a (2.9)	-0.1 ^b (2.5)	11.3***	0.23
Mutual problem-solving	5.9 ^a (2.3)	5.9 ^a (2.3)	5.8 ^a (2.4)	5.7 ^a (2.5)	5.0 ^a (1.8)	1.2	0.03
Female demand/partner withdraw	3.4 ^a (2.9)	3.8 ^a (2.4)	4.8 ^a (2.8)	4.5 ^a (3.7)	4.3 ^a (2.8)	1.2	0.03
Partner demand/female withdraw	2.7 ^a (2.5)	4.0 ^{ab} (2.5)	4.0 ^{ab} (2.6)	2.1 ^a (2.0)	4.8 ^b (3.1)	4.6**	0.11
Mutual avoidance/withdraw	3.6 ^a (2.4)	3.2 ^a (2.5)	2.6 ^a (2.3)	2.7 ^a (2.2)	4.7 ^b (2.5)	3.4*	0.08

Note. Where superscript letters differ indicates statistical mean difference.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

in reporting more partner verbal aggression/female calms things down. Additionally, three of the four violent groups (except moderate-A group) differed from the nonviolent group in reporting more unilateral partner verbal aggression. Overall verbally aggressive communication explained between 27 and 32% of the variance in domestic violence frequency/severity.

Focusing on problem-solving communication, the extreme group differed from the nonviolent group in reporting less constructive communication (i.e., mutual problem-solving *minus* mutual verbal aggression). Differences were also found among the violent groups such that the extreme group reported less constructive communication than the other three violent groups. Overall, constructive communication explained 23% of the variance.

Focusing on avoidance/withdraw communication, the extreme group reported more mutual avoidance than each of the other four groups. For demand/withdraw, only the partner demand/female withdraw was a significant pattern. Specifically, the extreme group reported more partner demand/female withdraw than either the moderate-B group (high frequency but mild) or the nonviolent group. Overall mutual avoidance and partner demand/female withdraw communication explained 8 and 11% of the variance, respectively.

The Relationship Between Communication Outcome Variables and Domestic Violence

Table V displays the results of discriminant analyses for the four communication outcome variables, above and beyond the effect of relationship distress. The *F* and η^2 values refer to the main effect of the specific communication outcome variable after adjusting for the contribution of distress. Both resolution status (i.e., being understood, having a say in the problem, problem was solved) and emotional distance (i.e., distant, withdrawn, discour-

aged, hopeless, withholding support) were found to be significant patterns, with unilateral distance explaining the most variance in domestic violence frequency/severity (17%). The extreme group differed from the nonviolent group on all four outcomes, reporting more mutual distance, more unilateral distance, more unilateral resolution, and less mutual resolution. Also, the extreme group differed from the limited group in reporting less mutual resolution and more unilateral distance. It also differed from the moderate-A group in reporting more mutual distance. Additionally, three of the four violent groups reported more unilateral resolution than the nonviolent group.

Communication Variables and the Relationship Between Self and Partner Physical Aggression

On the basis of the pattern of results presented earlier, there was a clear distinction between females in the extreme group who were frequently and severely violent toward their partners in comparison to those who were nonviolent, in terms of the couples' communication responses and outcomes. These findings regarding very violent females suggest the importance of knowing about their male partner and his level of violence. As noted earlier, the vast majority (81%) of the women in the extreme group also had partners who were also in the extreme group. A preliminary analysis was conducted to compare women in the extreme group who had extreme partners with those who had less violent and nonviolent partners (See Table III) in terms of each of the conflict communication patterns and outcomes. Results indicated significant differences between the two groups in that extremely violent females with less violent partners reported less unilateral male verbal aggression, less male blaming/female calms down, and more constructive communication (five times more). Importantly, this group had as much female unilateral verbal aggression, mutual verbal aggression,

Table V. Hierarchical Discriminant Analysis Comparing Mean Differences on Ten Communication Outcome Behaviors Among Five Subgroups of Domestic Violence

Communication response	Domestic violence subgroup: <i>M(SD)</i>					<i>F</i>	η^2
	Nonviolent (<i>n</i> = 50)	Limited (<i>n</i> = 33)	Moderate A (<i>n</i> = 17)	Moderate B (<i>n</i> = 10)	Extreme (<i>n</i> = 43)		
Mutual distance	3.6 ^a (1.9)	3.8 ^{ab} (1.9)	3.1 ^a (1.8)	4.3 ^{ab} (2.3)	4.6 ^b (1.7)	2.5*	0.06
Unilateral distance	2.6 ^a (1.7)	3.2 ^{ab} (1.5)	3.5 ^{bc} (1.5)	4.1 ^{bc} (1.7)	4.3 ^c (1.3)	7.3***	0.17
Mutual resolution	5.6 ^a (2.5)	5.4 ^a (2.1)	5.1 ^{ab} (2.6)	4.4 ^{ab} (1.9)	4.3 ^b (1.7)	2.6*	0.06
Unilateral resolution	3.2 ^a (1.8)	4.1 ^b (1.5)	4.4 ^b (1.9)	3.9 ^{ab} (1.9)	4.5 ^b (1.8)	3.3*	0.08

Note. Where superscript letters differ indicates statistical mean difference. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

partner demand/female withdraw, and mutual avoidance as the pairing of extreme partners.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This research was framed within a conflict model of domestic violence which encompassed four conflict components: conflicts of interest, conflict orientations, conflict responses, and conflict outcomes. The specific results reported here focused on the latter two components of the conflict model in an attempt to illuminate which specific behaviors distinguish among domestically violent subgroups. The results reported here largely confirm that conflict-based communication responses and outcomes contribute to female domestic violence as well as male domestic violence (Feldman & Ridley, 2000).

Verbal Aggression

Women who were frequently and severely physically aggressive (i.e., extreme) were in relationships where conflict was responded to with high amounts of blaming, accusing, criticizing, threatening, name calling, ridiculing, swearing, and verbally attacking the character, competence, or appearance of partners. These acts were done at times by both partners mutually, and at other times by each partner unilaterally, where the other partner did not engage in these acts. Additionally, these women were in relationships where, at times during conflict, they attempted to calm things down and do more listening in response to partners' blaming accusing and criticizing of her. Among the extreme group, relative to the nonviolent group, unilateral forms of verbal aggression were 2 times more likely to occur, partner verbal aggression/female calms things down was 1.5 times more likely to occur, and mutual verbal aggression was about 1.25 times as likely to occur. Even where females were enacting low frequency and mild physical aggression, they were in relationships where male partners were 1.5 times more likely to be unilaterally verbally aggressive.

Results regarding mutual verbal aggression are consistent with the findings of observational studies of domestic violence which suggest that attack-counterattack interactional sequences appear to be far more emotionally and behaviorally escalating than other types of negative communication sequences (Burman *et al.*, 1992, 1993; Cordova *et al.*, 1993; Sabourin, 1995). Research suggests that verbal aggression may escalate into physical aggression because (a) couples tend to "lock in" to dominant reciprocal response patterns, such as crosscomplaining and invalidation loops, contempt, defensiveness, and

stonewalling (Gottman, 1979, 1994); (b) arguments tend to progress through three levels of escalation, the issue level, the personality level, and the relationship level, each more difficult to address and contain (Stuart, 1980); (c) there is a high probability of retaliation in order to save face and prevent future attacks, particularly when the receiver believes the initial attack was intentional and illegitimate (Infante *et al.*, 1990; Roloff, 1996); and (d) the negative physiological and affective arousal of one partner, generated in verbally aggressive interactions, becomes mirrored in the other partner (Levinson & Gottman, 1983).

Results regarding unilateral partner verbal aggression are consistent with conceptual work in the cognitive-behavioral treatment for domestic violence, which has found that a range of dysfunctional thoughts, expectations, and interpretations of situations often serve to escalate anger arousal and verbally aggressive behavior. Early exposure to violence in the family of origin among domestically violent males has been found to promote both the development of a hostile attribution bias and the development of an insecure adult attachment style (see Feldman, 1997, for review). In both, the trigger for physical aggression may often be more tied to internal states (e.g., anxious, fearful of abandonment) or faulty cognitive interpretations (e.g., malicious intent, impending potential harm) than actual observable provoking behavior on the part of female partners. Social learning theory would also suggest that males may be playing out an "overlearned" script of violent behavior without consciously responding to overt partner behavior.

In regard to unilateral female verbal aggression, this may occur because physically aggressive females with physically aggressive partners may look for times at which to vent their frustrations or to voice their complaints when male partners are not as likely to be verbally or physically aggressive (e.g., good mood, too tired, preoccupied). Cognitive attribution explanations would suggest that at such times, ironically, a man may be more likely to interpret her behavior as provoking without cause, or believe that she started the conflict in the face of his doing nothing to provoke it. Subsequently, he may then strengthen his rationale that she is deserving of punishment or that he must get back at her. In contrast, it appears that for some women with less violent or even nonviolent partners, the explanation for their verbal behavior may parallel that of male unilateral verbal aggression as described earlier. This may be directly related to early exposure to violence in the female's family of origin and its subsequent developmental impact.

The pattern where partners are verbally aggression and females attempt to calm things down and do more

listening, appears to be more characteristic of females than males and particularly characteristic of extremely violent females relative to less violent females. This may represent one of several strategies or tactics used during escalating conflict where an extremely violent female: (a) may successfully reduce the risk of injury toward herself, (b) may find that the strategy is not effective and ultimately employs more escalating verbally aggression (e.g., unilateral verbal aggression) and physically aggressive tactics herself, (c) may have better problem-solving skills and feel as though she is taking the “higher road” in dealing with an escalating conflict process. In any case, the results regarding this pattern are counterintuitive and need to be a focus of future research.

Problem-Solving and Constructive Communication

Constructive communication referred to the use of the problem-solving strategies (mutual discussion, feeling expression, and offering solution/compromises) relative to the use of verbal aggression strategies (mutual blaming, accusing, criticizing, threatening with something negative, name calling, ridiculing, swearing, and attacking each others’ character, competence, or appearance). Women in the extreme group were in relationships where conflict was responded to with less constructive communication than nonviolent women or less violent women. In fact, constructive communication was 40–50 times less likely to occur in these relationships as compared to the other relationships. Decomposing constructive communication, mutual problem-solving was substantially more likely to occur (2.5 times) than mutual verbal aggression for *nonviolent* females, but no more likely to occur for those in the *extreme* violence group. Furthermore, among the extreme group, about one half of the participants had more verbal aggression than mutual problem-solving communication. It is noteworthy that mutual problem-solving alone did not distinguish among the domestically violent groups. However, mutual problem-solving strategies are clearly important in relation to the use of verbally aggressive strategies (i.e. constructive communication).

These findings parallel those of Gottman’s work on divorce and marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1994), which indicate that a key predictor of successful couples is their *ratio* of positive to negative exchanges, rather than their frequency of positives or negatives alone. Gottman’s work on couple types also suggests that certain types of successful, *regulated* couples are highly volatile, confrontive, conflict engaging, and emotional. However, in contrast to their unsuccessful, *nonregulated* counterparts, these couples express a lot of negativity, but offset it with a lot of

positivity. In regards to physical aggression, initial empirical support has been found for a problem-solving, skill deficiency model of interspousal violence which proposes that when a person does not have the verbal skills necessary to resolve social conflict cooperatively, s/he will be at an increased risk of resorting to both verbal aggression and violence (Babcock *et al.*, 1993; Infante *et al.*, 1989). Couples who can make some effort to cooperatively work on problem-solving of issues might help create a social and psychological environment that may insulate them against behavior that may perpetuate domestic violence. It may also help to sustain a generalized “positive sentiment” within the relationship, even when the relationship interaction patterns have negative components present.

Avoidance/Withdraw

Women in the extreme group were in relationships with more mutual avoidance than any of the other groups. They were also in relationships with more partner demand/female withdraw than nonviolent female relationships. Among the extreme group, relative to the nonviolent group, mutual avoidance was 1.25 times more likely to occur and partner demand/female withdraw was 1.75 times more likely to occur.

Interpersonal conflict theories generally posit that conflict avoidance and withdrawal is dysfunctional for the long-term course of a relationship, largely because (a) conflicts of interest do not get resolved; (b) unresolved issues fester and become more emotionally charged over time; and (c) as the number of unresolved issues and the volatility of issues increase, it is likely that couples become less tolerant of, and more sensitive to, any disagreement. One possible explanation for the findings regarding partner demand/female withdraw is that under the risk of male violence, it may be more likely that males’ demanding/nagging behavior is an extension of a general controlling pattern, but female partners are not willing to risk the same and are more likely to withdraw.

Conflict Outcomes

Along with communication response behaviors, the outcome status of conflict-based arguments and discussions in their own right appears to play a role in discriminating between aggressive and nonviolent relationships. Relative to the nonviolent group, three of the four violence groups had a poorer resolution status in that it was more likely that one partner felt like the problem had not been

solved to their liking, that their point of view had not been understood, and that they did not have a say in problem resolution (unilateral resolution status). In addition to a poor resolution status, women in the extreme group were in relationships where one or both partners felt distant, withdrawn, discouraged, or hopeless after an argument or conflict discussion relative to their nonviolent counterparts (unilateral and mutual distance).

These findings on conflict outcomes are consistent with conceptual work in the area of interpersonal conflict (Galvin & Brommel, 1986; Gottman, 1994; Jacobson & Gurman, 1986; Markman *et al.*, 1994; Rands *et al.*, 1981) that suggests that when verbally aggressive communication is elevated and problem-solving communication is poor, a number of negative outcomes may arise. These outcomes may or may not directly affect the global appraisal of the relationship. However, from a conflict viewpoint, the more one or both partners experience repeated emotional distance, a lack of problem resolution, and minimal contribution to outcomes, the more likely that (a) additional grievances accumulate based upon how the conflict process was managed, and (b) these outcomes may serve to trigger or to maintain negative conflict processes and ultimately domestic violence.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research provides support that conflict-based, communication responses and outcomes play an important role in female domestic violence, as it does in male domestic violence. Although two thirds of women report being physically aggressive toward their male partners, women are no doubt inherently aware that they are more likely to be injured as a result of domestic violence within the relationship. Additionally, it is noteworthy that a female's rating of their relationship as distressed is primarily based upon their partner's being extremely violent, rather than their own level of violence. Although distress does not appear to moderate the relationship between conflict-based communication and violence, a better understanding of the role of relationship distress in both conflict processes and domestic violence is needed. It is also important for future research to investigate the relationship between communication responses/outcomes and psychological forms of domestic abuse. Most importantly, future research needs to understand conflict-based, communication patterns at a far more detailed level. Three aspects are important to understand. The first relates to studying a broader range of communication patterns that may discriminate domestically violent individuals from nonviolent individuals (e.g., pressure them to apologize or admit they were wrong).

The second relates to teasing out and understanding the microbehaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, that comprise the more global patterns of the type investigated here (e.g., verbal aggression, demand/withdraw). The third relates to understanding the sequencing of interactional communication events, in terms of the response/counterresponse progression, the initiation of interchanges, and the context of interchanges.

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