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“Micro-cultures” of conflict: Couple-level perspectives on reasons for and causes of intimate partner violence in young adulthood

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Abstract

Objective: To highlight the development of young adult couples' shared understandings about reasons for conflict in their relationships, views about why some disagreements included the use of aggression (“causes”), and gendered perspectives on these relationship dynamics.

Background: Feminist theories have centered on relationship dynamics associated with intimate partner violence (IPV), but have focused primarily on men's concerns (e.g., jealousy) and use of violence as a means of control over female partners. The current analysis drew on symbolic interaction theory as a framework for exploring couple-level concerns, and ways in which dyadic communication contributes to these understandings, or what can be considered “micro-cultures” of conflict.

Method: The study relied on in-depth interviews with a heterogeneous sample of IPV-experienced young adults who had participated in a larger longitudinal study (Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study [TARS]) and separate interviews with their partners ($n = 90$).

Results: Analyses revealed that women's concerns about men's actions (e.g., infidelity) were frequently cited as reasons for serious conflicts, and showed significant concordance in partners' reports. Shared understandings sometimes extended to views on the role of more distal causes (e.g., family background) and the meaning(s) of each partner's use of aggression. Gendered dynamics included men's tendency to minimize women's concerns,

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and both partners' more open discussions of women's perpetration.

Conclusions: Theories of IPV and associated programmatic efforts should include attention to the social construction of these “micro-cultures,” as these shared meanings affect behavior, are potentially malleable, and add to the more intuitive focus on one-sided forces of control and constraint.

KEYWORDS

couples, gender, intimate partner violence, qualitative methods, young adulthood

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have documented significant consequences of intimate partner violence (IPV), including immediate and longer-term effects on physical and mental health (Simmons et al., 2018). Researchers have examined the impact of general predictors of violence such as poverty and family history, but more recently have begun to highlight the salience of dyadic processes. Studies that include information about both partners have generally shown that characteristics of the partner as well as the individual contribute to the odds of experiencing violence within a focal relationship (e.g., Fritz et al., 2012; Herrera et al., 2008). Nevertheless, gaps in knowledge remain, as such studies have focused primarily on attitudes or characteristics that individuals carry into their relationships, rather than on dynamics within the relationship itself.

Symbolic interaction (SI) offers a useful conceptual framework for further examination of couple-level dynamics associated with IPV, as this theoretical tradition emphasizes ways in which recurrent interaction and communication affect how situations are defined (Mead, 1934). In turn, these basic understandings influence behavior, along with prior socialization and other life course experiences. Continued interaction at the couple level contributes to each partner's attitudes and emotional experiences, and eventually creates areas of shared understanding, or what we will refer to as the “micro-cultures” that inevitably develop. Culture is typically defined as a way of life that encompasses knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and other features that are common to a group of people. Here we rely on the concept of micro-culture to indicate similar properties of a smaller social unit, in this instance the intimate dyad.

This shared terrain may be shaped by positive experiences, but extends to understandings about the nature of conflicts, perspectives on underlying “causes,” and about the use of violence within this particular relationship. In our view, this focus on shared meanings potentially adds to the more frequent emphasis on one-sided forces of control and coercion that have appropriately been central to discussions of IPV. Clearly, these coercive elements are key to understanding IPV and its negative consequences, but an exclusive focus on these dynamics does not provide a complete portrait of dyadic processes underlying conflict and conflict escalation. Evidence indicating the presence of such shared elements would also have implications for programmatic efforts, as couple-based programs or program content are often avoided in favor of approaches that center on the individual's traditionally gendered attitudes or personal deficits (i.e., inability to control feelings of anger; see Capaldi & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012).

The current analysis is based on in-depth interviews with respondents who were participants in a larger longitudinal study (Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study, TARS) and had reported IPV on a standard “conflict tactics” scale (CTS2; Straus et al., 1996). At wave five (2011–2013) we conducted in-depth interviews with a subset of these respondents and separate interviews with a current partner (total $n = 90$). The initial aim of this couple-level study was to

explore gendered perspectives on conflicts and violence (i.e., to identify distinctive features of the narrative accounts of male and female partners) where the referent was the same focal relationship. However, relying on a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), analyses nevertheless revealed significant areas of overlap in the narratives of male and female partners. Thus, our analyses focus on the nature and extent of these shared areas, as well as distinctively gendered aspects we also identified.

The in-depth interviews we conducted focused on conflict in general, but then went on to include detailed accounts about heated arguments that included elements of verbal and physical aggression. Feminist perspectives have been useful in offering concrete portraits of the character of IPV, but discussions—theoretical and programmatic—have centered primarily on men's concerns about their female partner's actions (e.g., jealousy, need to monitor the partner's whereabouts; De Coster & Heimer, 2021; Pence & Paymar, 1993). It is thus important to explore women's perspectives, and similarities and differences at the couple level, to develop a more comprehensive view of dyadic processes associated with intimate partner conflicts and violence. In this regard, relative to prior qualitative analyses, interviews and analyses explore the degree to which concerns that emerge tend to focus on issues related to the male or female partner's actions. Results of a recent analysis of the TARS survey data suggest that concerns about men's actions (including men's infidelity) remains an underexplored area that warrants additional investigation (Giordano et al., 2015).

A further aim of the current analysis is to elucidate the way in which a couple's micro-culture develops to include not only understandings about the reasons for conflict, but about underlying causes of conflict escalation. For our purposes here, we define *reasons* as immediate or built-up-over-time precipitants of conflict. The issue of *causes* encompasses these reasons but extends to beliefs about the role of more distal factors such as family background, experiences in previous relationships, or individual influences such as personality and temperament. Although prior research has investigated such causal factors, little research has considered how such understandings are brought into the relationship via intimate communication, and thus become a part of what constitutes couple context. These discussions about causation are potentially important, as couple-level interaction may further reinforce and in effect reify these beliefs or in some cases offer a challenge to them. Understandings related to reasons and causes are integral to the development of the *meanings* of conflicts within the intimate context. While these can be thought of as the underpinnings of violence, shared meanings may also include more direct understandings about the seriousness of the use of aggression within a particular relationship, and about its use by either partner. For example, the couple's micro-culture may evolve as a zone of zero tolerance, one that accords less significance to women's aggressive actions, or develops as a fragile world where the threat of men's violence is a constant undercurrent.

BACKGROUND

Prior research on couple-level processes

Background factors associated with the likelihood of experiencing IPV include early exposure within the family, and other known risk factors ranging from community resources to individual differences (Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020). Yet the observed variability over time in the experience of these forms of conflict, as documented in longitudinal studies, suggests that perspectives that focus exclusively on background characteristics or personality differences are somewhat incomplete as explanations. For example, longitudinal studies have documented age effects, and greater discontinuity among those who have gone on to change partners (Capaldi et al., 2003). Studies that have examined couple-level processes related to these patterns of variability have often focused on the risk profiles of both partners. To illustrate, Herrera et al.

(2008) found that partner and respondent self-reports of delinquency involvement contributed to the odds of experiencing IPV, Moffitt et al. (2001) documented the significance of the negative temperament of each partner, and Fritz et al. (2012) found that partners' as well as respondents' parental histories of IPV were significantly related to later IPV.

Such studies have thus attempted to capture aspects of the couple context by taking into account what each partner brings into the relationship in terms of personal characteristics, lifestyle, or family background. Although generally evocative of couple-level dynamics, this approach nevertheless retains the emphasis on these imported elements rather than on dynamics that unfold within the relationship itself. Feminist perspectives have contributed significantly to research and applied efforts in focusing specifically on relationship dynamics, particularly issues of power and control, and in highlighting the uniquely gendered aspects of these processes and this form of violence. Komter (1989) and other scholars have highlighted that aggressive actions develop not simply as angry responses, but as part of a more general attempt to control and dominate the partner. Yet other recent research findings complicate this portrait, and provide the conceptual background for the current investigation of couple-level processes.

A symbolic interactionist perspective on IPV

Differences (of opinion, of power) are clearly implicated in interpersonal conflicts. Yet below we describe three components of the couple's developing micro-culture that may not only be shared, but emerge as important to an understanding of relationship dynamics linked to IPV. This shared terrain may include: (a) understandings about key domains of contestation, (b) beliefs about "causes" of conflict escalation, and (c) views on the nature and seriousness of women's and men's use of aggression within the relationship. Here we focus particularly on women's use of various conflict tactics, as this has not as yet been fully incorporated into theorizing about IPV.

The development of shared understandings about reasons for conflict

A traditional definition of power is the ability to impose one's own will despite resistance. Yet SI theories stress the degree to which one's position, particularly within less formal contexts, is not fixed, but instead is likely to be continually negotiated and renegotiated. This general notion is supported by studies that have shown that verbal conflict is a reliable predictor of IPV, thus indicating that a level of "contestation" often precedes conflict escalation (Winsock & Smadar-Dror, 2021). This view is also consistent with feminist post-structural theories that focus on the dynamic nature of power, and indeed of gender relations themselves (Cannon et al., 2015). Recently, researchers have attempted to contextualize these basic findings by considering domains of contestation around which conflict and control attempts revolve.

This more localized approach provides a useful framework for interpreting survey findings indicating that: (a) male compared to female adolescents and young adults, on average, report higher levels of control attempts on the part of their female partners, and in turn, control attempts by either partner are associated with IPV (Giordano et al., 2016). For example, as noted above, a common theme in the IPV literature connects male jealousy to controlling actions such as isolating the female partner and monitoring her whereabouts, and studies have shown that this is a key dynamic within violent relationships (Barbaro & Raghavan, 2018). Yet more general investigations of infidelity have shown that young men are significantly more likely than comparably situated young women to report infidelity or concurrent relationships (Luo et al., 2010). It follows, then, that the young women who have concerns about such issues may express them and/or attempt to influence the partner's actions related to this realm.

Research also consistently shows that young men on average report higher levels of other potentially problematic behaviors such as illicit drug and problem alcohol use, affiliation with delinquent companions, and involvement in other actions that increase their odds of contact with the criminal justice system (Moffitt et al., 2001). Researchers have demonstrated links between such behavior profiles and IPV, but this has often been viewed as evidence of a general proclivity, or in the case of alcohol and drugs, of the disinhibiting effects of substance use. Yet there are also potential couple-level implications of a partner's lifestyle and behavioral choices.

The period of young adulthood brings increased pressure to take on adult responsibilities and to discard earlier forms of socializing and for some, these forms of "troublemaking" (Massoglia & Uggen, 2010). Individuals in relationships (more often women, based on the above differences in patterns), may have concerns about the partner's actions, as such actions may increasingly exact a range of costs, directly affect their own and other family members' well-being, and the quality of the relationship itself. The health promoting effects of marriage for men and prosocial role of female partners in criminal "desistance" are well-accepted phenomena (Sampson & Laub, 1993), but relationship dynamics associated with these partner effects, including variability in receptivity to partner influence attempts, have not been extensively investigated. To follow up on these ideas, a recent quantitative analysis of TARS survey data relying on the full sample of young adult respondents indicated that concerns about male partners' actions were both more common relative to concerns about women's actions and more strongly related to IPV (Giordano et al., 2022).

These recent findings are consistent with prior feminist theorizing but require an expanded lens on and further investigation of couple-based dynamics. Thus, our view is that gender socialization extends to male partners' negative reactions to their female partners' attempts to control aspects of their behavior, as well as to behaviors that are more straightforward as male dominance moves. Further, reflecting women's historically disadvantaged positions (societally, and within the romantic context), as well as recent changes to traditional gender arrangements, young women may react negatively to male partners' control attempts, but also to instances in which male partners ignore, minimize, or make light of women's efforts to influence their partners' actions. Accordingly, dyadic processes associated with conflict may encompass control attempts on the part of both partners, and negative reactions to these efforts to effect changes involving the partner and the relationship. A SI lens highlights that conceptualizations of controlling actions are likely incomplete when considered only as a reflection of personal attributes (i.e., an individual who is "controlling"), or even as an extension of traditional gender socialization. Although these individual and social factors are clearly involved, control attempts are nevertheless productively viewed as linked to concrete concerns that have emerged within the relationship. Further, while Mead (1934) argued that interpersonal communication leads to an interpenetration of perspectives, and in turn, cooperation, this is not an inevitable outcome.

A level of recognition of the other's viewpoint can thus be conceptualized as a core component of conflict, as well as having the potential for positive relationship-enhancing developments. This dyadic perspective, then, foregrounds the importance of intimate communication, and differs both from binary, somewhat static conceptions of gender relations (Butler, 1990), as well as from the idea that coercive processes are the only relationship dynamics that matter for an understanding of the unfolding of IPV within intimate relationships. Focusing additional attention on women's expressed reactions and frustrations is also consistent with the feminist post-structural view that power is "fluid and relational" (Cannon et al., 2015), and is thus subject to continual negotiation. Further, some of Mead's conceptual notions foreshadow the possibility of conflict and negative emotions following verbal expressions of disappointment and attempts to control the other partner. Mead (1934) asserted that emotions arise in connection with a "blocked action." Within the context of women's attempts to influence the partner's current behavior, men's previously enjoyed freedoms and positive sense of self have been challenged or "interrupted." In turn, male actions such as infidelity directly impede (block) young

women's capacities to enjoy the type of committed relationship and long-term future that they may have envisioned.

Couple-level understandings about causes of aggression

Along with a level of agreement on the basic reasons for conflict, recurrent interaction and communication are implicated in a second component of a couple's developing micro-culture—beliefs about the causes of aggression in general, and about one or both partners' use of it within the relationship. Thus, although infidelity may be seen as a reason for a couple's disagreements, the use of violence itself is subject to a further meaning-construction process. Whereas some ideas about violence and IPV are likely to be “imported” based on prior socialization and experience, communication between partners subjects these ideas to further couple-level scrutiny. This provides opportunities for a partner to influence the other's views about the origins and malleability of aggressive actions (e.g., the role of temperament, or prior family exposure), to challenge previously held beliefs, or further reinforce them.

Views on women's and men's use of “physical conflict tactics”

This focus on the importance of couple-level communication also extends to beliefs about women's as well as men's use of aggression. Researchers have noted the relatively high self-reported rates of women's use of various “conflict tactics” included in IPV scales (Straus et al., 1996), but have emphasized that such items and scales do not capture differences in the meaning(s), seriousness, and consequences of women's compared with men's use of aggression against a partner (Hamby, 2014). Nevertheless, the previously documented levels found within most, if not all, community samples should not be discounted entirely. Thus, focusing more attention on women's use of aggression has the potential to further contextualize these behaviors by considering their meaning(s) at the couple level. From an SI perspective, the feelings of disappointment and anger women's actions telegraph may be interpreted as negative “reflected appraisals” (Matsueda, 1992), even if physical harms do not ensue. For example, Sommer et al. (2019) showed that expressions of contempt were significantly related to both actor and partner aggression. In turn, such negative appraisals along with women's use of physical “conflict tactics” may in context serve to negate prohibitions against hitting a woman, especially an intimate partner.

The SI perspective thus contrasts with prior dyadic research that has often concentrated on the form (distressed communication, control attempts) rather than the “content” (features of the couple's micro-culture) of these conflictual relationships. The focus on content and meanings is potentially useful, as this has the potential to answer basic questions about what is going on that either engenders or lowers the prospects of violence unfolding within a particular relationship. Attention to sequences centered on problematic male actions in particular contributes to the overall portrait beyond depictions that have concentrated primarily on men's negative responses to women's behaviors. In this way, the elements of the micro-culture fit together well: women's reactions to domains of contestation centered on problematic male actions are often a part of the sequence, even as both partners interpret men's use of aggression as more serious and injurious.

While our analyses will thus focus on these less often explored understandings that evolve within the couple's micro-culture, clearly one-sided coercive processes may co-exist with these processes or come to the fore at any time. Thus, concerns that develop may be overlapping or part of a sequence. For example, women may initially express disappointment and anger about a male partner's problematic actions, but men's strong reactions and use of violence may serve to interrupt and silence female partners (in line with previous descriptions of the intimate terrorist dynamic [Johnson, 1995]). Or, late in a relationship, a disillusioned female partner may begin

to seek out an alternative partner—a move that may be seen as the ultimate negative appraisal (Rezey, 2020). And, regardless of this variability in sequencing of couple-level dynamics, prior research has amply demonstrated that men's use of aggression is generally linked to more severe consequences for women's safety and well-being (Campbell, 2002).

METHOD

Sample selection

We relied on in-depth interviews from a subset of respondents ($n = 50$) who were participants in the TARS, and also secured interviews with 50 of their current partners. The core TARS respondents were initially selected randomly for in-depth interviews if they had reported physical relationship violence (as measured by the CTS2; Straus et al., 1996) during a previous structured interview. The majority reported current or past IPV at the most recent fifth interview (42), with a small number of individuals (8) reporting IPV at wave 4 (mean age 20) and not at the most recent wave. The latter subset related to our theoretical interest in variability across time and different partners. After this provisional selection process, we examined the responses to the CTS2 more closely and drew on other available contextual data (prior arrests, previous qualitative interviews) to rule out the selection of essentially trivial cases. Accordingly, the resulting sample is to a degree based on a theoretical sampling process, albeit one derived from a larger sample obtained through stratified, random sampling procedures. This selection process provided us with a diverse sample of male and female respondents characterized by varied levels of socioeconomic resources and a background that included serious conflicts. The average age of core respondents was 26, 53% were women, 42% reported their race/ethnicity as White, 31% Black, 20% Hispanic, and 7% Other. We excluded a few cases missing couple-level information or discussion of conflict ($n = 5$ couples). The final analytic sample is 45 couples, 90 individual interviews (see Supporting Information for more details about the larger survey sample, exclusion criteria, interview procedures, and issues of positionality).

Interview process

The general interview guide consisted of eight broad questions, and probes designed to elicit a complete relationship history, including positive features as well as conflict within each relationship. Based on prior work, we have found that discussing conflict in more general terms is a useful step before introducing more sensitive topics related to IPV. Further, even respondents who reported extensive IPV were not violent in most situations. After the general history, the bulk of the interview centered on the current/most recent partner. Although these interviews were wide ranging, all respondents were asked a basic question about reasons for conflict, "All couples have disagreements or arguments; what are some things that you and X fight about?" Probes elicited additional details, including changes over time. Respondents were not asked to assign these concerns to one partner, but this tended to occur organically during the interview process ("the conflict was him and his ho's as I like to call them"). Discussions of "causes" (e.g., violence within the family, character traits), and references to women's actions emerged from discussions about why they thought some fights "got physical."

Analysis of the in-depth interview data

Interviews averaged 80 min and transcripts ranged from 21 to 90 pages. Five research assistants read and transcribed all of the qualitative interviews and subsequently created 2–3 page memos

(i.e., summary abstracts) about each interview. These summaries included straightforward open codes corresponding to the interview protocol, but also relevant quotes, in order to retain a direct link to the interview content. Each week recently transcribed interviews were discussed in detail at project meetings. Themes of similarity in the content of male and female partners' narratives were noted both in project meetings and in the written memos. Gendered perspectives were also identified, but the theme of concordance across the interviews was striking and pointed out by all team members. Thus, as a second stage in the analysis, research assistants returned to the lengthy narratives, assigned codes about concordance and created new concordance abstracts. This coding included an assessment of whether male or female partner issues emerged as a primary area of discord. We also developed more refined codes relating to other areas that had emerged during these readings and group meetings, including respondents' mention of what could be called "theories" of causation about their own and/or partner's use of physical violence within the relationship. Recognizing the potential for a developing bias in our ideas about these trends, a new research assistant who had not participated in the earlier phases of the study read each transcript and tabulated the "reasons for conflict" and extent of concordance across partners. Results were then checked against the concordance abstracts created by other team members, and any discrepancies were resolved based on further scrutiny of the entire narrative. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these percentages are used to convey a general sense of the levels of observed concordance, and are not definitive statistics.

The other concepts we identify were the result of a more traditional narrative approach (i.e., these were also coded and text segments analyzed, but tabulations were not appropriate because these did not uniformly emerge in response to a consistently asked question). As the analysis continued, more refined codes and second order constructs were developed and applied to relevant texts (e.g., the tendency of the male partner to minimize the female partner's concerns). The objective in the results section below is to illustrate important conceptual categories and connections between them, consistent with the goal of building theories of IPV that are "grounded" in the relationship experiences, meanings, and actions of respondents themselves.

RESULTS

Concordance on reasons for conflict: The salience of concerns about men's actions

Throughout the various stages of the analyses of these qualitative data, readers of the lengthy narratives noted the striking similarities in the content of many male and female partner interviews. This was a surprising initial observation, since the general objective of the qualitative component of the study was to identify gender differences in perspective and content across the narrative accounts—including subtle differences that would be more difficult to uncover relying on structured survey data. This provisional observation led to a return to the narratives and focus on specific areas of concordance as well as discordance across these couple-level interviews. The emergence of themes relating to "reasons" for conflict was not in itself remarkable, as the interview protocol had included a question designed to elicit information about sources of conflict in the relationship. However, from a gendered-perspectives starting point, the apparent level of agreement of many male and female partners in perceived reasons was a notable observation. To provide a general sense of the distributions of these responses, we estimate that approximately 75% of the open-ended interviews focused greater attention on concerns about male actions. Further, an examination at the couple level indicates a relatively high level of agreement on the bases of conflict. Specifically, about 70% of the couples agreed about the primary sources of conflict, and across 84% of these concordant couples, both partners emphasized male actions as the primary driver of conflict within the relationship. These findings buttress results of a

previous analysis of survey data based on a single respondent's report (Giordano et al., 2022), but provide new evidence that this reflects a shared, couple-level understanding.

Further, consistent with these findings, and recognizing that male partners would be unlikely to voice concerns about their own actions, both partners' narratives indicate that female partners often communicated negative reactions to these relationship developments. In addition, references to women's perpetration of various acts included in the IPV scale were frequently incorporated into the narratives, consistent with results based on the full sample, and as shown in other studies relying on self-report data. Thus, although the narratives contain evidence of traditionally gendered processes (e.g., those stemming from male jealousy), conflict relating to the male partner's actions frequently coexisted with these themes or emerged as central preoccupations within the in-depth interviews. The excerpts below illustrate the conceptual domains we identified, and how the elements connect as pathways to "common couple" violence.

Kevin and Nicole agreed that many of the conflicts they had over the course of their relationship related to Kevin's continued contacts with his "ex" Dana. Although these interviews were conducted several weeks apart, both of these respondents centered on this concern:

Kevin: I think she might've slapped me on the body a few times.

Interviewer: What would make her get so mad that she would've hit you?

Kevin: I think it was probably talking to my ex.

Interviewer: Was she like jealous or something?

Kevin: Insecure, more worried I would go back to her. (Age 25)

Nicole's narrative was consistent with Kevin's assessment, as this respondent described multiple instances where conflicts had escalated around the issue. For example, she noted, "I had issues with him talking to Dana like secretly even while I was pregnant." Other points in Kevin's narrative indicate that he understood her point of view: "She said, 'I don't talk to my first love no more. I dropped him completely out of my life and his family...you should do the same thing.' Well I was like 'I'm not you.'" This excerpt thus supports a more fundamental theoretical assertion, namely that the interpenetration of perspectives, as described by Mead (1934), need not lead inevitably to shared, positive outcomes.

Bonnie's and Jake's narratives are similar in content, and forge the link to aggressive actions. Bonnie (age 26), described a serious conflict: "I was going onto my laptop and I found a letter to some woman called Desiree saying that I am married, but I do want to have casual sex." After this discovery, Bonnie threw the laptop across the room and slapped Jake in the face. Separately, Jake described the disagreement, but went on to include a reference to his own aggressive action:

She found some emails, I was talking to this chick online, and she found them and then she got all irate and we were arguing back and forth. And then I think I said, "Fuck you." And she whacked me across my face. So I pushed her up against the door. (Jake, 27)

Minimization of women's concerns

Many other couple-level narratives reflected concordance on key reasons for conflicts, but analyses nevertheless did reveal some potentially important gendered communication dynamics surrounding the expression of these concerns. Thus, Kevin's and Jake's responses are consistent with the tendency of some male partners to minimize or belittle women's expressions of their

concerns (Recall that Kevin indicated that Nicole's concerns were simply a reflection of her "insecurity," and Jake's response of "Fuck you" was even clearer as a verbal act of negation).

Further, in the scenarios described by many of the TARS respondents, the male partners' responses and attempts to minimize the problems had potential to increase women's feelings of anger, as their concerns were often supported by objective evidence:

Being so smothering and going through my phone and all that crap... you see I'm living with you, I ain't never moved out... I take care of your kid. I feel like she should've gave me more trust, let me go out, feel free to do what I want to do... Always acting insecure, don't want me to do nothing, go nowhere, can't interact with people. (Aaron, 24)

For once, I felt like I had to see it with my own eyes... I showed up at the apartment and I caught him laying in bed with another girl. (Joy, 26)

Describing the problem area as "smothering" and due to his partner's insecurity may have added to the negative emotions Joy experienced when communicating concerns to this partner, particularly because her concerns were backed up by concrete observations. Thus, Joy's negative reactions are integral to an understanding of dynamics within the relationship that were associated with heated conflicts. However, Aaron's resentment about any attempts to control his ability to "feel free to do what I want to do" ultimately connects back to men's greater freedom of movement and independence as experienced from an early age. Such responses thus provide a relationship-specific path back to notions of male privilege that have long been emphasized in traditional feminist treatments of IPV.

Other reasons for conflict: Time with friends and lifestyle concerns

As the above examples illustrate, concerns about infidelity and other violations of trust are "bottom line" issues for many individuals in this conflict-experienced subsample, but disagreements related to other concerns were also raised by some of the respondents. For example, whereas previous quantitative results focused on the respondent's disapproval of partners' friends (Giordano et al., 2020), the qualitative data reveal that the sheer amount of time spent with friends sometimes emerged as source of discord. Ryan and Jill both reflected on Ryan's time away from her as a source of disagreements:

Some conflicts are when he goes golfing. It irritates me when he's golfing from like 9 in the morning till 9 o'clock at night. And then, he'll call me and say that he's going to have a couple drinks with his buddies at the bar. And so I don't see him until 9 in the morning to probably 2:30 in the morning... I mean like I'm like, "Are you serious?" (Jill, 25)

Ryan's narrative also centered on conflicts related to golf. Yet we note that this respondent, 33, clearly understood the larger import and Jill's perspective on the issue ("I think it's just more that she feels like just sometimes I put her off for my friends"). Another respondent Stephanie, 29, highlighted problems related to her partner Ian's drinking. Ian agreed that this had been a source of contention, but nevertheless continued to argue that he deserved time out with his friends:

But when I'm out and drinking we don't start drinking until, after, after the bar closed down, and so I'll be out till maybe two or three and that's what she don't

like. And I know that. But I figure if I have my own day, why can't I stay out a little later? (Ian, 27)

An early study of IPV patterns showed that men who went out to bars frequently (three or more times a week) were more likely to abuse their wives, and decreasing these activities was associated with "desistance" (Bowker, 1983). Fagan (1989) theorized that socializing within all-male groups likely reinforced norms about male dominance and at least implicitly about the abuse itself. Although the peer normative climate is important, this perspective ignores women's own perspectives, or couple-level dynamics that may stem from intimate involvement with a partner who often stays out "till two or three," or frequents bars multiple times a week.

As noted above, young adulthood is a phase of the life course in which individuals experience pressures to settle down in multiple respects. However, one partner may develop ideas sooner about the need to discard features of a previous lifestyle (e.g., partying and involvement in other risky behaviors) that may have been shared at an earlier point in the relationship. Again, based on rates of prevalence of risk behaviors by gender, it is reasonable to expect that the female partner is more likely to be the one to develop this point of view. Jessica (age 24) talked about a partner who was "selling some serious stuff." Jessica indicated that she initially liked that "we didn't worry about anything...we had money," but eventually "couldn't deal with it" anymore, noting the negative impact on her life, and the heated conflicts that accompanied her change in perspective ("you can't have these junkies throughout my house!").

The in-depth interview conducted with Lisa, shown below, not only highlights this respondent's strong negative reactions to her partner Mark's ongoing substance use issues, but points to the specific elements that over time have amplified the conflicts between them. In particular, Lisa resented Mark's previous attempts to hide the extent of his opioid abuse:

Just lies, which is basically the same as cheating. Um, lies, lies, lies, lies, I hate liars you know? I haeeeee liars, like that's the stupidest thing to me. If you lie to me, I mean, you might as well be cheating. (Lisa, 24)

Mark's own description shows how intimate communication refines understandings of the other partner's viewpoint and meanings of "the problem," which has the potential to continue or exacerbate these patterns or alternatively, to serve as a framework for enacting changes. It is in this sense that a micro-culture is created within the couple context. These shared spaces include areas of conflict as well as perhaps more intuitively, positive relationship experiences. Note that while Mark's interview occurred weeks apart from Lisa's, the content is strikingly similar:

That's the thing. When you lie to someone about something and then you're doing something behind, I mean it might as well have been cheating. Might as well have, you know I mean I'm still lying. I'm going to do something behind your back. (Mark, 27)

Meanings of women's use of "conflict tactics"

As indicated in the introduction, men's use of aggression is generally viewed as a more serious development, but less is known about the character and meanings of women's use of various "conflict tactics" within the intimate relationship context. In a recent study, Jaramillo-Sierra et al. (2017) found that a majority of women in their sample distanced themselves from the experience of anger or "kept it in." Yet this finding to an extent contrasts with women's relatively high rates of self-reported IPV perpetration (Straus et al., 1996), and many of the

narratives elicited from these respondents. As shown in the excerpts above, women and men in this IPV-experienced sample often incorporated references to women's anger and in some instances, behaviors included in typical conflict tactics scales. Although the literature has emphasized differences in the severity and consequences of women's and men's actions, continuing to highlight these important gender differences does not in itself clarify the meanings of women's behaviors either from the point of view of women themselves or that of their male partners. Thus, the focus on conflicts revolving around male partners' actions provides a basis for further situating the meaning and import of women's actions within the context of these young adult relationships.

The contemporary normative climate surrounding women's use of violence is less clear-cut relative to men's use of violence against a female partner. These understandings and our focus on concerns related to men's actions are likely related to women's willingness to resort to aggressive actions and to talk about it freely within the context of these accounts. Both partners made frequent references to the issue of women's anger and aggressive responses. Yet while the respondents often "opened up" about women hitting or slapping their partners, this was not often described as an insignificant or trivial relationship development:

I definitely throw things... at him. Yup. And I do hit him. He just gets me to such a boiling point that I tell him that I just snap. He knows I'm pissed... we fight all the time. I mean, we do. But, I guess it's part of us... it's what we do. [Does he hit you?] No, he just yells at me, like, "Why do you always gotta be so fucking violent?" It's like, "Because you piss me off so much"... it's like, the beyond boiling point. (Maria, 24)

This account further illustrates our notion that a micro-culture is created within the intimate context, one that includes understandings not only about the bases of discord, but about the way each partner and the couple are likely to display and react to the other's experiences of anger. This includes whether aggressive acts are considered unthinkable, possible, in the past, or a routine aspect of the relationship. Maria not only does not distance herself from these actions, but uses the present tense, referring to these conflicts as "a part of us," and "what we do." Other accounts forge a direct link between concerns about male actions (e.g., infidelity) and women's aggressive acts that followed the experience of negative emotions connected to these issues:

What the hell is she doing here? And oh she's just my friend...and I slapped the shit out of him. He grabbed me by my arms and then I got one arm loose and I slapped him, and then he slapped me back. I got one kick in on him, right before he kicked me out the door. Mad as hell. (Jessica, 25)

Marissa and Will both refer to an incident in which Marissa calls one of the women in his phone:

I'm in the bed and I felt somebody slapping my face... Pap! I look up, its her and the other girl. She called some girl she never knew to the house and they're in the bedroom slapping me...and I'm running down the steps and she grabbed a lamp, something straight to the face. I don't know if you can see it, but I had stitches right here. (Will, 36)

The quote below describes an incident in which the respondent, Alicia, indicates that she came close to committing an even more serious act of violence (shooting her partner). Although Alicia did not follow through, the excerpt telegraphs her level of anger, feelings that were amplified when her partner Keith (age 23) tried to dismiss her concerns and go to bed:

[Alicia got the gun out from the drawer.] So I was standing right here and I was thinking I could just shoot him from here... No, I was, I'm carrying this dude's baby and you're out basically looking for my replacement, you know, I was so angry. (Alicia, 29)

Similarly, Ann (age 27) not only emphasized her specific concerns, but that her partner was not taking them seriously: "He walked away from me and it drove me crazy....so I threw him into the wall. Like, like shoved him into the wall. And then walked away. And walked upstairs."

It is potentially important to highlight that male and female respondents often discussed women's anger and aggressive acts in these relatively straightforward ways (e.g., "she just smacked the shit out of me right across the face," "I got one good kick in on him," "I threw him into the wall"). Yet, as the descriptions suggest, these actions were not considered meaning-less, as they were understood as reflections of women's underlying concerns and level of anger about specific situations. In contrast, neither women nor men tended to describe male perpetration or "mutual" violence in this manner. Clearly, social prohibitions against hitting women have increased, and these dynamics likely have contributed to respondents' reluctance to describe men's violence in this direct, detailed way. Seth's (age 33) narrative account of a mutual incident described an initial back and forth, but then went on to include a more serious use of violence that upended the element of apparent mutuality and finalized the sequence: "we were in each other's faces and I just like shoved her away... [then I] like grabbed her up and slammed her on the ground." Seth ended any semblance of mutuality by engaging in an act of dominance over his partner (slamming her to the ground), and this brief description begins to convey the higher level of risk to women that has been effectively described in prior work. Yet focusing on men's use of violence and other controlling actions is not at odds with the idea that an element of contestation (verbal protests and even use of physical conflict tactics on the part of the female partner) may occur alone or as part of a sequence that includes mutual violence.

It is also possible that rather than constituting nonoverlapping subtypes, some features of "intimate terrorism" may develop out of a mutual violence pattern or the reverse. Thus, for example, over time, men may begin to rely on violence to silence women's contestations or other negative feedback, after an initial period of verbal conflict or mutual violence. Studies have also shown that men may resort to violence when they believe the partner is interested in leaving the relationship. Within this context, then, a woman's intent to leave is understood by the partners as the ultimate negative appraisal (Logan & Walker, 2004). To illustrate, Andrea describes a serious one-sided attack that occurred in a prior relationship after she told her partner that she wanted to leave the relationship:

All I remember was him jumping out the bushes and choking me from behind... they said I fractured the tail bone... I remember waking up and them telling me they had me in a neck brace and I had IV's and stuff all around me, beeping. (Andrea, 32)

Understandings about "causes" of conflict escalation as part of the developing micro-culture

The narrative accounts at times extended beyond discussions of the reasons for conflict and the character of violent altercations, as respondents attempted to explain why some disagreements had escalated to include more overt displays of anger and aggression. These explanations or discussions about causes often connected to women's as well as men's actions. Such discussions are consistent with the notion that even though women's acts were not generally equated with

those of men in terms of seriousness, these actions were nevertheless often considered problematic within the context of these relationships. Thus, the analyses revealed areas of concordance about the *causes* of conflict escalation as well as about *reasons* for disagreements.

Recall that Ann's narrative includes the incident in which she shoved Jack against a basement wall. Both Ann and Jack focus on a personality explanation and her ethnic origins:

I would say with conflict we still struggle when there is conflict. She's, I, I always say she's Italian cause she's kinda hot headed but the best way we handle conflict is kinda step away from it and revisit it when it's kinda cooled down a bit. (Jack, 26)

He's always the one that walks away and tries to be calm. And I'm always the one that follows and yells. I'm Italian and Irish, I speak very loud... I remember going after him in the basement, because when we're fighting, he's so calm, it's so frustrating. (Ann, 27)

Another respondent Kelsey (age 26) references her own use of aggressive tactics, and states simply—"that's just my own way. We're both Tauruses, that's probably the problem." Yet potentially reflecting prior couple communications, note that Dave's narrative is remarkably similar: "Like I said, we are both Taurus. I think, when the arguments happen we don't usually come to an agreement because we are both very hard-headed people."

The role of couple communications in cementing or altering views about the nature of violent expression is potentially important, and has not been considered in-depth in previous research. Thus, for example, continuing to rely on such "character" explanations may inhibit discussion of specific concerns or couple dynamics associated with serious conflicts, thus limiting opportunities for enacting couple-level changes. Other respondents focused on family background as an explanation for their own or partner actions. Julie's and Shane's narratives both reference differences in the way each of their parents handled conflicts as a key dynamic that has affected their own relationship experiences (Fritz et al., 2012). Yet in this instance, the new relationship (micro-culture) provided opportunities for change:

I mean Shane's family, Shane's parents have been together since they were in high school. They were like high school sweethearts...They're like the perfect little happy family...but in my head marriages don't work like that... (Julie, 23)

She saw that (IPV) growing up. I come from a family, I've never seen my parents argue....they go into another room. She says she's seen her parents argue, push each other and stuff like that. So, to me, that's taboo. I don't like that, so when she used to grab me and push me, I don't know how to react. (Shane, 30)

Another respondent, Sara, indicated that although her friends and family had wanted her to break up with Don, she "saw the good in him," and pointed to Don's difficult family background as an explanation for his earlier actions. ("In his life he hasn't had it, he's had it rough all his life. His mom was a crack head. His dad was not around... He's never seen a successful marriage").

Respondents' lengthy narratives also included frequent references to the influence of experiences with prior partners, suggesting that these experiences also become a part of the couple's developing micro-culture. For example, Joe indicated that initially Amy did not trust him in large part because of very negative experiences with a prior partner Chad:

Her previous relationship was very abusive. And so her trust levels are way down. And then she met me and realized I'm a lot different. I'm going to treat her with the utmost respect; she's starting to realize that I'm not her ex. (Joe, 23)

Joe's narrative forged a strong contrast between his own attitudes and that of Amy's former boyfriend. Yet it is of interest and consistent with our general focus that due to a long period between interviews, Amy indicated that Joe had cheated on her and they are no longer together.

Jackie's and Anthony's relationship was also initially affected by Jackie's experiences with a prior partner Brian. Jackie describes highly abusive acts that Brian had committed that well illustrate the traditional focus on male jealousy, but also incorporated her own concerns:

He stole my check to go out and pick up these girls and have fun and left me at home [later] woke me up, what the hell are you doing with that damn thing on [new nightgown] what man was in my house.... Next thing you know he just started whamming on me... he didn't hit me in my face...didn't want everyone else to know. (Jackie, 28)

Jackie's relationship with her current partner Anthony (age 28) was quite different. Both respondents brought up that Jackie was the only one who had become aggressive in their current relationship. However, Anthony's reactions and general orientation were helpful as they had worked together to develop a different set of relationship dynamics:

[It was after work], and I kinda exploded and like shoved him a little. But he looked at me and said I'm gonna pretend like that didn't happen because you're having a bad day and I know you've worked a long time...Anthony taught me not to even play fight with my children... "boys do not put their hands on their mother."

Thus, Anthony's role-taking capacity, stance of avoiding all use of aggressive tactics, and both partners' commitment to the future coalesced to put the new relationship on a different path.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our initial objective in conducting interviews with IPV-experienced respondents and their partners was to explore each partner's own view of the dynamics within the relationship associated with conflict and violence, and to further illuminate gendered aspects of respondents' perspectives. Yet results of a grounded theory analysis led us to develop the basic insight that within the context of intimate relationships, couple-level, "shared" understandings coexist with the areas of difference that traditionally define this and other forms of conflict. SI offers a useful theoretical framework, in foregrounding that the "intimate" features of IPV, and associated levels of interaction and communication, are a part of the meaning construction process along with imported elements (e.g., family history, individual differences in temperament, and/or gendered socialization). While a couple's micro-culture is comprised of many features, results highlighted three areas: (a) shared understandings about the couple's reasons for conflict, (b) ideas about "causes" of conflict escalation, and (c) views on the meaning and import of each partner's use of aggression within the relationship.

We illustrated couple dynamics that appear to occur frequently, particularly within the context of a general community sample, but that have not been explored in-depth relative to those associated with the pressing problem of what has been labeled "intimate terrorism." (Johnson, 2008). Analyses offered additional context for linking and interpreting previous descriptive findings that have remained undertheorized in existing treatments (e.g. verbal conflict as a reliable risk factor, women's self-reports of their use of aggressive "conflict tactics," and relatively high scores on scales measuring control attempts (Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020).

Researchers have been reluctant to focus attention on women's communications and actions and more generally on dyadic processes, as this has the potential to suggest that women have played a role in the victimization that occurs. Yet examining common sequences respondents described (often following concerns about male actions) has highlighted that a range of relationship-based processes may be associated with frequently occurring forms of IPV. The "intimate terrorist" dynamic (Johnson, 2008) emphasized men's attempts to control women's lives, with violence or threat of violence and other abusive strategies employed to ensure compliance. Yet the typology highlighted the presence of other dynamics that might characterize what Johnson termed "common couple" and later "situational couple" violence. Nevertheless, theories and programs have tended to focus either on intimate terrorist dynamics or adapt a gender-neutral stance.

The dynamic processes we identified can be considered gendered, but differ from prior depictions in highlighting men's problematic actions and women's reactions to them. However, other findings fit well with a traditionally gendered perspective, including the tendency of male partners to minimize women's concerns, and reluctance to discuss their own aggressive actions in detail. Nevertheless, partners' narrative accounts of conflict *domains*, often centered on men's infidelity and involvement in other problem behaviors, as well as *perceived causes* underlying conflict escalation, revealed a significant level of partner agreement or "concordance." Importantly, narratives at times reflected a keen understanding of the other partner's viewpoint. This suggests that a level of role-taking is likely to occur, even within the confines of highly conflictual relationships, and where the referent is the genesis of conflict itself. We referred to this as a developing micro-culture to anchor the idea that meanings are crafted on-site, as well as based on imported elements such as family history and gender socialization.

Results pointing to the salience of concerns about men's actions connect logically with the findings of many more general studies, namely those documenting that young men more often do things that are likely to be considered problematic (e.g., infidelity, substance use, or criminal behavior). Within the context of relationships of greater duration and significance often formed during young adulthood, then, it is reasonable to expect that women may express dissatisfaction about these problem areas—particularly when such actions reflect violations of trust or threaten the relationship in fundamental ways. The narrative accounts indicate that they do. Women's responses may include attempts to control or monitor men's actions, verbal expressions of disagreement, and in some instances the use of aggressive "conflict tactics." Traditionally gendered aspects come into play as these scenarios unfold, as the character of women's reactions is likely to be influenced by strong investments in relationships. In turn, women's negative "reflected appraisals" and expressions of concern may be experienced aversely by men whose earlier socialization may not have included restrictions on freedom of movement, acceptance of critical feedback, or learning the value of walking away from verbal and/or physical challenges.

The narratives elicited from couples also highlighted that ongoing interaction and communication can provide a basis for reifying ideas about the *causes* and inevitability of conflict, as well as for working to change underlying behaviors that may have precipitated these disagreements. This is a potentially important finding, as prior research on causes of IPV has not considered how couple communication subjects such common beliefs to further scrutiny.

The analyses revealed the continuing impact of gendered perspectives in the finding that men sometimes made light of or attempted to minimize women's concerns. Consistent with a dyadic focus, however, results revealed that such attempts to turn the tables and in effect "victim-blame" were not uniformly effective, and often only increased feelings of anger women indicated that they experienced. The SI focus on both partners as integral to the meaning construction process thus adds to prior research that has revealed how men have belittled partners (and engaged in more severe actions such as gaslighting), because previous studies have not generally included attention to women's responses other than feelings of distress (Sweet, 2019). While these dynamics are clearly distressing, the current results are consistent

with a recent focus on women's agency (Showden, 2011), as narratives revealed that in many instances women did not accept the notion that conflicts were the result of their own actions. And while sometimes framed differently, men often agreed that their actions were the primary drivers of conflict.

Men's attempts to monitor their partners' whereabouts and severe acts of aggression, as emphasized previously, most readily evoke themes of male dominance. Yet other relationship dynamics described here (i.e., continuing to engage in behavior that female partners find troublesome, or minimizing their concerns), nevertheless did reflect the continuing impact of beliefs about male privilege and thus for some couples ultimately work to perpetuate gender inequalities. As most treatments of IPV stress, there is a critical need for men to take full responsibility for their own aggressive actions (i.e., to avoid any sense of blaming the victim). Yet a perspective that includes attention to women's perspectives and behaviors is nevertheless important to developing a comprehensive perspective on couple-level processes linked to IPV.

Our conceptual focus and analysis also has implications for prevention and intervention efforts. For example, many websites focused on IPV describe warning signs of abuse. These have been essential to communicate that there is more to abuse than the physical act of hitting (e.g., Pence & Paymar, 1993). However, these lists (e.g., wants to make all the decisions, extremely jealous) concentrate on "characteristics of the abuser," thus skirting the issue of dyadic processes. Bracketing off discussions of the character of the couple's micro-culture is potentially limiting, because individuals may not identify with depictions that differ from their own experiences. The portrait we described also differs from gender-neutral approaches, as these may incorporate the idea that women as well as men may be aggressive or jealous, but do not address the gendered dynamics we highlighted in this analysis. While public opinion has slowly shifted regarding the acceptability of men hitting their partners, women's use of aggression is not as well understood or as heavily proscribed. Prior depictions have emphasized that although men's violence is injurious in many ways, women's acts may be dismissed by men or seen as "laughable" (Molidor & Tolman, 1998). Based on the narrative accounts we analyzed, however, in context women's actions are understood by the couple to reflect the seriousness of women's concerns, and the feelings of anger and disappointment they are experiencing.

Some of this study's limitations point to areas for future research. More systematic research is needed on relationship dynamics across the full range of gender identities, as well as on ways in which the focal relationship issues discussed above may be influenced by socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. Additional research is also needed on sequencing, including when, how, and why highly coercive dynamics (most often perpetrated by men) interrupt the dyadic processes we focused on in this study. It is also important to link more directly the risk factors we labeled "imported" elements (e.g., family history) and the dyadic processes we emphasized.

Taking into account these and other study limitations (e.g., the sample is regional), the analyses nevertheless shed light on relationship dynamics that almost by definition occur more frequently relative to the more extreme forms of abuse that have been stressed in many investigations of IPV. Yet while common, research has demonstrated links to depression, relationship instability, and detriments to the well-being of children exposed to these forms of parental conflict (Simmons et al., 2018). Further, some research indicates that bidirectional violence is associated with higher injury risk (Whitaker et al., 2007). Here we focused on ways in which aspects of the couple's micro-culture may be linked to IPV. However, this basic notion might also prove a useful concept in connection with "healthy relationship" programs designed to strengthen positive features of relationships and limit the emergence of negative dyadic patterns.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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