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Olson, Loreen N. and Braithwaite, Dawn O., “If You Hit Me Again, I’ll Hit You Back”: Conflict Management Strategies of Individuals Experiencing Aggression during Conflicts” (2004). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 93.
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Published in *Communication Studies* 55:2 (Summer 2004), pp. 271–285; doi: 10.1080/10510970409388619.

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Published online May 22, 2009.

“If You Hit Me Again, I’ll Hit You Back”: Conflict Management Strategies of Individuals Experiencing Aggression during Conflicts

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Abstract

In interpersonal relationships characterized by aggression, the negotiation of conflict is especially significant. The present study examined the conflict management strategies used by 31 individuals who had experienced verbal and/or physical aggression during conflicts with their partners. Sillars’ (1986) conflict tactics coding system was used as a framework to analyze 960 pages of transcribed data. The results of this deductive content analysis indicated that the participants reported using primarily Distributive conflict strategies. Analytic induction was also used to interpret nonverbal forms of conflict management, revealing three common tactics: crying, nonverbal avoidance, and aggression. Implications for using these conflict strategies in interpersonal relationships characterized by aggression are discussed.

Keywords: conflict management, interpersonal aggression, nonverbal conflict tactics, verbal conflict tactics

Because of its ubiquitous nature, conflict has received a significant amount of attention from social scientists across disciplines. The negotiation of conflict is especially significant in interpersonal relationships characterized by aggression. Researchers have documented an important association among romance, conflict, and violence. For instance, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) found that couples who reported high amounts of conflict had a violence rate of 43.9%, which was 16 times higher than nonconflict couples. Others also

have found conflict to be exceptionally frequent in violent couples (Straus, 1991) and, in some instances, a primary cause of aggression (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989).

In addition, researchers have consistently identified several unhealthy communicative behaviors employed by individuals in violent relationships, such as the use of verbal aggression (e.g., Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Sabourin, 1996; Sabourin, Infante, & Rudd, 1993) and negative affect, anger, or patronizing behavior during problem-solving discussions (Margolin, Burman, & John, 1989; Margolin, John, & Gleberman, 1988; O'Leary & Vivian, 1990). Several destructive dyadic patterns of conflict management have also been noted, including, for example, demand-withdraw (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999) and destructive forms of relational control (Rogers, Castleton, & Lloyd, 1996; Sabourin, 1995).

Although this body of work has contributed greatly to our understanding of the communication in violent relationships, we posit that a closer, in-depth analysis of conflicts involving aggression is needed to expand our knowledge of how individuals negotiate their conflicts vis a vis their selection of specific tactics and their enactment of aggressive behaviors. By examining the anatomy of a conflict at such a microscopic level (e.g., individual strategies and tactics), a deeper, more precise understanding of the relationship between conflict and aggression is made possible by focusing on the individuals' strategic communication choices made during conflicts with their partners. Further, a broader perspective about violence and communication is also gained by focusing the analytical lens on all of the strategies used. Intuitively, we know that couples who experience aggression during conflicts do not only use physical violence as a resolution strategy. Yet, we have little empirical evidence of how aggression and destructive conflict management strategies coexist with constructive ones. Therefore, one goal of this project was to analyze the strategies and tactics used during conflicts involving aggression in hopes of simultaneously gaining both a narrower understanding of the specific tactics employed and a broader perspective of the repertoire of strategies chosen. For our purposes here, aggression is broadly defined and represents a variety of verbal and physical acts, including insults or threats that are used to intentionally hurt the other, throwing (or threatening to throw) things at the other person or kicking objects out of frustration, or acts of physical contact such as pushing, shoving, slapping, biting, etc.

In addition, many studies examining domestic violence have tended to sample couples or individuals who have experienced physical violence (e.g., Lloyd, 1996; Rogers, Castleton, & Lloyd, 1996; Whitchurch, 2000) or are seeking shelter or support because of said violence (e.g., Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Rudd, Beatty, & Burant, 1994; Sabourin, 1995; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995). Unfortunately, all too many couples experience aggression in multiple forms and never seek the assistance of social service agencies. Therefore, a need exists to broaden our sampling procedures to intentionally include individuals from a more general population who have experienced various types and levels of verbal *and* physical violence during their conflicts. Thus, the overall purpose of our investigation was to deepen our understanding of the relationship between aggression and conflict by examining the conflict tactics used by individuals from a diverse population base who experienced verbal and physical aggression during conflicts with their partners.

Conflict Management and Violence

Even though different approaches to studying conflict exist (for a review, see Cahn, 1992), many interpersonal communication scholars have assumed an interactional perspective (Cahn, 1992; Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). The interactional paradigm focuses on a couples' problem-solving interactions and views conflict as a dyadic form of communication. Research in this framework has tended to examine specific conflict patterns, styles, strategies, and tactics, and, in so doing, has used different units of analysis (e.g., couple or individual).

Conflict Patterns

With regard to conflict patterns, researchers have analyzed the way conflict is *dyadically structured*. This structural approach to conflict focuses on how the individuals' strategy choice is relationally determined and situation specific (Klein & Johnson, 1997). According to Klein and Johnson (1997), the situational constraints affecting individuals' strategic choice are evidenced by several conflict patterns. Two patterns particularly salient to the present focus on interpersonal violence include the demand-withdraw pattern and negative reciprocity—both of which are often studied using the couple as the unit of analysis. First, the demand-withdraw pattern is defined as “one partner's attempts to engage in a problem-solving discussion, often resorting to pressure and demands, while the other partner attempts to avoid or withdraw from the discussion” (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993, p. 16). Researchers suggest that a couple's use of the demand-withdraw pattern can lead to destructive conflict management and foreshadow relationship dissolution (Klein & Johnson, 1997). Furthermore, this patterned interaction has been shown to be a predictor of intimate violence (Babcock et al., 1993; Sagrestano et al., 1999).

Labeled the “hallmark of marital conflict,” negative reciprocity is a second pattern that is especially problematic in interpersonal relationships, in general, and in violent relationships, specifically (Klein & Johnson, 1997). Specifically, negative reciprocity is defined as a couple's tendency to “match aversive behavior with aversive behavior” (Sabourin, 1996, p. 209). Negative affect and bid for control are key aspects of this communication pattern (Cahn, 1992; Sabourin, 1996). Research has shown a greater presence of negative reciprocity in dissatisfied couples than satisfied couples (for reviews, see Cahn, 1992; Canary et al., 1995; Sabourin, 1996) and in abusive couples than nonabusive couples (Sabourin, 1995; Sabourin et al., 1993; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995).

Conflict Styles, Tactics, and Strategies

In addition to examining dyadic *patterns* of conflict, a large body of research exists that has focused on the use of specific conflict styles, tactics, and strategies. Much of this research began with a focus on different *styles* of conflict, examining the ways in which *individuals* managed conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Rahim, 1983).

Becoming discontented with an individual approach to a dyadic phenomenon, however, researchers eventually turned their attention to more *interactional* ways of analyzing conflict. Specifically, as a way to gain insight into the dyadic nature of interpersonal conflict, they began to examine the specific conflict strategies and tactics employed. Conflict

strategies refer to the broad, overarching objectives interactants use to resolve conflict; whereas, *tactics* are the specific behaviors they use to actualize the strategy (Newton & Burgoon, 1990). It is important to note that, although the individual is the unit of analysis when analyzing conflict in such a way, the strategy or tactic reported is based upon how the individual enacted the behavior in relation to his/her partner.

Sillars' (1980a, 1980b, 1986) work has been central to this interactional approach to conflict management. Specifically, he identified three superordinate strategies that accounted for ways in which people generally approach conflict with one another, avoidant (working away from partner), distributive (working against partner), and integrative (working with partner) (Canary et al., 1995). Avoidant strategies refer to individuals' attempts to avoid explicit reference to the conflict (Sillars, 1980b). Distributive strategies are defined as explicit discussion of the conflict, which includes a negative evaluation of the partner or an attempt at compliance (Sillars, 1980b). Similarly, integrative strategies are characterized by their explicit discussion of the conflict; however, they are different from distributive strategies in that they include neutral or positive evaluations of the partner and do not seek compliance (Sillars, 1980b).¹

Numerous studies have been conducted examining the use of the Sillars' (1980a, Sillars' 1986) conflict tactics in various nonviolent relationships. Results have consistently shown that integrative tactics are positively related to individuals' relational satisfaction; whereas, distributive and avoidant tactics are negatively associated with satisfaction (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach, 1994; Sillars, 1980a, 1980b).

More specifically, Fitzpatrick (1988a, 1988b) and Witteman and Fitzpatrick (1986) employed Sillars' typology to examine how individuals in committed romantic relationships negotiated their conflicts. They found that the three couple types (Traditionals, Independents, and Separates) used different tactics when attempting to resolve conflicts. For instance, Traditionals relied on avoidance tactics less than any other couple types, especially with regard to more serious issues (Fitzpatrick, 1988b). Moreover, they enacted cooperative behaviors and appeals to the relationship (Witteman & Fitzpatrick, 1986). In contrast, Independents readily used confrontation in conflict (Fitzpatrick, 1988b). Further, as compared to the other couple types, Independents were more likely to engage in refutation, to discount the other person's arguments, and to seek information (Witteman & Fitzpatrick, 1986). Finally, Fitzpatrick (1988a) found that Separates had a much more contentious nature to their communication and, therefore, could be described as using more Distributive tactics. In addition, they tended to avoid conflict, were more assertive, had few coordinated exchanges of open conflict, used power plays, and avoided rational discussion of issues. Fitzpatrick (1988a) noticed a building of frustration in the Separates' communication patterns that, in her opinion, may have made these couples more prone to violence or abuse.

Aside from the research conducted by Fitzpatrick and colleagues, little empirical examination has been conducted using Sillars' typology to determine the various conflict tactics employed by individuals experiencing aggression during their conflicts. It is important to note that a large body of research has been conducted using the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) developed by Straus and colleagues at the University of New Hampshire. This instrument has become the most widely used instrument for gathering data about physical

violence in families (Schafer, 1996; Straus, 1992a), assisting researchers in identifying important relational issues surrounding conflict and aggression between family members. However, the CTS is not without its critics, even from the developers of the scale themselves (for a review, see Straus, 1992b). Most germane to the present study is the CTS's limited conceptualization and operationalization of the conflict tactics themselves. For instance, the tactics included in the CTS fall into three general categories: reasoning (rational discussion), verbal aggression (verbal and nonverbal acts intended to hurt the other), and violence (physical acts of aggression). There are 19 items on the CTS Couple Form R (Straus, 1992a), with 3 representing the reasoning mode, 7 capturing verbal aggression, and 9 measuring violence. Of these 19, only 5 are clearly grounded in various verbal communication strategies (e.g., "discussed an issue calmly," "got information to back up your side of things," "insulted or swore at him/her"). Compared to Sillars' typology of 25 verbal conflict tactics, it is clear that the CTS is providing important, but limited, information about the communication strategies used by individuals during conflicts involving aggression. Additional information about these strategies is vital to increasing knowledge of the interactional approach to conflict, in general, and to violent romantic relationships, specifically. By focusing on the multiple *tactics* associated with the use of aggression, even more insight can be gained into the *specific* behaviors individuals use to enact a strategy that may involve the use of aggression.

In addition, research examining the communication patterns of individuals in violent relationships has tended to sample individuals who have obtained counseling for the abuse, reported the violence to the police, or sought the assistance of a shelter or medical professionals. Moreover, the majority of research on violent couples has tended to focus primarily on the use of physical aggression. Even in instances when other concepts, such as power, communication, or verbal aggression, were the primary focus, researchers have tended to use physical violence as a marker for inclusion in the sample (e.g., Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993; Infante et al., 1989; Infante et al., 1990; Sabourin et al., 1993). Thus, a need exists to understand more fully how various types of aggression are experienced by individuals from a broader population base. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the purposeful sampling strategy of "maximum variation" is useful when the goal of the project is to fully display diverse perspectives about the phenomenon under analysis. Thus, by combining the need to know more about the anatomy of aggressive conflicts and the variety of aggression used in those conflicts, the purpose of the present analysis is to shed light on the conflict management strategies of individuals drawn from a diverse population base who experienced aggression during conflicts with their partners. The following research question formally guided our analysis:

RQ: Which conflict management tactics do individuals in romantic relationships use during conflicts involving aggression?

Method

The present study was grounded in the qualitative tradition of inquiry; whereby, the general intent was to describe the recurring patterns of meaning participants ascribed to their

behaviors during conflicts involving aggression (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Leininger, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, a qualitative content analysis procedure (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) was used to identify specific conflict tactics using Sillars' (1986) extant conflict tactics typology. Additionally, we utilized the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to inductively identify nonverbal conflict tactics that naturally emerged during the deductive content analysis.

Data Collection

Data for the present study were part of a larger project examining communication, control, and aggression in romantic relationships (Olson, 2000). Recruitment efforts focused on identifying individuals from a broad population base, including members of various communities and universities/colleges in the Midwest. Specifically, individuals were recruited from the community through referrals and from communication classes at a large university and two urban community colleges. Recruiting from these sources allowed us to reach a diverse community-based sample. Although many of the participants were students, many were of nontraditional ages, worked full-time, were parents, and were from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Interviews

The first author conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 31 individuals (26 females and 5 males) who reported having experienced and/or initiated various types of aggression during conflicts with their partner.² Following the maximum variation sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we intentionally sought interviewees who had experienced different types of aggression in order to ascertain breadth of experience. Data gained during the preliminary screening procedures showed that the majority of the interviewees ($N = 23$) reported the use of minor aggression, such as yelling, crying, refusing to talk, or stomping out of the room; and more intense acts of verbal aggression, such as verbal insults or swearing at the other; and/or noncontact physical displays of anger, such as kicking, throwing, or smashing inanimate objects or "threatening" to hit or throw something at the other person. The remaining eight participants reported the presence of more severe forms of violence, including severe and frequent verbal abuse (e.g., hostile and belittling personal attacks) and/or some form of physical contact, such as pushing, shoving, slapping, kicking, or biting.

The interviews were conducted in private locations chosen by the participants and lasted, on average, more than 60 minutes. In addition to providing demographic information, the participants were asked to discuss in detail the conflicts they had had with their romantic partners that stood out to them, involved the use of aggression, and spanned the most recent five years or the history of their relationship (whichever was less). Because this project was part of a larger data set, further detail regarding the recruitment, data collection, and interview procedures can be found elsewhere (Olson, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

Participants

The majority of the interviewees ($N = 24$) were between the ages of 19 to 36; whereas, the remaining seven were between 36 and 50. The ethnic and racial composition included 28

European Americans, 1 African American, 1 Native American, and 1 Asian American. At the time of the interviews, 26 of the 31 participants were currently involved in romantic, heterosexual relationships (17 = married, 2 = dating and cohabiting, 7 = dating but not cohabiting). Eleven couples were together for 5 or more years, 9 for 3–4 years, and 5 for 2 years or less.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews yielded approximately 960 single-spaced pages of text-based data.³ In general, our data analysis process for this phase of the project involved a continuous interplay between analytic induction and deduction. Baxter and Babbie (2004) point out that scholars often alternate between these two forms of reasoning and analysis. Specifically, the data analysis process occurred in three phases. First, the transcripts were read in their entirety to gain an overall sense of these data and to begin the process of analysis. Because there were fewer males and persons of color in the sample, we considered whether these interviews should be analyzed and reported separately. After the first reading, we chose to report all data together, to avoid dividing the sample and reporting results by small subgroups. Most importantly, after a careful initial reading, we determined that these data appeared to be consistent across sex and ethnicity with respect to conflict strategies and therefore chose to report all 31 interviews together.

Second, the main treatment of these data was a deductive content analysis, applying Sillars' (1986) conflict tactics coding scheme. According to Huberman and Miles (1998), deductively oriented analyses work well when the researcher "has a good bank of applicable, well-delineated concepts" (p. 185). Sillars' typology is one of the most frequently used by communication scholars to code conflict tactics across various relational types. Therefore, because of its heuristic value, Sillars' coding scheme was used to analyze the data in the present study. Concomitantly, our application to conflicts characterized by aggression would serve as an important extension of the typology itself.

Concerning the specific analysis during this second phase, data were coded into the 3 superordinate categories, 7 subcategories, and 25 tactics (Sillars, 1986). The three superordinate strategies included the following: (a) avoidant strategies (i.e., attempts to avoid explicit reference to the conflict), (b) distributive strategies (i.e., explicit discussion of the conflict, including negative evaluation of the partner or an attempt at compliance), and (c) integrative strategies (i.e., explicit discussion of the conflict, neutral or positive evaluations of the partner, not seeking compliance). Data were further coded into one of the 7 subcategories and 25 tactics. Those cases that did not fit Sillars' typology were set aside for further analysis.

Third, via the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), analytic induction was employed to account for the discrepant cases that did not fit into Sillars' typology (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This last step included an analysis of the non-verbal conflict management tactics that were unaccounted for in Sillars' framework. These new categories, which were identified inductively, emerged naturally from the interviewees' comments (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Creswell, 1998). Finally, to check the analysis, the transcripts were read again, looking for any negative cases that would disconfirm the

analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and exemplars were chosen to present in the research report.

Results

A total of 259 verbal conflict tactics were coded. Distributive tactics were the most frequently reported ($n = 140$), followed by integrative ($n = 80$), avoidant ($n = 37$), and uncodable ($n = 2$). In the following section, we present the results of our analysis by first addressing the most commonly reported integrative and distributive verbal conflict tactics. Thereafter, we discuss the nonverbal conflict tactics identified.

*Integrative Conflict Tactics*⁴

The most common integrative conflict tactics reportedly employed were three types of Analytic Remarks: Descriptive Statements ($n = 18$), Disclosive Statements ($n = 18$), and Soliciting Disclosure ($n = 10$).⁵ These tactics involved the participants' use of statements or questions, showing a desire to understand the issue and/or their partners' feelings (Sillars, 1986).

Specifically, Descriptive and Disclosive Statements were used often by partners to explain their perspective on a conflict issue or to reveal their feelings about the issue to the participants (Sillars, 1986). For example, during an argument with her husband over buying a boat, Betty⁶ remarked how her husband worked through his reasoning, explaining why they should not buy the boat. Or, when describing how she handled a conflict with her boyfriend, Veronica stated, "basically [I was] just telling him, letting him know what my priorities were and he was, you know, he accepted them. Not very positively, but he accepted them" (196–197). Additionally, Hannah revealed how her boyfriend used Disclosive Statements when explaining why he was not able to spend time with her. Hannah commented, "He was trying to say that, that was wrong and he tried, he tried to explain why he couldn't spend time with me at that particular moment" (632–634).

A sincere desire to solve the conflict was apparent in many of these interviews. For example, Rachel described an instance where she used Soliciting Disclosure, trying to learn whether or not her boyfriend wanted to break up with her, "I kept asking him questions. What he wanted, you know? Like, 'what do you want? Do you want to stay together'" (268–270)? Rachel attempted to resolve the conflict by soliciting disclosure from her partner, or trying to get him to share his thoughts and feelings.

In general, the partners used Analytic Remarks in an attempt to understand better the nature of the conflict. As described, these types of remarks were not hostile in tone, but, instead, constructive attempts at resolving the conflict with their partners.

*Distributive Conflict Tactics*⁷

Four of the seven distributive tactics were frequently identified: Personal Criticism ($n = 39$), Hostile Imperatives ($n = 33$), Presumptive Remarks ($n = 21$), and Rejection ($n = 17$). The Personal Criticism tactic was used to verbally insult partners' self-concept or their family members. Specifically, this tactic included many instances of name-calling or verbal put-

downs such as "cheater," "asshole," "selfish," "inconsiderate," "useless," "jerk," "sonofabitch," "stupid," and "lazy."

Moreover, partners frequently used Hostile Imperatives, or threats, as a way of dealing with their conflict. For example, John told his wife, "if you hit me again, I'll hit you back" (980). Mark also used a threat to deal with his wife during a very heated argument,

I said, "Gina, I'm telling you this and you better hear me loud and clear. If you do not get out of my face, and leave me the fuck alone, let me go downstairs, I will leave you and *never* come back." (1879-1881)

Additionally, Hostile Imperatives were used as a means of gaining compliance. For example, Cinzie noted an argument she had with her husband about going to church and participating in the service,

I told him that, if you do not shake my hand in church at that point we will not sit together as a family anymore in church. Because that's, that's the rules. You don't go into church and be a prick. And, if you do, do it in somebody else's pew because you're not gonna do it in front of my kids. (1020-1025)

A third distributive tactic, Presumptive Remarks, was also frequently employed. According to Sillars (1986), this tactic involves attributing unacknowledged motives to the other partner. The statements are typically accusatory in nature and beyond the conflict issue itself. For example, Tori depicted an argument with her boyfriend in which he was questioning her feelings for him and accusing Tori of wanting to sleep with a past boyfriend. According to Tori, her boyfriend said, "the fact that you wanted to have fun and that was all you cared about. . . . And, I thought you loved me. How could you even think of that" (250-251)? Tori responded, "it was like I wasn't even thinking of that" (253). Tori's example is representative of how others described using Presumptive Remarks or comments that accused the other partner of doing, feeling, or thinking something he/she was not (Sillars, 1986). Lea described another presumptive instance, showing how partners would often use verbal jabs to accuse the other of some hidden agenda. Lea stated, "I was like, 'if you respected me at all, you wouldn't have done that and if, you know, I mean, 'you obviously don't give a shit about me,' that kind of stuff" (571-573).

The fourth tactic, Rejection, included antagonistic statements against the participant, as well as the conflict at hand (Sillars, 1986). The statements included aggressive denial of the other partner's ideas, thoughts, feelings, or personhood (Sillars, 1986). For example, Dave specified an instance when he and his wife were arguing over family ties and responsibilities. He stated, "she started telling me, well, blood was thicker than water. And, saying that blood, you know, relatives, you know, were more important than anything else, you know" (1207-1210). Because Dave was not a blood relative, his wife's comments not only rejected Dave's argument, but were a form of personal rejection as well.

As revealed in the excerpts, these distributive tactics represented the most hostile and aggressive language used by partners as they engaged in conflict with their significant others.

In general, Sillars' (1986) conflict coding system was an excellent tool for analyzing the way in which the participants and their partners verbally negotiated their conflicts. However, we discovered that verbal negotiation of conflict was not the only one way in which the individuals described handling their disagreements. The partners also described non-verbal ways of dealing with conflict.

Nonverbal Conflict Tactics

Crying

One of the most common themes to emerge during the participants' discussions of their conflicts was the use of crying as a nonverbal conflict tactic. Several participants described instances when the conflict escalated to a point where all they could do was cry. Stephani's description captured what other participants expressed as well, "I just felt completely out of control so normally when something like, a situation like this would happen, I would just, I would cry" (218–220). According to many of the individuals, crying dramatically changed the nature of the conflict, resulting in a more constructive way of dealing with the conflict or a discontinuance of the conflict due to the pain. Dave described one conflict with his wife that demonstrated how crying changed the nature of a conflict for some participants, "she started crying. And, ah, then I guess that's where I started getting sympathetic" (550–551). It was just a short time after his wife started crying that the conflict was resolved.

Both females and males reportedly cried during conflict episodes. Specifically, some female participants described instances when the conflict changed immediately upon seeing their male partners cry. Because it was so unusual, seeing their male partners cry changed the escalating nature of the conflict and promptly reversed the negative conflict cycle into one that was more productive and directed toward resolution. In contrast, a few of the female participants described times when their crying made their partners even madder and caused the conflict to escalate. These instances occurred less frequently, however.

Nonverbal avoidance

A second nonverbal means of conflict management included instances when participants or their partners nonverbally avoided or ended the conflict by leaving or physically getting away from the other. This was often a way for them to deal with their own or their partner's anger. Complete avoidance of the conflict was a frequently mentioned way in which the participants and their partners reportedly dealt with conflict. For many, avoidance was described as a normal pattern—a way they had learned to deal with conflict. This learned pattern is apparent in Sharee's description of her tendency to avoid conflict, "I don't usually talk about it. Sometimes it's easier to avoid things" (297–298). When describing why she sometimes used silence as a means of dealing with conflict, one female participant, Desiree, said the following,

The silence, to be honest with you, is sometimes when I feel like I can't handle it anymore, and I just want to block it all out. And, yes, my feelings are hurt, but I'm not gonna deal with it anymore. So, I'm just gonna sit here and be quiet because it's one of those, you know, when you come to a dead-end conversation,

you can just feel like you're getting a headache cause you're not getting anywhere. So, the silence a lot of times is just trying to, trying to avoid the conflict too. You know, if I'm just silent and don't answer any questions it's not gonna escalate anymore. (490–498)

In addition, John described how he just preferred to avoid conflict, or in his words, “fog it out” (205). However, he, along with several others, also mentioned the potential dangers of a silent, avoidant pattern. For some, such as John, staying silent aggravated their partners even more, causing conflicts to escalate. This finding suggests that silence can be either a productive or a destructive conflict tactic. It appeared to be a constructive way of dealing with conflict when both parties avoided the conflict altogether, or retreated during a heightened state. In contrast, silence as an avoidance strategy appeared to create an escalated, more severe conflict interaction when one party was withdrawing and the other demanding. One partner's emotional or physical departure would cause the other partner, who wanted to continue the discussion, to become even angrier, causing the conflict to escalate and last longer.

Physically leaving the site of a conflict was another nonverbal avoidant tactic reportedly used by several of the participants and their partners. Leave-taking was a way for the participants and/or their partners to “cool down” or, as in Tiffany's case, to save face. Leaving was a way for her to deal with the embarrassment caused by her partner's public treatment of her. In a room full of other men and no empty chairs, Tiffany's boyfriend had publicly announced that she could “just sit on the floor.” Rather than confronting him, Tiffany revealed how she chose to deal with this public embarrassment,

I was like, okay, that would have been funny if he would have said, “just kidding hon” and got up and give me his chair. Or, you know, touched me some way like, you know, to let me know mat he was kidding. Well, all these guys, all these parents were just laughing, you know. And, I'm still sitting on the floor. So, I'm just embarrassed. I was so embarrassed, you know? I just felt like all these people think that he like dominates me or something, and I do whatever he says you know, and I don't like to, I don't like to be like that. And, so he got up and did something, and so then, I'm like, I have to leave. Cuz I was so embarrassed, I just wanted to get out of there, you know. I was about ready to cry at any time. (738–747)

Physical aggression

A third nonverbal conflict tactic that participants described were acts of physical aggression. Participants described instances during conflicts when items, such as a bottle of cologne (Jim, 156–157), a hair brush (Mary, 728), and a chair (Sarah, 1545) were thrown. Additional acts of physical aggression included slamming a car door (Tiffany, 157), pounding a fist on a counter (John, 234), wrestling on the floor (Kristi, 646), being kicked in the face by her boyfriend (Airin, 810), slapping a partner (Yvonne, 176; Tricia, 153), or pushing and shoving her partner (Lisa, 1278). Desiree described a time where she dealt with her anger by throwing a drink at her fiancé,

I could just feel like burning inside and [when] he got a little bit closer to me, I was just like mad. I didn't want to talk to him so I took my Zima and just went like this with it [demonstrating how she threw the drink at him] and like was pouring it all over him. I like threw my drink at him. (656–661)

As indicated in Desiree's account, physical nonverbal displays of aggression appeared to occur as a result of the interactants' frustration. However, interestingly, physical aggression was also described as a way to underscore the importance of an issue or as a way of getting a partner's attention. This finding suggests that physical aggression may not always be the *result* of ineffective verbal conflict management, but, instead, could be one of the first strategies directly employed.

Discussion

Although participants reported the use integrative and avoidant strategies, the conflicts as described in these interviews were overwhelmingly distributive in nature. These findings complement work done by other researchers, which shows that violent couples use more negative affect and defensive, attacking behaviors during their conflicts and problem-solving discussions (e.g., Margolin et al., 1989; Margolin et al., 1988; Rogers et al., 1996; Sabourin et al., 1993).

In addition, like other communication scholars (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 1988a; Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982), we discovered that conflicts were resolved in several nonverbal ways. The most notable nonverbal conflict tactics included crying, emotional and physical avoidance, and physical aggression. The participants noted that these nonverbal conflict tactics could have either positive or negative outcomes. For instance, some interactants noted that crying during an argument prompted a change in the escalation of the argument. This seemed to happen most frequently when the crying was validated by the non-crying partner. This finding supports research by Crawford and colleagues (1992), who noted that when the witness of the crying sees it as a signal that his/her behavior is no longer appropriate, the person crying, in turn, views that acknowledgment as a form of validation. In the present study, the pain symbolically represented in the crying led non-crying partners to stop the argument and make relational repairs—this was especially true for female partners who saw their male partners cry. Tavis (1992) discussed how males, due to their socialization, go to great lengths to avoid expression of certain emotions (e.g., grief or affection) in order to avoid cultural denigration. Therefore, according to Tavis, “if a man cries in public . . . , it is big news” (p. 265). Thus, because their partners' crying contradicted the societal convention, “big boys don't cry,” the females in the present study appeared to interpret this as a sign that they had indeed brought harm to their partners, and, therefore, needed to stop behaving as they were. Conversely, some male partners were annoyed by their female partner's tears, perhaps revealing their socialized injunction to “be brave” (Crawford et al., 1992) or perceptions that crying is manipulative, childish, or weak (Campbell & Muncer, 1987).

Additionally, physical leave-taking was a healthy way for some individuals to deal with a conflict that had “gotten out of hand.” Doing so allowed the interactants an opportunity

to cool off. Interestingly, however, this did not work for all couples. For some, one partner's departure caused the remaining partner to become even more enraged, leading to further escalation. The use of silence had a similar effect on the participants' ability to manage conflict constructively or destructively. In some instances, silence allowed the interactants to avoid or retreat from a negative situation. Others, however, reported that one partner's use of silence angered the other, leading to an escalated, more severe conflict interaction. These findings highlight the dyadic, nonverbal nature of conflict and aggression (Fitzpatrick, 1988a; Lloyd, 1996). This relational view of aggression can be visualized with the dance metaphor (for a similar application of the metaphor, see Rogers et al., 1996). Like a dance, each partner must learn to move with the other for successful conflict resolution. In the instances when one partner was engaged and the other avoidant, the conflict pattern was often unsatisfactory, unsuccessful, and, in some instances, more destructive. In other words, their conflicts were not well choreographed; the relational partners were not working together. Conversely, when both partners agreed to the use of silence or physical leave-taking, they reported more success in their conflict resolution—the partners were able to dance as one.

More research is needed to untangle the key relational and individual variables linked to the different ways couples who experience aggression manage their conflicts. For example, why does leave-taking work for some and not for others? Why do some partners stop to make relational repairs when seeing their loved one cry, while others are angered by the display of emotion? It is clear from the results of our study that a one-size-fits-all method of conflict resolution is not appropriate for all couples experiencing aggression. Further exploration of various conflict resolution models tailored to the needs of different types of aggressive couples is needed. We suggest that these models include the various ways the interactants may respond emotionally to the seeking and giving of support during the conflict episode (e.g., see Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998).

In addition, the results of the present study highlight the need to extend our analysis of conflict beyond verbal means of resolution to include nonverbal ones as well. Aggression is both a verbal and nonverbal phenomenon. Therefore, to understand the way in which aggressive partners negotiate conflict, we must continue to develop frameworks of both verbal and nonverbal means of conflict management.

Moreover, anger may not be the only or the primary emotion experienced during a conflict involving aggression (Canary, Spitzberg, & Semic, 1998). There may be an array of emotions felt (e.g., fear, sadness, disgust)—all of which affect the verbal and nonverbal expressive behavior. To date, few models of conflict resolution have accounted for the emotionality involved in disputes and the selection of tactics based upon different felt emotions (for a review of behaviors associated with emotions, see Guerrero, Andersen, & Trost, 1998). Based upon our findings that revealed how certain nonverbal behaviors vary dramatically in their effect on the trajectory of conflicts involving aggression, we suggest that researchers interested in understanding the relationship between aggression and conflict also begin to examine the emotionality underlying these relational phenomena as they relate to the communicative choices made.

We also suggest that readers remain mindful of a few limitations to the present study. First, we must acknowledge that the amount of aggression in the participants' conflicts

should not be surprising; after all, that is what we asked the participants to describe—the conflicts that “stood out to them” and involved aggression. Therefore, there is a need to use caution when generalizing about their communication patterns as a whole. Yet, the disproportionate use of distributive tactics provides new insight into the anatomy of an aggressive conflict episode and advances our understanding of the conflict strategies employed by individuals experiencing relational aggression.

Further, we acknowledge that the cross-sectional nature of the data, the individual unit of analysis, and the primarily female sample limit the degree to which the findings can be generalized to other individuals experiencing intimate violence. To increase generalizability, more studies are needed that sample male partners and that gather dyadic, naturalistic data in order to broaden our knowledge of the ways in which couples experience aggression during their conflicts. In so doing, however, we must maintain a watchful eye over two potentially conflictual desires, to obtain naturalistic data and to protect human participants. For instance, collecting dyadic data in the homes of couples who are experiencing aggression may prompt discussions and potentially violent encounters once the researcher leaves the premises or the video camera is turned off. Thus, those engaged in such scholarship must remain forever mindful of the undue harm that may come to informants and seek to balance the goals of the research with the safety of participants.

Without doubt, conflict is an integral part of our most enduring relationships. Unfortunately, many couples are incapable of constructively managing their disputes, and, all too often, resort to untoward verbal and physical means to resolve their differences. By continuing to learn more about the emotionality of conflict, how that emotion in conflict relates to the use of aggression, and how the relationships among aggression, emotion, and conflict may manifest themselves differently across gender and relationships, the more we can advance our theories of conflict management, in general, and violent communication, more specifically. Such knowledge also has the opportunity to help practitioners identify the most effective means of intervention tailored to the needs of the specific couple.

Authors Biographies

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Notes

1. Sillars (1986) later expanded the three superordinate categories to include seven distinctive tactics and twenty-five subcategories, or communicative acts, in these seven tactics. The Avoidance superordinate category includes four of the seven tactics, including Denial and Equivocation, Topic Management, Noncommittal Remarks, and Irreverent Remarks. Analytic Remarks and Conciliatory Remarks are tactics subsumed in the Integrative category. Finally, the Distributive

- category includes the Confrontative Remark tactic (for definitions and further explanation of the subcategories, see Sillars 1986).
2. These 31 individuals were chosen from an initial sampling group of 60 people (33 college students; 27 community persons) who indicated experiencing aggression during conflicts and were willing to be interviewed. Of these 60, there were 21 males, 39 females, and 1 person of unknown sex. As these numbers indicate, there were a sufficient number of male participants who had experienced aggression in the selection pool. However, logistical and, in some cases, safety issues for the female interviewer became more of a reason for the larger number of female interviewees than the lack of qualified male participants. Moreover, attention was paid to the experiences reported to see if there were any notable sex-based differences. Because there were none as related to the current study's focus, the data were examined holistically and not broken down by participant sex. However, the authors acknowledge that important sex differences do exist within the domestic violence literature and may explain, in part, why more females qualified for the study.
 3. Because of technical difficulty, one interview was not captured on audiotape but is included in the analysis because of the availability of notes taken during the interview.
 4. According to Sillars (1986), the integrative conflict tactics identified in the present analysis are defined as follows: descriptive statements are nonevaluative statements about observable events related to conflict; disclosive statements are nonevaluative statements about events related to conflict which the partner cannot observe, such as thoughts, feelings, intentions, motivations, and past history; and, soliciting disclosure are nonhostile questions about events related to conflict that cannot be observed (thoughts, feelings, intentions, motives, or past history).
 5. Only the most common tactics are discussed; therefore, they do not add up to the total number of each tactic reported at the beginning of the results section.
 6. All names are fictitious.
 7. The distributive tactics reported in this study are defined by Sillars (1986) in the following way: personal criticism is defined as remarks that criticize directly the personal characteristics or behaviors of the partner; rejection are those statements made in response to the partner's previous statements that imply antagonism toward the partner as well as disagreement; hostile imperatives include requests, demands, arguments, threats, or other prescriptive statements that implicitly blame the partner and seek change in the partner's behavior, and, finally, presumptive remarks are statements that attribute thoughts, feelings, motivations, or behaviors to the partner that the partner does not acknowledge. This last tactic is the opposite of "soliciting disclosure."

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