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Verbal Abuse in Married versus Non-married Couples: The Relationship between Perception of Ac- ceptability and Experience

Verbal abuse can lead to physical abuse if it is not recognized, or is tolerated in one's partner. Participant's perception of the acceptability of verbal abuse (PAVA) was compared to the level of verbal abuse in their own relationship (Conflict Tactics Scales-II). PAVA had a weak positive relationship with the actual occurrence of verbal abuse. PAVA and levels of verbal abuse were highest in very new and more established relationships regardless of relationship status. Males were more accepting of verbal abuse, and reported it less in their relationships. Finally, African American, Hispanic American and Asian American participants reported lower levels of verbal abuse in their relationships. These findings illustrate the complex relationship between the perception and experience of verbal abuse and suggest the need for additional research.

Domestic violence, including physical, verbal and sexual abuse, is a major public health issue that has received a lot of attention. For example, 35% of women and 22% of men presenting to the emergency department reported having experienced domestic violence (Massey, 1999). Rates of domestic violence vary by ethnic group and are particularly high in some minority groups (e.g. African Americans) (Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Studies of verbal abuse among intimate couples are relatively few, with researchers tending to focus on issues related to physical and sexual abuse. A study of 1182 dating college students suggested that people tend to downplay the severity of verbal abuse in a relation-

ship, especially as compared to physical abuse (Miller & Bukva, 2001). This situation is unfortunate as verbal abuse is one of the most pervasive negative behaviors in intimate relationships between males and females (Coker, Hall Smith, McKeown & King, 2000; Feldman and Ridley, 2000; Stets, 1990). According to Ryan (1995), verbal abuse is a good predictor of physical aggression in a dating relationship. In fact, the relationship between verbal and physical abuse in an intimate relationship has been described as a two-step process where verbal abuse tends to initiate physical abuse (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Stets, 1990). For this reason it is important to fully understand the existence of verbal abuse in intimate relationships as this behavior may

potentially predict whether or not couples will become physically violent in the future.

Ray and Gold (1996) examined the relationship between personality differences and dating violence in a sample of 60 undergraduate students. The results suggested that as the length of dating time increased, the rate of verbal abuse increased as well. The authors argued that longer times together produced increased opportunity for conflict. In another study, cohabitating couples experienced the most frequent and severe violent acts (including verbal, physical, and psychological abuse) as compared to dating and married couples (Stets & Straus, 1989). The authors suggested that cohabiting couples may be more isolated from their network of kin (either by stigma or by choice) and this may result in a lowered monitoring and challenging of violent behavior. Another possibility was that persons who want to keep their independence would choose to cohabitate instead of marry. These individuals would then easily argue over who is controlling or being controlled in the relationship which may lead to violence. Also, without a perceived obligation to keep the relationship intact, as is likely the case for married couples, cohabitating couples would show less restraint in their relationships than married couples. However, in another earlier study of 130 married and 130 dating college students, dating students reported higher levels of moderate physical force (e.g. pushing or slapping) than married students (Rouse, Breen & Howell, 1988).

An intervening set of variables is the ability of an individual to directly recognize instances of verbal abuse when they happen, and if they do, to choose to either respond to, or to tolerate, this verbal abuse from their partner. If an individual fails to recognize instances of verbal abuse, or tolerates it in his or her partner, then it will likely continue unchecked. For the purpose of the present research, the operational definition of verbal abuse is: "the use of verbal and nonverbal acts which symbolically hurt the other, or the use of threats to hurt the other," (Straus, 1979, p. 77). A range of behaviors are indicative of verbal abuse including name calling, ignoring, insulting a family member, damaging personal objects, refusal to speak to partner, etc. The perception of verbal

abuse and its relationship to domestic violence has received some attention in previous studies (e.g. Archer & Graham-Kevan, 2003). The present study uses a direct measure of the perception of acceptability of verbal abuse and relates it to actual verbal abuse toward one's partner.

The present study will add to the available literature on verbal abuse by exploring how individuals who are involved in dating, cohabiting or married relationships understand and experience verbal abuse. The study was designed to reveal the relationship between participant's perception of the acceptability of verbal abuse, and their experience of verbal abuse in their own relationship. Participant's acceptance of verbal abuse was measured by the Verbal Interactions Scale, a scale developed by the researchers that evaluates the perception of the acceptability of incidences of verbal aggression between intimate couples. Participant's experience of verbal abuse in their relationship was measured with the Conflict Tactics Scale-II (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996). The present study will also investigate the relationship between increased intimacy (based on length of time in the relationship and degree of commitment) and the perception and experience of verbal abuse. By comparing the results from the Verbal Interactions Scale to the Conflict Tactics Scales, it can be determined whether there is a relationship between the acceptance of verbal abuse and the actual experience of verbal abuse in an intimate relationship.

It is predicted that there is a positive relationship between the degree of acceptance of verbal abuse and the actual experience of verbal abuse in an intimate relationship. It is also predicted that married couples, and couples that have been in a relationship for a longer period of time, will perceive instances of verbal abuse as more acceptable than couples who are dating or in new relationships. It is also predicted that couples living together will be more likely to accept verbal abuse or other forms of violence than couples who live apart. These findings would be expected based on the fact that married and cohabitating couples spend more of their daily lives together, and as a result, they may be more used to the violent behavior that their significant other is

practicing on them, or more willing to perpetrate such abuse themselves due to the higher level of commitment in the relationship. We assume that these differences will occur regardless of whether or not participants are aware that verbal abuse is occurring. Males are expected to be more likely to be tolerant of verbal abuse than females because they tend to use stronger more forceful expletives in their speech (Lakoff, 1973) and therefore may be less aware when verbal abuse is occurring. A relationship between ethnicity and levels of verbal abuse is also predicted (i.e. lower levels in Asian Americans, higher levels in African Americans) based on previous research (Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirty-six undergraduate students (74.4% female; 25.6% male), aged 18-51 years ($M = 21.82$, $SE = .56$) who were in intimate relationships (married, living together or dating) participated in the study. Their relationship status was as follows: 11.1% married, 7.4% living together and 81.5% dating. The ethnicity of the sample was: African American (7.4%), Asian American (27.2%), Caucasian (10.3%), Latino (50%), and Other (5.1%). On average, the participants had been in their relationships for just over 2 ½ years, with a range of 1 month to 21 years.

Measures

Participants completed the Verbal Interactions Questionnaire, a questionnaire developed by the authors, which was used to measure the perception of the acceptability of verbal aggression between intimate couples. It consisted of 16 scenarios covering a range of types of verbal aggression. Many of the scenarios involved experiences occurring during conversation among intimate couples. Examples of some of the types of verbal abuse included were ignoring (e.g. "After dinner you try to talk with your partner about the things you have done today, but your partner ignores what you are saying and keeps watching TV"), name calling ("Fuck you! I already told you that it was your fault!"), insulting family members (e.g. "You must

have been born with a gene called "dummy", and your entire family shares it too"). Some of the scenarios involved a situation that the participant could imagine, for instance, damaging personal objects (e.g. "You and your partner get into a major fight, and he/she starts throwing things everywhere"). After reading the scenarios, participants were asked to consider their reaction to the scenario, and to indicate their perception of the acceptability of such behavior by placing a mark on a 11.5cm line as follows: Acceptable <-----
/-----> Unacceptable. A participant's score could range from 0 to 11.5 with lower scores indicating greater tolerance of abuse. The Verbal Interactions questionnaire was tested for reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$, Split-half = .84) and construct validity in a pilot study of 56 CSULA students as part of a course requirement.

Participants also completed the Psychological Aggression subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scales-II developed by Straus in 1979, and revised in 1996 (Straus et al., 1996). These items were used to measure how frequently couples use different forms of verbal abuse in their current relationship. The Conflict-Tactics Scale has been widely used in the area of measuring conflict in intimate relationships, especially in married couples (Ryan, 1995; Straus, 1979; Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Stets & Straus, 1989; Stets, 1990; Hamby & Sugarman, 1999; Ray & Gold, 1996). The scale measures how often an intimate couple reacts during a conflict with each of the following behaviors: negotiation, psychological aggression, physical assault, sexual coercion, and injury. Estimates of internal consistency range from .79 to .95 for the different subtests, and both the revised scale and its predecessor have been empirically validated (Straus et al., 1996; Straus, Hamby & Warren, 2003). Participants indicate how often a particular behavior (e.g. shouting) has occurred in them and their partner over the past year. These are summed for a total score.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a University Introductory Psychology subject pool and received research credit for their participation. Participants were not asked to sign a consent form, but were given a statement that fully described the procedures

and objectives of the research. Potential participants were informed that they were free to participate or not, were able to discontinue at any time, and that there was no consequence for non participation. Participants were also be given a list of clinical referrals to agencies that deal directly with verbal abuse support and treatment in the event that assistance was needed for any discomfort generated from completing the survey. The questionnaires took approximately 20 minutes to complete. No participants withdrew from the study.

Results

As expected, there were significant ($p < .000$) correlations (from $r = .833$ to $r = .947$) between all factors on the Conflict Tactics Scale II (self, partner and total).

Relationship between Acceptability and Experience of Verbal Abuse

There were small negative correlations between participants scores on the Verbal Interaction Scale (the perception of the acceptability of verbal abuse) and scores on the Psychological Aggression Subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale-II (the frequency of actual abuse) in self: $r = -.026$, partner $r = -.188^*$, $p = .02$ and total: $r = -.14$ indicating that participants who were more accepting of verbal abuse reported higher levels of abuse in their own relationships, particularly from their partner.

Relationship between Intimacy and Acceptability and Experience of Verbal Abuse

One-Way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) did not reveal a relationship between level of intimacy (dating, living together or married) and scores on the Verbal Interaction Scale (the perception of the acceptability of verbal abuse) or scores on the Psychological Aggression Subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale-II (the frequency of verbal abuse in participants relationships) even when the categories were collapsed into married versus dating or dating versus living together.

A one-way ANOVA looking at the relationship between the length of time participants had been in their relationship and scores on the Verbal Interaction Scale (the perception of the acceptability of verbal abuse) approached significance ($F(5, 127) =$

2.007 , $p = .082$). In fact the relationship appeared curvilinear, with participants who had been in relationships for less than 6 months or more than 10 years perceiving verbal abuse the most acceptable (see Table 1). A similar ANOVA on scores on the Psychological Aggression Subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale-II (the frequency of verbal abuse in participant's relationships) was not significant, but scores showed that participants in new or well established relationships reported the highest levels of verbal abuse particularly from one's partner (see Table 2). Not surprisingly then, there was no linear correlation between the actual number of months in the relationship and the perception of acceptability of, or experience of, verbal abuse.

Influence of Gender on Acceptability and Experience of Verbal Abuse

An ANOVA on scores on the Verbal Interaction Scale showed that males and females differed significantly on their perception of the acceptability of verbal abuse ($F(1, 132) = 20.901$, $p < .000$). Males rated the scenarios as more acceptable ($M = 9.2$, $SE = .16$) than females ($M = 10.00$, $SE = .09$). Although the results failed to reach significance, males appeared to be less likely to report that they are perpetrating verbal abuse in their own relationship (self: $M = 9.5$, $SE = 1.5$ vs. $M = 13.6$, $SE = 1.7$, $p > .05$), or experiencing it from their partner (partner: $M = 9$, $SE = 1.4$ vs. $M = 10.3$, $SE = 1.4$, $p > .05$).

Influence of ethnicity on acceptability and experience of verbal abuse

Participants of different ethnicities did not differ in their perception of the acceptability of verbal abuse. ANOVA revealed a significant relationship between ethnicity and actual experience of verbal abuse from one's partner ($F(4, 135) = 5.001$, $p < .001$). The relationship between ethnicity and the total level of abuse in the participants relationships was also significant ($F(4, 135) = 2.901$, $p < .02$). In general, Caucasians tended to report more verbal abuse in their relationships than the other identified groups (see Table 3).

Discussion

These findings illustrate the complex relationship between the perception and experience of verbal abuse and suggest that more research is needed to fully understand this complex area.

The results showed that in general participants who were more accepting of verbal abuse reported higher levels of abuse in their own relationships, particularly from their partner, though the relationship was not a strong one. It appears that what you actually think about verbal abuse and what you actually do or accept in your own relationship may be two different things. This may not be so surprising as individuals in abusive relationships often report feeling very conflicted about their behavior and/or their inability to leave the relationship (see Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

The results do not support the hypothesis that verbal abuse will increase as the level of intimacy of a relationship increases, since whether participants were married, cohabiting or dating did not seem to affect their scores on either of the two questionnaires. This finding is in contrast to previous research which found that cohabitating couples experience the most frequent violent acts (including verbal, physical, and psychological abuse) as compared to dating and married couples (Stets & Straus, 1989).

The perception of acceptability of verbal abuse does appear to be greater in persons who have been in their relationship for 6 months or less, and this seems to be related to higher levels of reported abuse. Persons who were over two years into their relationship reported some of the highest levels of verbal abuse, and an increased willingness to accept such behavior, a finding consistent with Ray and Gold (1996) who reported that as the length of dating time increased, the rate of verbal abuse increased as well. The relationship between verbal abuse and length of time in a relationship is clearly not a simple linear one, and the data do not support the idea that marriage or increased time together will "fix" a problem with verbal abuse. Instead it appears that the propensity for verbal abuse is likely there from the beginning of the relationship, though it may be suppressed as the relationship continues through

its early stages. The data is more indicative of the possibility that increased time in a relationship may "create" an environment of verbal abuse, at least up to a point. Notably, individuals in the longest relationships (over 10 years) were some of the most accepting of verbal abuse and reported the lowest levels of verbal abuse within themselves, and the highest level of verbal abuse from their partner suggesting that the ability to control one's verbal behavior and to tolerate lapses from ones partner may contribute to whether a relationship lasts over the long term. A similar curvilinear trend was found between length of relationship and moderate physical force in college students (Rouse, Breen & Howell, 1988).

Ethnicity was not related to perception of acceptability of verbal abuse, but was related to reported levels of abuse. Previous research has indicated that while Hispanic Americans experience similar levels of domestic violence to Whites, levels are higher in African Americans and lower in Asian Americans (Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). According to the present results, these findings may not hold true for verbal abuse. Caucasian participants reported higher levels of verbal abuse than African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. Another possibility is that the domestic violence experienced by certain ethnic groups comes to the attention of authorities more or less often.

Results supported the hypothesis that males perceive instances of verbal abuse as more acceptable than females. Although the data was not statistically significant, males consistently reported lower frequencies of verbal abuse from themselves and from their partner than females did. The data suggests that males may be less aware of, or concerned by, the violence inherent in verbal abuse of one's partner, and/or that they may be less willing to admit that they are violent. Males appear more likely to view verbal abuse as an acceptable or normal part of their lives and this may be related to their conversation styles (Lakoff, 1973; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, Bettencourt & Lemme, 2006).

There are several limitations to the present study that need to be mentioned. The small sample of mostly female college students in dating relationships

is not representative of the total population and, as such, the findings may not be fully generalizable. The present study is also cross sectional in nature and does not allow for a full analysis of the acceptability and experience of verbal abuse throughout the development of an intimate relationship. A community sample of actual couples, examined longitudinally, would give a better picture of how verbal abuse develops in most couples. It would also be pertinent to include younger couples though this would likely require additional measures (see Orphinas & Frankowski, 2001). Finally, responses to the Verbal Interactions Questionnaire consistently fell toward the high end of the scale suggesting that the vignettes were largely perceived negatively thereby reducing the likelihood of detecting significant differences between the groups. Utilization of additional measures of verbal abuse would also have strengthened the study (e.g. Borjesson, Aarons & Dunn, 2003).

Future research could look at how level of education influences the recognition and experience of verbal abuse. Another interesting study would be to examine how getting married changes the experience of verbal abuse within couples with a history of violence, as compared to those without such a history. This research will help explain the impact of history and acceptance on verbal abuse, and whether or not the acceptance of verbal abuse is dependent on the level of intimacy within the relationship.

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Table 1

Relationship between Length of time in Relationship and Perception of Acceptability of Verbal Abuse as measured by the Verbal Interactions Questionnaire (Mean +/- SE).

Time in Relationship	Mean Acceptability Score	SE
3 months or less	9.4	.24
3-6 months	9.43	.2
6 months-1 year	10.27	.15
1-2 years	9.9	.15
2-10 years	9.9	.12
More than 10 years	9.42	.96

Table 2

Relationship between Length of time in Relationship and Experience of Verbal Abuse in ones own relationship as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale-II (Mean +/- SE).

Time in Relationship	Experience of Verbal Abuse					
	Self		Partner		Total	
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SE</u>
3 months or less	14.36	7.6	8.73	5.4	23.09	12.8
3-6 months	9.00	2.7	8.85	2.6	17.85	4.9
6 months-1 year	8.94	2.1	7.25	1.3	16.19	3.1
1-2 years	11.66	2.6	7.74	1.7	18.63	4.2
2-10 years	15.67	2.1	12.43	1.7	27.92	3.8
More than 10 years	5.00	2.0	15.00	7.8	20.00	7.6

Table 3

Relationship between Ethnicity and the Experience of Verbal Abuse as measured by the Psychological Abuse Subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale-II (Mean +/- SE).

Ethnicity	Self		Partner**		Total*	
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SE</u>
African American	8.4	1.8	7.4	1.6	15.8	3.2
Asian American	10.24	2.4	8.08	1.6	13.32	3.7
Hispanic American	12.15	1.8	8.44	1.26	20.16	2.9
Caucasian	19.29	5.7	16.4	4.00	34.79	9.7

* p < .05 **p < .001