

Denial, Minimization, Partner Blaming, and Intimate Aggression in Dating Partners

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Although countering denial, minimization, and externalization of blame is a key component of most interventions for individuals who have been abusive in their intimate relationships, these attributions have only seldom been the focus of empirical investigation. Using a sample of 139 male and female university students, this study examined the associations between self-reported minimization and blaming attributions and the perpetration of physical, sexual, and psychological aggression against an intimate partner. For men, minimization of conflict and partner blame were associated with self-reported perpetration of intimate partner aggression, even after controlling for socially desirable responding and relationship satisfaction. In contrast, women's aggression was associated only with partner blame. Discussion focuses on overlap with similar areas of research, gender differences in minimization and blaming, and on potential directions for further empirical work on the associations of intimate aggression, relationship dissatisfaction, and attribution.

Keywords: *abuse; attribution; blaming; dating violence; intimate aggression; minimization*

Denial of problem behavior, or of personal responsibility for such behavior, is a fundamental component of many psychological problems that involve significant harm to others. In the field of criminology, the process by which individuals avoid taking personal responsibility for their antisocial behavior has been studied as "techniques of neutralization" and "deviance disavowal" (Minor, 1980; Sykes & Matza, 1957). The importance of denial to treatment of addictive behavior is enshrined by 12-step programs that begin by

having members admit to problem drinking (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1989). Minimization, denial, and blaming are also clearly recognized in research and practice with sexual offenders. In this area of study, types of denial have been proposed (Salter, 1988), measures have been constructed (Schneider & Wright, 2001), and reductions in denial have been studied as indicators of treatment success (O'Donohue & Letourneau, 1993).

Clinicians working with male perpetrators and victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) also clearly recognize the importance of denial, minimization, and blaming. The Duluth Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993), which forms the educational basis for numerous intimate violence prevention and intervention programs, labels minimization, denial, and blaming as forms of abuse, along with other behaviors such as physical violence, emotional degradation, and sexual coercion. In addition, formal standards developed to regulate batterer intervention programs typically include countering men's denial and minimization and encouraging them to take personal responsibility for their abusive actions as critical intervention goals (Austin & Dankwort, 1999).

Despite recognition of the importance of minimization, denial, and blaming to the treatment of IPV, there has been very little empirical attention paid to these constructs in studies of the development, maintenance, or change of abusive behavior. Furthermore, available descriptions and theories of denial are based on clinical populations (i.e., batterers in treatment and women living in shelters), raising questions about their applicability to more common forms of dating and marital violence. The current work was undertaken to expand research in this area by developing an empirical self-report measure of denial, minimization, and blaming of IPV and investigating the association of these constructs to aggression against an intimate partner in a normative sample.

Denial, Minimization, and Blaming: Definition and Theory

The simplicity of the phrase denial, minimization, and blaming belies considerable complexity in definition. Although a single underlying construct may link these terms conceptually, the terms denial, minimization, and blaming represent at least two dimensions. The first is a continuum ranging from outright denial of engaging in actions that are abusive to an intimate partner to clear and complete admission of abusive actions and their consequences. Denial and minimization fall along this continuum. Examples include outright denial of abuse, minimization of specific abusive actions (e.g., a light push is reported rather than an injury-causing shove), and admission of acts with denial of impact (e.g., acknowledgment of a slap with assertion that the

victim had no reason to fear or to be upset in response). Blaming, by contrast, refers to the attribution of causality to factors outside the self. For example, an individual who acts in an abusive manner may “blame” his or her actions on the behavior of the partner (e.g., “If you hadn’t . . . then this wouldn’t have happened”) or on the circumstances (e.g., “This would never have happened if your friends didn’t interfere”).

Differing forms of denial, minimization, and blaming have been the basis of a number of type-based descriptions of denial in the literature on sexual offenders (Barrett, Sykes, & Byrnes, 1986; Salter, 1988). Salter (1988), for example, suggested four types of denial: denial of behaviors, denial of the seriousness of behaviors and the need for treatment, denial of responsibility for behaviors, and admission with justification. Others have suggested that different forms of denial represent stages of varying severity, with denial of behaviors preceding denial of responsibility (i.e., denial and minimization before blaming; Lafflen & Sturm, 1994; Sgroi, 1989). The one study that has examined the nature of denial empirically supports the former multitype conception, at least among sexual offenders. In exploratory factor analyses, Schneider and Wright (2001) found that items assessing various forms of denial loaded onto 6 factors differentiated by the focus of denial (e.g., denial of offense, of intent, or risk of relapse).

In contrast to the multifactor forms of denial and blaming suggested in the typology literature, theoretical models of denial, minimization, and blaming tend to emphasize their similarity. Denial, minimization, and blaming are addressed in three theories of abuse—feminist theory and, more controversially, psychoanalytic and systems theories.

Feminist theory. Feminist theories are rooted in the idea that abuse of women by their intimate partners is the inevitable result of a patriarchal society that directly and indirectly allows men to dominate and control their partners (Adams, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Margolin & Burman, 1993). In other words, a man abuses a woman because cultural norms support his belief that violence is an acceptable and effective method of solving interpersonal conflicts, because he is entitled and expected to control his wife, and because his use of violence receives no social penalty (Carden, 1994). Denial, minimization, and blaming are understood by feminist theories as ways that men attempt to avoid paying consequences for their harmful actions against their partners. Men are expected to deny, minimize, or deflect blame for their behaviors in legal or social contexts where abuse may be sanctioned and admit to their behaviors in circumstances that are accepting of men’s domination of women (see Heckert & Gondolf, 2000, for supportive evidence). In contrast,

feminist theorists argue that women who are being abused by their partners are likely to blame themselves and unlikely to try to unjustly excuse their own aggressive behaviors.

Psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic writings, in contrast, understand denial, minimization, and blaming as forms of largely unconscious defense against threats to the self. According to these theories, such defenses are most necessary when individuals have an inner sense of themselves as shameful, powerless, and unlovable (Clulow, 2001; Papps & O'Carroll, 1998). To prevent, or defend, against being overwhelmed by these feelings when given negative feedback, individuals with this sense of self minimize and deny their behaviors or blame their behaviors on others. Some psychodynamic theorists suggest that men may be more vulnerable to this defensive organization than women because traditionally socialized males are likely to interpret feelings of dependency as a failure in masculinity that needs to be defended against (Wallace & Nosko, 1993).

Psychoanalytic writings also offer theory that directly links a negative inner sense of self to denial, minimization, blaming, and to abusive behaviors. First, it is proposed that controlling behavior serves a similar defensive function to denial and blaming. Specifically, such behaviors prevent an intimate partner from providing negative feedback, thereby preserving the abuser's fragile and often falsely positive sense of self (Clulow, 2001; Papps & O'Carroll, 1998; Ragg, 1999). Second, among abusive individuals, there is a hypothesized projection of shame from the self to the intimate partner so that the intimate partner is perceived as being ashamed and disapproving of the abuser. In this way, the focus of hostile feelings, originally directed inwards against the self, are shifted to the "disapproving" other (Lewis, 1971; Scheff, 1987, Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996) and abusive behaviors can be more readily justified by the perceived negativity of the other (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992; Tangney et al., 1996). Finally, psychoanalytic theories suggest that when denial, minimization, and blaming defenses are unsuccessful in preventing overwhelming feelings of shame, rejection, and powerlessness, abusive behavior serves a third function—escape from the negative sense of self through the feelings of powerfulness gained with abusive domination (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 2002).

Systems theory. Finally, the issue of blaming has been addressed in systems theories of abusive behavior. These theories view violence as a function of the relationship between individuals (Hansen & Harway, 1993) with repeating and

enduring patterns of behavior maintained by both partners to preserve relationship system equilibrium. Thus, both members of an abusive couple are seen as contributing to the escalation of hostile, coercive, and eventually abusive exchanges, although the contribution of each may not be equal (Gelles & Maynard, 1987; Neidig, Friedman, & Collins, 1985). Men's and women's blaming has been identified by systems theories as one dynamic that contributes significantly to dissatisfaction in relationships and, by extension, to the likelihood of abuse. Systems theories offer only general ideas about the origins and nature of blaming, in part, because insight into causal factors is generally thought to be secondary to promoting change (Gelles & Maynard, 1987).

Past Research

The limited research done on the importance of denial, minimization, and blaming to abusive behaviors provides support for the importance of these attributions. First, studies have shown that high levels of blaming are associated with increased intimate abuse. Dutton and Starzomski (1997), for example, found that blaming was strongly associated with men's coercion ($r = .50$), intimidation ($r = .38$), emotional abuse ($r = .60$), and isolation ($r = .53$) of their partners. Similarly, a number of studies on attributions in relationships report that men who have been violent in their marriages have a tendency to view their partners as critical, rejecting, and intentionally malicious and are more likely than non-violent men to blame their partners for difficulties (Eckhardt, Barbour, & Davison, 1998; Schweinle, Ickes, & Bernstein, 2002; Tonizzo, Howells, Day, Reidpath, & Froyland, 2000).

In support of the role of minimization, studies have shown that individuals with prior experience of violence in an intimate relationship are more likely to minimize the extent and impact of low-level abusive behaviors (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1999) and to be accepting of aggression in relationships (e.g., Arias & Johnson, 1989; Cauffman, Feldman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000). Moreover, there is preliminary evidence that denial and minimization have implications for the progress of abusive men through treatment, with high-denial men less likely than other men to show changes in their abusive behavior (Murphy & Baxter, 1997; Scott & Wolfe, 2003).

Finally, there is some support for the idea that denial and blaming are more strongly related to IPV for men than women, though evidence on this point is mixed. In support of a gender difference, male college students have been found to be more likely to deny responsibility for perpetration of abusive behavior and to blame the victims than female students (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; LeJune & Follette, 1994). Men also appear to be more defensively

responsive than women to their partners' attempt to direct the conversation or gain a concession in the relationship (Ehrensaft, 1996). In contrast, a recent study of men and women convicted of IPV found virtually equivalent levels and patterns of minimization, denial, and blame (Henning, Jones, & Holdford, 2005).

Current Work

In summary, denial, minimization, blaming, and intimate abuse are integrally connected in practice and in a number of theories of abuse, with the interrelationships of these behaviors potentially stronger among men than women. The current study aimed to build on past research in two important ways. First, we aimed to construct a scale(s) to assess respondents' tendency to minimize and deny their abusive behavior and to externalize responsibility for abusive actions. Second, we examined the extent to which abusive behavior was associated with individuals' denial and minimization. We hypothesized that denial, minimization, and blaming would be associated with the perpetration of IPV with stronger associations for men than women. Finally, consistent with feminist and psychoanalytic theories of the functions of denial, minimization, and blaming, we expected these attributions to be specific to the perpetration of abuse in relationships and not a general characteristic of unhappy partnerships.

Method

Sample

Participants in the current study were 62 male and 77 female students from a large university located in southwestern Ontario.¹ The majority of students were age 19 or 20 years (84%), in their first year of university (86%). As in most university samples, students generally came from socially advantaged homes. Approximately four fifths of participants' parents were in intact marriages (80%) and had more than 12 years of education (81% of fathers and 84% of mothers), and approximately three fourths came from families with incomes over Can\$50,000 (75%).

Eighty-six percent of students reported ever having been in an intimate relationship that lasted more than 1 month, with 38% reporting current romantic involvement, and 48% reporting romantic involvement within the past year. Seventy-one percent of students who reported dating also indicated

that sex was a part of their relationship. Almost all romantically involved students described a noncohabiting (99%), heterosexual (99%) dating relationship (97%), rather than a homosexual, cohabiting, engaged, or marital relationship.

Measures

Personal and Relationships Profile (PRP). The PRP (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1999) is a 186-item self-report measure intended for clinical screening and research on family violence. Detailed description of the development and characteristics of the PRP is available in Straus and Mouradian (1999). Briefly, PRP items are arranged in 23 subscales assessing personal (e.g., antisocial personality, criminal history, substance use, violence approval) and relationship (e.g., anger management, dominance, jealousy) factors theoretically related to the etiology of IPV. In addition, the PRP includes a social desirability response set scale adapted from Reynolds (1982). Respondents rate their agreement with each item on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), and items are summed to create subscale scores. Current analyses were limited to two subscales of the PRP: social desirability (13 items) and relationship distress (10 items; e.g., "I wish my partner and I got along better").

Additional items. Twenty items assessing minimization, denial, and blaming were added to the PRP for the purposes of the current study. These new items were developed and revised by K. Scott and M. Straus in collaboration with two experienced batterer counselors. The final test set of items assessed participants' minimization of conflict through avoidance (4 items; e.g., "I think that it is best to avoid talking about problems in a relationship"), denial of personal contribution to relationship difficulties (5 items; e.g., "I have never said or done anything to my partner that I regret"), blaming of partner for negative affect and experiences (5 items; e.g., "My partner refuses to 'let go' of things in our relationship that are already over and done with"), blaming of partner for difficulties (3 items; e.g., "My partner purposefully pushes my buttons to get me to fight"), and participants' perception of victimization from their partner (3 items; e.g., "If I don't defend myself, my partner will walk all over me"). As on the remainder of the PRP, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

Exploratory principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation of the 20 denial, minimization, and blaming items initially identified five factors

with Eigenvalues greater than 1. Examination of the scree plot, however, revealed substantial discontinuity between the first and second components and continuity between subsequent components. Component 1, with an eigenvalue of 7.65 accounted for 38.26% of variance. In contrast, Components 3, 4, and 5 all had eigenvalues under 2, and each added less than 10% to the total variance. Subsequent analyses limiting the solution to one component found 13 items loaded unambiguously at .50 on the resulting factor. These items all tapped men's blaming attitude and negative attributions of their intimate partner (i.e., items reflecting blaming partner for negative affect, blaming partner for relationship difficulties, and perception of victimization from partner).

As one aim for the development of the PRP is for concise assessment of many factors related to IPV, a 6-item version of the partner blaming scale was created. Items for the short partner blaming scale were those with high factor loadings that appeared to tap a range of forms of blaming. Internal consistency of the resulting partner blaming scale was good ($\alpha = .90$).

The 7 items that did not load on the identified factor were examined for conceptual meaning. Four of these items represented minimization of conflict through avoidance, and the remaining 3 represented denial of personal contribution to relationship difficulties. Because self-report instruments are currently lacking in each of these dimensions, these items were retained in their conceptual groupings. The internal consistency of the resulting 4-item minimization and 3-item denial of relationship difficulty scales was relatively poor, as may be expected with such few items ($\alpha = .43$ for minimization and $\alpha = .32$ for denial). A list of all items is available in the appendix.

Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2). The CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996) is widely used to measure the occurrence and severity of domestic partner violence. This behavioral self-report instrument includes scales to measure the prevalence, chronicity, and severity of three types of maltreatment in intimate partner relationships (i.e., physical assault, sexual coercion, and psychological aggression), injury in intimate relationships, and use of negotiation. Respondents are asked to consider each item and then indicate if they have perpetrated or experienced the target behavior: once, twice, 3 to 5 times, 6 to 10, 11 to 20 times, more than 20 times in the past year, not in the past year but at some time before, or never. Responses are used to derive indices of lifelong and past year prevalence and chronicity of violence.

Current analyses were limited to past year prevalence scores on 5 scales of the CTS2, perpetration of minor physical assault (5 items; e.g., "I twisted my partner's arm or hair"), severe physical assault (7 items; e.g., "I choked my partner"), minor sexual coercion (3 items; e.g., "I made my partner

have sex without a condom”), severe sexual coercion (4 items; e.g., “I used force [like hitting, holding down, or using a weapon] to make my partner have sex with me”), minor psychological aggression (4 items; e.g., “I did something to spite my partner”), and severe psychological aggression (4 items; e.g., “I destroyed something of my partner’s”). In each of the physical, sexual, and psychological abuse domains, tripartite variables were created with students reporting no incidents of abuse perpetration in the past year given a score of 0, those reporting only minor abuse given a score of 1, and those reporting at least one incident severe abuse (and typically many minor incidents) given a score of 2.

Procedure

Students for the current study were recruited from the main hallway in the largest residence building on the university campus. Students who volunteered were given a questionnaire booklet containing information on the purpose of the study, questions about basic demographics, the PRP items, the additional 20-items assessing minimization, denial, and blaming, and the CTS2. They were asked to work quietly and privately to complete the questions and were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. A debriefing form was given to each student on completion of the questionnaire that provided additional detail about the study and contact information for area services focused on intimate violence. Students were paid a small honorarium in recognition of their time.

Results

Prevalence of Intimate Partner Aggression

As in other young adult samples, rates of self-reported abuse perpetration were high (Coker et al., 2000; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001; Straus, 2004; Wolfe et al., 2001). Among male students, 11% reported only minor physical violence, and an additional 11% reported at least one incident of severe physical abuse. Similarly, 15% and 7% of male students reported perpetration of minor and severe sexual coercion, respectively. Rates of physical and sexual abuse perpetration were higher among female students, with 28% and 15% reporting minor and severe forms of physical abuse, and 20% and 11% reporting minor and severe forms of sexual coercion. Minor psychological aggression, such as yelling and insulting, was reported by the majority of male

(59%) and female (53%) students. More severe forms of psychological aggression, such as threatening a partner or destroying his or her property, were reported by just less than one fourth of respondents (22% male and 23% female). The finding of greater prevalence of female-to-male versus male-to-female violence perpetration is common in nonclinical samples and must be tempered with the knowledge that male-to-female violence typically has greater negative consequences of emotional distress and injury (e.g., Cascardi, Langhinrichsen & Vivian, 1992; Saunders, 2002).

Reports of psychological abuse were strongly related to social desirability, such that students reporting in more socially desirable ways endorsed fewer incidents of relationship aggression (correlation of social desirability with psychological aggression $r = -.32$). Correlations of social desirability with physical aggression and sexual coercion were in the expected direction but did not reach significant levels.

Partner Blaming, Denial, and Minimization of Relationship Difficulties

Comparison of mean scores found that male students reported significantly more blaming than female students, $M = 13.1$, $SD = 4.4$ versus $M = 10.9$, $SD = 4.0$; $F(1, 121) = 7.85$, $p < .01$, and significantly more denial of relationship difficulties, $M = 6.6$, $SD = 1.8$ versus $M = 6.1$, $SD = 1.6$; $F(1, 122) = 3.69$, $p = .05$. No significant differences were noted in male and female students' tendency to minimize discussion of relationship difficulties.

Among male and female students, moderate to strong correlations were found between levels of blame and minimization ($r = .51$ and $.23$ for male and female students, respectively). Correlations among denial, blame and minimization with denial were generally weak and nonsignificant with the exception of a significant correlation between blame and denial for male students ($r = -.29$).

Association of Minimization, Blaming, and Denial With Perpetration of Aggression in Intimate Relationships, Controlling for Social Desirability

We hypothesized that partner blaming, minimization, and denial would be associated with the perpetration of IPV with stronger associations for men than women. To examine this hypothesis, partial correlations of partner blaming, minimization, denial, and self-reported relationship aggression were computed, controlling for social desirability. Results, as presented in Table 1,

Table 1
Partial Correlations of Partner Blaming and Minimization
With Self-Reported Relationship Aggression, Controlling
for Social Desirability and for Relationship Distress

	Controlling for Social Desirability			Controlling for Social Desirability and Relationship Distress		
	Partner Blaming	Minimization	Denial	Partner Blaming	Minimization	Denial
Male students						
Physical assault	.24	.37**	.13	.29*	.39**	.18
Sexual coercion	.39**	.56**	.15	.41**	.57**	.26
Psychological aggression	.33*	.18	-.11	.33*	.22	-.02
Female students						
Physical assault	.38**	.16	-.11	.40**	.16	-.16
Sexual coercion	.11	-.01	.01	.20	.05	-.04
Psychological aggression	.33**	.02	-.28*	.34**	.01	-.32**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

indicate that among male students, partner blaming and minimization of conflict discussion were strongly associated with abuse perpetration. Among female students, similarly strong associations were shown between partner blaming and abuse. Minimization, in contrast, was uncorrelated with abuse. Denial was not associated with higher levels of abuse among either male or female students; rather, among female students, greater denial was associated with significantly lower levels of psychological aggression.

Specificity of Association

Finally, we examined the hypothesis that partner blaming, denial, and minimization are specific to aggression and not general characteristics of unhappy relationships. To do this, relationship distress was added as a control variable in the partial correlations of attitudes and relationship aggression. If relationship distress is critical to the nature of the relationship between attitudes and aggression, then with the addition of this control, the strength of the noted correlations should decrease. If, on the other hand, relationship distress plays a relatively minor role, then accounting for its effect should result in negligible differences in observed correlations. Results of these analyses,

presented in Table 1, show correlations between partner blaming, denial, and relationship aggression and are virtually unaffected by the addition of relationship distress as a control variable.

Discussion

The current study explored the association of intimate partner aggression to minimization and denial of relationship difficulties and externalization of blame. From an initial pool of 20 items, scales were created to measure three aspects of problem denial: blaming of a partner for initiating and exaggerating relationship difficulties, tendency to avoid discussion of relationship problems, and the extent to which the individual minimized relationship difficulties. For men and women, partner blaming was associated with self-reported perpetration of intimate partner aggression. Moreover, these relationships were specific to aggression and were not proxies for general relationship distress or socially desirable response style. For men, but not women, minimization of conflict discussion was also related to the perpetration of relationship aggression, again independent of relationship distress and response style. Finally, contrary to hypotheses, denial of contribution to relationship difficulties was not associated with higher reports of relationship difficulties among men or women.

Association of Relationship Aggression to Partner Blame

Current findings with regard to blame of an intimate partner contribute to a long tradition of research supporting the importance of attributions to relationship health. In a review of the literature in 1990, Bradbury and Fincham established that more distressed couples ascribed more negative intent and selfish motivations to their partners and deemed them as being more blameworthy. Subsequent research suggested that this association between attribution and dissatisfaction is not a by-product of depression, anger, or negative affect (e.g., Sayers, Kohn, Fresco, Bellack, & Sarwer, 2001), supported the role of attributions in maintaining and predicting marital distress over time (e.g., Davey, Fincham, Beach, & Brody, 2001; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Philips, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 2000), and established that violent men are more likely than nonviolent men to view their partners as critical, rejecting, and intentionally malicious (Eckhardt et al., 1998; Schweinle et al., 2002).

Results of the current study add to this literature in three ways. First, results have implications for the conceptualization of partner blame. In the literature on marital dissatisfaction, blame is usually operationalized as

“blame for relationship problems.” For example, one partner may blame the other for starting arguments. In the woman abuse literature, in contrast, *blame* generally refers to the tendency of abusive men to blame their partners for their abusive actions; for example, an abusive man may blame his partner for “making me hit you.” In the current study, items reflecting both of these forms of blame are loaded onto the same underlying conceptual factor. This suggests that, despite their seeming difference, these forms of blame may be functionally similar, so that an individual who blames his or her partner for beginning arguments may also be highly likely to assign blame for the actions he or she takes during this argument.

Second, the current work contributes to understanding differences between young men and women in the style and effects of blaming attributions. Herein, men reported generally higher levels of partner blame than women. However, contrary to hypotheses, partner blaming among men was not more strongly related to relationship aggression than among women. One plausible explanation for this finding is that in dating relationships, where mutual, low-level aggression is common, the attributions of blame of men and women serve similar aggression-supporting functions, as proposed by systems theories of relationship violence. The sense of helplessness and self-blame noted in clinical samples of abused women (Barnett, Martinez, & Keyson, 1996) may develop as a result of chronic victimization experiences, rather than as a risk factor for these experiences.

Finally, current results also raise interesting questions about the interface of relationship satisfaction, relationship aggression, and attribution. Results of past studies have been contradictory in terms of the relative importance of attribution to aggression as compared to relationship dissatisfaction. Fincham and his colleagues (Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne, & Karney, 1997) argued that responsibility attributions are associated with marital distress, with no independent relation to relationship violence. In support of this position, Tonizzo et al. (2000) found that relationship satisfaction completely accounted for the associations between intimate aggression and partner blame in a sample of 84 men from domestic violence programs and the community. In contrast, current findings support the relation of blaming attributions to aggression, even after accounting for relationship satisfaction. Given the high correlation typically found between relationship satisfaction and relationship aggression (e.g., Byrne & Arias, 1997), it is likely that attributions are important to relationship satisfaction and aggression. Perhaps most relevant to future study is determining whether specific attributions differentiate those distressed partners who do, and do not, go on to a pattern of domineering, controlling, and abusive relationships, whether such relationships are moderated by predictable personal or relationship contexts.

Association of Relationship Aggression to Minimizing Discussion of Conflict

A second construct to emerge from the current study was respondents' tendency toward minimizing and avoiding thoughts or discussion of personal contribution to relationship difficulties. Among men, endorsement of these minimization items was strongly associated with perpetration of relationship aggression. In other words, men who prefer to avoid discussion of relationship difficulties were more likely to report physical aggression and sexual coercion than men who engage in discussions of relationship difficulties. This finding has considerable precedent in the literature, though from an unusual source. Studies of marital satisfaction have found a strong association between marital discord and a pattern of communication whereby one member of the couple (usually the female) makes demands, pleas for change, or criticizes while the other (usually the male) withdraws through inaction or defensiveness (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Uebelacker, Courtnage, & Whisman, 2003).

The demand-withdrawal communication pattern has been related to abuse in relationships. As expected, male batterers have been found to be more likely to withdraw from conflict than other married men (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999). Less expected is converging evidence that they are also more likely to be demanding of their partners (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998), and this demanding style is correlated with their wives' reports of husband emotional abuse (Berns et al., 1999). In considering these results, Berns et al. (1999) suggested that, similar to men in unhappy but nonviolent marriages, batterers tend to be unresponsive to demands of their wives (high withdrawal). Added to this is the batterer's perception that they are powerless relative to their partners, the response to which is continual demand for change and criticism of their partners' behavior (high demand).

The absence of relationship between avoidance and female-perpetrated intimate partner aggression is also consistent with past research. Berns et al. (1999) speculated that this result, as well, is related to the abuse context. In particular, they suggest that women may avoid withdrawal because such behavior results in increased risk of victimization from a dissatisfied partner.

Denial of Relationship Difficulties

A final construct examined in the current study was denial of relationship difficulties. Items on this scale tapped universal negative relationship experiences, such as sometimes regretting something that one said. Male students were more likely to endorse these denial items than female students. This

gender difference has also been noted in other studies. Sayers and Baucom (1995), for example, examined the attributional dimensions of a relatively large sample of distressed and nondistressed couples. Although most categories of attributions existed across both genders, there was evidence for a "male-only" dimension tapping denial of the seriousness of problems in the relationship. Similarly, there is a trend for stronger relationships for males than females between aggression and subsequent justification of their violent actions (Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, & Grasley, 2004).

Denial was not related to increased risk of relationship aggression among either male or female students in the current study. This is in contrast to the many clinical descriptions of batterers that emphasize their minimization and denial of past abuse (Dutton & Golant, 1995). It is likely that measurement difficulties contributed to these nonsignificant results. The current minimization scale has only 3 items, and these items had relatively poor internal consistency. With this in mind, we are currently in the process of developing additional denial items based on other universal negative experiences in relationships (e.g., "I have never expected my partner to go out of her way to do something for me"). It is our hope that these items may tap the respondents' bias toward denying relationship difficulties, similar to the response-style biases tapped in social desirability scales. As such work continues, it will be necessary to compare self-report assessments of minimization and blaming to clinical judgment, observation, and to attributions produced during immediate problem-solving tasks.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations to the current study to be addressed in future research. Perhaps the most important is the nature of the sample. University samples offer a good opportunity for initial study of relationship aggression because rates of low-level, bidirectional relationship aggression are high, and because patterns of difficulties are consistent with those found in clinical samples (e.g., Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001). However, for confidence to be placed in results, research needs to be expanded to samples of maritally distressed couples and clinically identified abusive individuals.

Second, results of the current study underline the importance of controlling for social desirability in research on either attributions or relationship aggression. As in past studies, effects of social desirability on reporting of relationship aggression and attributions were found (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Schaefer-Porter & Hendrick, 2000; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1997). Given this, studies using self-report should routinely include a social desirability scale to gauge degree of bias in individuals' responding. Even more compelling

are methods of data collection that avoid self-report and instead assess automatic or spontaneous attitudes, attributions, or behaviors (e.g., Eckhardt & Jamison, 2002).

Finally, consideration of current results point to the overlap of literature on marital discord and intimate partner abuse. There has traditionally been a divide between those studying and intervening in unhappy marriages and those dealing with intimate partner abuse (Avis, 1992; Bograd, 1992). Research on domestic violence has tended to use a feminist approach, focusing on the influence of societal-level patriarchy and on the importance of men's responsibility for their behavior (Carden, 1994). Studies of marital discord, however, have tended to be informed by systems views that emphasize the role of both partners in contributing to marital dissatisfaction (Hansen & Harway, 1993). Although these broad theoretical differences remain important, results of the current study suggest that there may be more similarities than differences in the attributions studied in these fields. In particular, patterns of minimization, denial, and blaming oft-noted among those who perpetrate intimate partner abuse, when examined in greater detail, seem to overlap substantially with the concepts of *attributions of negative intent to a partner* (blame) and the *demand-withdraw* (minimization) communication patterns. Given this, it seems reasonable to suggest that with greater dialogue between the fields a richer literature in both areas will result.

In conclusion, denial, minimization, and attributions of blame are important to understanding and treating abuse in intimate relationships. Moreover, there is preliminary evidence from the current study, and from related studies of marital dissatisfaction, that these constructs can be studied using self-report methods. As research on development and change in abusive behavior continues, attributions should be an important focus of research.

Appendix

Denial, Minimization, and Blaming Scale

For each of the following items, respondents are asked to indicate whether they "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree."

Items assessing partner blame

My partner often brings up conflicts that have already been resolved.

My partner exaggerates negative things I have done in our relationship.

My partner blames me for almost all the bad things that happen in our relationship.

My partner is always criticizing what I say and do.

My partner refuses to “let go” of things in our relationship that are already over and done with.

My partner purposefully pushes my buttons to get me to fight.

Items assessing minimization and avoidance of conflict discussion

After my partner and I have a fight, I like to talk about what went wrong. (Reverse-scored)

After my partner and I have a fight, I think about how I contributed to the problem. (Reverse-scored)

After my partner and I fight, I try not to think about it.

It is best to avoid talking about problems in a relationship.

Items assessing denial of personal contribution to relationship difficulties

I have never said or done anything that hurt my partner.

I have never said or done anything to my partner that I regret.

There is nothing about my relationship with my partner that I want to change.

Note

1. Data was initially available from more students; however, initial screening as specified by Straus (2004) identified a number with concerning responses or response patterns. These students were omitted from all subsequent analyses.

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