

Consistency of Spousal Aggression in the First Seven Years of Marriage

Brian M. Quigley, Lorig Kachadourian, & Kenneth E. Leonard
Research Institute on Addictions,
University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Abstract

Rates of spousal aggression in the early years of marriage were examined in a longitudinal study of 383 newlywed couples. Using data collected from surveys at the time of marriage, and at the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 7th anniversaries from each member of the couple, we examined prevalence rates of aggression by both husbands and wives, the consistency of aggression across the seven years, and prospective predictors of consistency. Consistency of aggression by both husbands and wives was predicted by demographic variables, by verbal aggression, and husband's frequency of heavy drinking prior to marriage. Results indicate that, although rates of aggression decrease over time, important predictors of consistent aggression can be identified for future consideration in treatment and prevention efforts.

Goals and Objectives

The first goal of the present analysis was to examine rates of physical aggression by both husbands and wives and to examine injury from spousal aggression over the first seven years of marriage.

The second goal was to examine the consistency of aggression in couples over that time frame and to determine what variables at the beginning of marriage are predictive of the consistency of aggression over time.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were 383 couples involved in a longitudinal study of marriage recruited in Western New York as they applied for their marriage license. All participants were at least 18 years old, spoke English, and were literate. Ethnicity was assessed at the first assessment. The majority of the men and women in the sample were Caucasian (husbands: 59%; wives: 62%).

Methods

Couples completed the Revised Conflict Tactic Scale prior to marriage and then at their first, second, fourth, and seventh wedding anniversaries. Measures based on the Conflict Tactics Scale were used to assess prevalence of physical aggression by both husbands and wives in each year of marriage. *Physical aggression was indicated if either member of the couple endorsed aggression occurring.*

At the time of marriage couples also completed measures of hostility, marital satisfaction (Locke Wallace Marital Adjustment Test), verbal aggression (TENSE), and measures of alcohol use including the Alcohol Dependence Scale, daily alcohol use, and the frequency of consuming 6 or more alcoholic drinks.

Results

Rates of Aggression

Figure 1 displays the rates of aggression at all five measurement points. Rates of husband to wife aggression were 35.2%, 36.3%, 37.1%, 23.8%, and 23.5% respectively at the five assessments. Rates of wife to husband aggression were 46.0%, 43.3%, 42.6%, 32.6%, and 27.4% over the seven years.

Rates of Injury

Figure 1 displays the rates of physical injury at all five measurement points. Wives were reported as injured in 14.9% of couples prior to marriage and 13.8%, 10.7%, 10.2%, and 10.2% at subsequent assessments. Husbands were reported as injured in 14.9% of couples prior to marriage and 13.6%, 9.1%, 8.4%, and 7.6% at subsequent assessments.

Consistency of Aggression

In order to examine the consistency of aggression over the seven years, we computed in how many years aggression by either the husband or the wife was reported. This resulted in a score ranging from 0 (no violence reported in any year) to 5 (reporting violence in all five years). The score is from 0 to five because, although the time period of measurement was seven years, only five measurements were taken during that time frame and at each measurement only the previous year's IPV was measured. Results indicated that 39.9% of husbands and 32.9% of wives did not engage in IPV in any of the five years (see Figure 2). Among 28.5% of the sample, no aggression by either spouse was reported at any assessment. Approximately 9% of husbands and 13% of wives were engaged in at least one act of physical aggression in all five measurement years. Among 15.7% of the couples, at least one act of physical aggression by either spouse occurred in all five measurement years.

We then examined what characteristics of the couples at the time of marriage predicted consistent aggression over the seven year time period. Two regression equations were conducted. The consistency of both husband and wife aggression were regressed on demographic variables, husband and wife hostility, husband and wife verbal conflict, couple marital satisfaction, husband and wife alcohol use, alcohol dependence, and heavy drinking (6 or more drinks at one time) at the time of marriage. The results were similar for both husbands and wives. Ethnicity (minority status), lower husband education, younger wife age, greater husband and wife verbal aggression, and more husband heavy drinking at the time of marriage predicted greater consistency of violence for husbands. These variables accounted for 28% of the variance in the consistency of husband aggression. The consistency of wife aggression was predicted by all the same variables as well as by lower wife marital satisfaction. These variables accounted for 35% of the variance in the consistency of wife aggression.

Conclusions and Implications

Consistent with past research, IPV decreases over time although rates of aggression at the seventh anniversary were still over 20% for both husbands and wives. Also consistent with past research, wives consistently demonstrated more frequent aggression than husbands.

In the early years of marriage, the amount of injury is similar for both husbands and wives but over time wives are more likely to experience injury than husbands.

The consistency of aggression by both husbands and wives over time was predicted by demographic variables, verbal aggression, and husband's frequency of heavy drinking. Identification of these early risks factors for continued marital aggression is important for future treatment and prevention efforts.

Figure 1. Rates of Violence and Injury

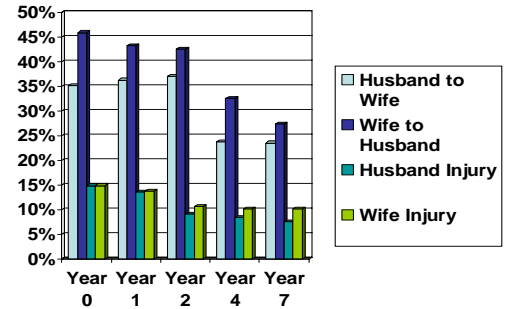
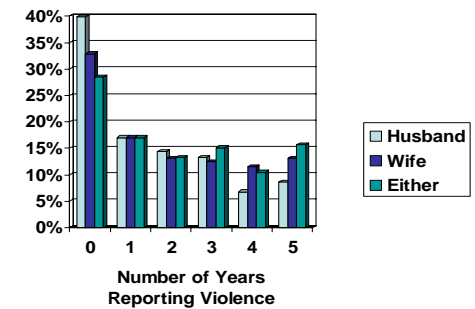


Figure 2. Consistency of Violence



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Correspondence to Brian M. Quigley, Research Institute on Addictions,
1021 Main St. Buffalo, NY, 14203 email: quigley@ria.buffalo.edu

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