

Typology of Perceived Causes of IPV Perpetration in Young Adults

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## ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were to investigate the perceived causes of perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) among young adults, to assess whether distinct profiles exist, and to investigate sex differences. Questionnaires and structured interviews were administered to 233 young French-Canadian couples. Findings revealed that the perceived cause of anger was the most frequently provided explanation for partner aggression. In addition, women reported anger as a perceived cause of their violence more frequently than men, while men reported loss of control and revenge more often than women. Moreover, classification analyses resulted in three profiles of IPV perpetrators based on the perceived causes of their violence: (1) *Reactive*, (2) *Common* and (3) *Hostile*. The *Reactive* profile is characterized by the perceived causes of self-defence and loss of control. Individuals in this profile also perpetrated the greatest number of different physically violent behaviors. Individuals in the *Common* profile did not report a particular perceived cause of violence significantly more than the other profiles. These individuals were the least violent. Finally, the *Hostile* profile is characterized by the perceived causes of alcohol or drugs, domination, provocation, jealousy and intimidation. These individuals perpetrated the greatest number of psychologically and physically violent behaviors and perceived the impact of their violence the most negatively. Proposing a typology for IPV perpetrators in the young adult population contributes to a better understanding of perceived causes and high-risk situations (Flynn & Graham, 2010), thus allowing for possible prevention of more serious acts of aggression in later years.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence, perceived causes, young adults.

## Typology of the Perceived Causes of Intimate Partner Violence

### Perpetration among Young Adults

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse”. Although this type of violence can occur within couples of all ages, the young seem to be particularly at risk. In the United States, women who are 20 to 24 years of age are at the greatest risk of nonfatal IPV (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). In Canada, 15 to 24 year-olds are five times more likely than those 45 years of age and up to be physically or sexually victimized by their partner (Statistics Canada, 2009).

Despite the societal threat that is IPV, little is known about the perceptions of those involved in partner violence. As mentioned by Flynn and Graham’s review of the literature (2010), few studies have examined the explanations provided by IPV perpetrators for their actions. For the purposes of the current study, perceived causes will be understood as factors immediate to the violent situation. We are thus referring to “immediate precursors or precipitators” which the perpetrator perceives as being the cause for his or her violent acts, and not to more distal concepts such as “background and personal attributes of the perpetrator” or “current life circumstances” (Flynn & Graham, 2010). It is useful and important to study IPV perpetrators’ perceptions as to the immediate causes of their violent acts, as these causes can be readily addressed in interventions aimed at rehabilitation. For instance, overwhelming feelings of anger or jealousy immediately preceding violent outbursts can be tackled through treatment utilizing emotional regulation exercises. Similarly, the study of possible sex differences

regarding the perceived causes of IPV could inform the development of specific and differential interventions for male and female offenders.

Although a great deal of research has focused on male IPV perpetration, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the perceived causes or cognitions behind this violence (Gilchrist, 2009). In one study with 162 men recruited from IPV intervention facilities, the perceived causes of control, jealousy and “violence following verbal abuse”, which can be likened to retaliation, were identified as important for male offenders. These motivations were not only related to male-to-female violence, but also to dominance, isolation, and emotional abuse suffered by the woman, as well as to low marital satisfaction (Babcock et al., 2004).

A few studies have exclusively investigated the perceived causes of violence provided by female IPV perpetrators (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010; Caldwell, Swan, Allen, Sullivan, & Snow, 2009; Hettrich & O’Leary, 2007; Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009). A recurring finding is that expressing negative emotions is an important perceived cause of female IPV perpetration. These negative feelings include anger, hurt, frustration (Caldwell et al., 2009) and a pushed temper (Hettrich & O’Leary, 2007). It has been proposed that such anger might arise after futile attempts to get the partner’s attention (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010). Although self-defence has also been identified as an important cause for women’s violence (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010; Caldwell et al., 2009), the expression of negative emotions is more frequently endorsed (Caldwell et al., 2009; Hettrich & O’Leary, 2007; Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009).

Only a handful of articles have compared the perceived causes of violence provided by male and female IPV perpetrators (Follingstad et al., 1991; Flynn & Graham, 2010; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Hamberger & Guse, 2005; Henning, Jones, & Holdford, 2005; Kernsmith, 2005) and only one dated study specifically examined young adults (Follingstad et al., 1991).

Traditionally, violence perpetrated by women has been interpreted in reactive or expressive terms (i.e., anger, retaliation for emotional hurt) more so than the violence of men (Flynn & Graham, 2010; Follingstad et al., 1991). Although violence perpetrated by women may generally be more reactive, aggression used by men does not appear to be more instrumental, with coercion and control emerging as important causes for both sexes (Flynn & Graham, 2010) and one study reporting that women use violence to control more often than men (Follingstad et al., 1991). As for the perceived cause of self-defence, the literature presents conflicting results with some studies reporting that women are more likely than men to state that their aggression was defensive in nature (Henning et al., 2005) and others reporting no significant sex differences (Follingstad et al., 1991; Kernsmith, 2005). In brief, the sparse literature points to sex differences at least for some perceived causes of IPV, although few consistent patterns are found across studies (Flynn & Graham, 2010). These studies also have several limitations in the context of our current investigation. Most literature used clinical or convicted samples and did not examine young adults (e.g., Kernsmith, 2005; Hamberger & Guse, 2005; Henning et al., 2005). As Hamberger and Guse (2005) admit, people arrested for domestic violence represent a small minority of all domestically violent partners. Thus, further research is required in order to assess the perceived causes of IPV perpetration in young adult couples in the community and to investigate possible sex differences.

The study of the perceived causes of perpetrated IPV has important implications. Individuals' perceptions are central to their experiences of violence and the manner in which they behave. Therefore, perceptions of both female and male perpetrators can provide significant insight into IPV that may not be apparent from more objective and distal risk factors (Flynn & Graham, 2010). A comprehensive examination of perceived causes is useful for identifying high-

risk situations and precipitators that increase the risk of IPV (Flynn & Graham, 2010), as well as for creating typologies that can contribute to streamlining the assessment of treatment needs and fine-tuning treatment. In addition, a better understanding of how perceptions differ by sex is necessary for the development of adequate interventions programs for both male and female offenders (Flynn & Graham, 2010). Although certain typologies of IPV perpetrators have been developed on the basis of perceived causes (Babcock et al., 2004; Gilchrist, 2009; Hamberger & Guse, 2005), none have specifically looked into young adults. Yet, understanding the IPV of these young individuals and providing adequate intervention is crucial, as their violent behavior can be prevented from perpetuating throughout their lives. Further investigation is therefore needed in order to include young adults of both sexes into a typology of the perceived causes of IPV.

Hence, the goal of the current study is to investigate the perceived causes of perpetrated IPV among young adult couples from the community. The specific objectives are 1) to assess whether distinct profiles exist and whether they differ in terms of various parameters of violence (i.e., chronicity, number of different acts of violence, and perceived impact of violence) and 2) to examine possible sex differences.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

Through ads and posters disseminated in local newspapers and universities and colleges, 233 young heterosexual French-Canadian couples (466 participants) were recruited. Seventy-four individuals were excluded because they reported not perpetrating any psychological or physical violence during the past year and/or they did not provide a perceived cause for their violence. Therefore, the sample was comprised of 392 individuals. Other inclusion criteria were

1) to be 18 to 30 years old and 2) to have been in their current relationship for less than five years. The average age of women was 22.27 ( $SD = 2.70$ ) and 23.45 for men ( $SD = 3.17$ ). The average length of relationships was 22.96 months ( $SD = 15.73$ ). Of all the couples, 53% cohabitated and 8% had children. In addition, 59% were full-time students, 28% were employed and 13% were unemployed. Academically, 17% had a high school education, 34% had a technical college degree and 47% had a university education. During the session, participants answered the questionnaires in separate rooms and each received \$20 as compensation.

### *Measures*

*The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2)*. The CTS-2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996) measures the frequency of violent behaviors between the respondent and his or her partner over the past 12 months, ranging from 0 (*has never happened*) to 6 (*+ than 20 times in the past year*). Respondents provide information for both perpetrated violence and sustained violence. The CTS-2 includes 78 items and is composed of five subscales: negotiation, psychological aggression, physical assault, sexual coercion and injury. In this study, only perpetrated violence and the subscales of psychological aggression (e.g., insulted or swore at my partner, destroyed something belonging to my partner) and physical assault (e.g., pushed or shoved my partner, slapped my partner) were utilized. The CTS-2 has good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.79$  to  $0.95$ ; Straus & al., 1996) and was translated into French by Lussier (1999).

Using the CTS-2, the chronicity of violence, which indicates the number of psychologically and physically violent behaviors in the past 12 months, was established according to the recommendations of Straus et al. (1996). In addition, two variables assessing the number of different acts of psychological aggression (out of 8 acts on its respective subscale) and physical assault (out of 12 acts on its respective subscale) over the past 12 months were created.

*The Perceptions of Aggression Scale (POAS).* The POAS is a structured interview developed by our research team and used to assess the perceived causes of the participants' violent behaviors. The interviewer began the questions with "What led you to ..." and added each of the violent behaviors reported in the CTS-2. Inspired by the perceived immediate precipitators of IPV reviewed by Flynn and Graham (2010), an answer sheet with the following choices was provided: (a) because I was *jealous*, (b) because I was *angry*, (c) because I was under the influence of *alcohol or drugs*, (d) to *dominate*, (e) because I *lost control*, (f) to get *revenge*, (g) because my *partner provoked me*, (h) to *intimidate*, (i) to *obtain something*, (j) out of *self-defence*, (k) for *other* reasons. Participants were asked to indicate the perceived cause that most closely corresponded to each act of aggression. In this study, the "other" category was excluded. The development of this measure was based on the questionnaire used by Follingstad et al. (1991) as well as on the literature regarding motivations for IPV reviewed by Flynn and Graham (2010).

*Perception of the Impact of Aggression Interview (PIAI).* The PIAI is a structured interview developed by our research team and inspired by the "perception of marital problems" questionnaire developed by Boisvert and his colleagues (1995). It is designed to measure the respondent's perception of the impact of his or her aggression on (a) the relationship, (b) the partner and (c) the respondent on a 9-point scale ranging from -4 to +4 (-4 = very negative, 0 = neutral, +4 = very positive). In this study, the perceived impact on the respondent was excluded. The score corresponds to the average perceived impact of all reported psychologically and physically violent behaviors on the CTS-2.

### *Analysis*



To propose a classification of the perceived causes of violence, a two-step cluster analysis using Schwarz's Bayesian Criterion (BIC) as the clustering criterion was carried out. This analysis is designed to group together individuals that are similar; in this case, based on the perceived causes for their aggression. One of the major advantages of two-step clustering is that it allows for the automatic selection of the number of clusters. To make use of this advantage, we did not fix a certain number of clusters but only specified a maximum of 6. Internal variables used to create typological profiles corresponded to the frequency of each of the 10 perceived causes provided by respondents on the POAS. Since all internal variables were continuous, Euclidean distance measure was utilized. The discriminant validity of the profiles was assessed by performing a comparative analysis with predetermined external variables: (1) the chronicity and the number of different acts of psychological and physical violence committed during the past 12 months and (2) the perceived impact of psychological and physical aggression on the relationship and on the partner.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Analysis*

Of the 392 individuals in the sample, 100% of the women and 98.4% of the men reported having engaged in psychological aggression during the past year, whereas 41.1% of the women and 39.5% of the men reported having used physical violence. Using chi-square analyses, no sex-based differences were found in terms of the perpetration of psychological or physical violence.

Chi-square analyses were also used to assess whether there was a link between reporting specific perceived causes of violent behavior and the sex of violent individuals (Table 1). More women than men reported anger, while more men than women reported loss of control and

revenge. As there were no differences for seven perceived causes out of 10, profiles were created without taking into account sex differences. On average, individuals reported a total of 3.93 perceived causes for all perpetrated violence. Results in Table 2 suggest that the most frequently reported causes were anger, intimidation, jealousy, revenge and loss of control.

#### *Two-Step Cluster Analysis*

Individuals in the “*Reactive*” profile ( $n = 34$ ; Table 2) represented 8.7% of the sample. They justified their acts of violence with the motivation to “obtain something” or “self-defence” significantly more than the two other profiles. They also reported “loss of control” more frequently than the *Common* profile. *Reactive* individuals attributed their acts of aggression to “alcohol or drugs”, “domination”, “provocation”, “jealousy” and “intimidation” less frequently than the *Hostile* profile.

Individuals in the “*Common*” profile ( $n = 272$ ) represented 69.4% of participants and did not explain their violence through particular perceived causes. However, they reported “jealousy”, “domination” and “provocation” less frequently than the *Hostile* profile. They also reported “loss of control” less frequently than the *Reactive* profile. They did not justify their violence with “alcohol or drugs”, wanting “to obtain something” or “self-defence”.

Individuals in the “*Hostile*” profile ( $n = 86$ ) made up 21.9% of the sample. “Alcohol or drugs”, “domination”, “provocation” and “jealousy” were reported more frequently by these individuals than the two other profiles. They also reported “intimidation” more often than the *Reactive* profile.

#### *Discriminant Validity of Profiles*

To ascertain whether there was a link between the profiles and the sex of the violent individuals, chi-square analyses were conducted and yielded no significant differences. Next, as

a mean of assessing the discriminant value of the created profiles, comparative analyses regarding the parameters of violence were conducted (Table 3). Significant differences between profiles were observed for all of these variables. *Hostile* individuals scored higher than the two other profiles for the chronicity of psychological and physical violence, followed by the *Reactive* profile. Next, *Hostile* participants committed a greater number of different acts of psychological violence than the other two profiles, followed by the *Reactive* profile. However, *Reactive* respondents perpetrated a greater number of different acts of physical violence, followed by the *Hostile* profile. Finally, *Hostile* individuals perceived the impact of their aggression on the relationship and on their partner more negatively than the two other profiles.

## DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to investigate the perceived causes of perpetrated IPV among young adults. The second goal was to assess whether distinct profiles exist and whether they differ in terms of parameters of violence. Moreover, sex differences were considered. Importantly, the rate of perpetrated psychological and physical violence found in our study was similar to that of other studies among non-clinical samples of young adults (Hettrich & O'Leary, 2007; Hines & Saudino, 2003; Perry & Fromuth, 2005; Straus, 2004; Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009). Findings reveal no sex-based differences in terms of the perpetration of psychological or physical violence. This result corroborates past research suggesting that young men and women report having experienced psychological violence at similar rates (Fortin, Guay, Lavoie, Boisvert, & Beaudry, 2012), as well as research among 13,601 university students demonstrating no sex-based difference in the rate of perpetration of physical IPV (Straus, 2008). This finding also lends support a growing body of literature showing that the most common pattern of IPV among young adults (Melander, Noel, & Tyler, 2010; Próspero & Kim, 2009;

Straus, 2008; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007) as well as adults of all ages (Anderson, 2002; Williams & Frieze, 2005) is one in which both partners commit acts of aggression, both for physical and psychological violence.

### *Perceived Causes Of Violence*

The perceived cause of anger was the most frequently provided explanation for partner aggression. This result underlying the importance of anger corroborates past research with IPV perpetrators of both sexes demonstrating that anger is commonly endorsed as an explanation for violent behaviors (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010; Caldwell et al., 2009; Follingstad et al., 1991; Flynn & Graham, 2010; Henning et al., 2005; Hettrich & O’Leary, 2007; Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009).

In terms of sex differences in the perceived causes of IPV perpetration, there was a significant link between the sex of the individual and reporting anger, loss of control and revenge. First, we found that women reported anger as a perceived cause of their violence more frequently than men, which is consistent with past research examining sex differences (Flynn & Graham, 2010; Kernsmith, 2005). Second, we found that men reported loss of control more often than women. Although this finding is novel in the literature, it is coherent with research stating that the implicit theory of uncontrollability is present in male IPV perpetrators (Gilchrist, 2009). These individuals blame “outside stressors, alcohol or unknown forces, reflected in the sentiment ‘it just happened’, which is a common response of offenders who are asked to explain the circumstances leading up to their offence” (Gilchrist, 2009, p.139). Third, men reported being motivated by revenge more often than women. In the literature, revenge has been defined as a violent act that “extends beyond the motive of self-defence to include an element of retribution for something said or done by the partner” (Flynn & Graham, 2010, p.244). It can include retaliation for physical aggression or emotional hurt by the partner. This distinction may be

crucial, as retaliation for being hit first may be more often reported by men (Follingstad et al., 1991), while retaliation for emotional hurt may be more often reported by women (Follingstad et al., 1991; Kernsmith, 2005). It is interesting to note that no sex differences were found in terms of self-defence, which adds to the growing literature questioning the long-held notion that women primarily act in self-defence against an abusive partner (Follingstad et al., 1991; Hettrich & O'Leary, 2007; Kernsmith, 2005; Stuart et al., 2006; Walley-Jean & Swan, 2009).

### *Typology*

Analyses resulted in three profiles of IPV perpetrators based on the perceived causes of their violence: (1) *Reactive*, (2) *Common* and (3) *Hostile*. The probability of profile membership was not significantly influenced by the individual's sex.

*Reactive profile.* The first profile was named *Reactive* because violent individuals pointed to the motivation of self-defence and rarely mentioned instrumental causes such as intimidation and domination. Individuals in this profile perpetrated the most diverse acts of physical violence (i.e., the greatest number of different physically violent behaviors out of 12 on the CTS-2 subscale). In the literature, reactive violence is characterized as a response to (accurately or inaccurately) perceived threats or frustrations in a context of high affective-physiological arousal and minimal cognitive processing. Individuals who perpetrate reactive violence are more likely than those who are proactive to present dependent personality traits. In addition, they demonstrate more impulsive anger and less domination than proactive individuals during conflictual interactions (Chase, O'Leary & Heyman, 2001). Although no significant differences in the perceived cause of anger were found in the current study, it is possible that the impulsive nature of these individuals' reactions leads to the perpetration of different physically violent behaviors in differing contexts and interactions. The reactive and emotional nature of this profile

is further supported by the fact that these individuals were significantly more likely to report loss of control than those in the *Common* profile.

*Common profile.* The second profile was named *Common*, as it included the great majority of participants. These IPV perpetrators did not report a particular perceived cause of violence significantly more than the other profiles. However, they did score lower than individuals in the *Reactive* profile on loss of control and did not report the perceived cause of self-defence, thus placing themselves in contrast with the previously discussed reactive form of violence. The *Common* profile also reported the perceived causes of jealousy, domination and provocation significantly less than the *Hostile* profile, suggesting that the violence perpetrated by this profile is not instrumentally motivated either. In addition, these individuals were the least violent and perceived the impact of their violence less negatively than the *Hostile* profile.

*Hostile profile.* The third profile was named *Hostile*, as the motivations of intimidation and domination were more frequently reported than in the other profiles. Moreover, these individuals perceived the impact of their aggression as more negative and the chronicity of psychological and physical aggression was higher than in the other two profiles. Their perceived causes of intimidation and domination, coupled with their awareness of the consequences of their actions and the frequency of their violence, suggests that their behavior may be planned and instrumental. The fact that these individuals commit both physical and psychological violence more often than the other two profiles may be related to the expectation that they will achieve their aim by acting aggressively. The *Hostile* profile can be likened to Chase and colleagues' (2001) proactive category of offenders, whose interactions with their partners are characterized by dominance and whose violence is generally instrumental. According to these authors, these IPV perpetrators are more likely than reactive offenders to have antisocial, aggressive-sadistic

and psychopathic personality traits. In addition, external attributions explaining violence, such as alcohol or drug use, provocation and jealousy (presumably ‘due to the partner’s behavior’), were more often endorsed by the *Hostile* profile than by the other two categories. By justifying their violent acts with external elements, participants may render themselves unaccountable of the consequences of their actions (Henning et al., 2005; O’Keefe, 1997; Stets & Henderson, 1991).

*Limitations and Clinical Implications*

Despite its many strengths, this study must also be interpreted in light of its limitations. First, the current typology was created based on the confounded perceived causes of both psychological and physical violence. It is possible that the perceived causes for one type of violence differ from the explanations for another. However, it would have been difficult to separately examine the perceived causes of each type of aggression, as a relatively small proportion of the sample reported physical violence only. Second, the retrospective self-report nature of the data may be distorted by recall bias and social desirability. Third, it would be interesting to examine whether our results hold true with a sample of young adults with a lesser level of education, or amongst homosexual couples. Finally, in the interest of intelligibility, not all of the precipitators of IPV identified as significant in Flynn and Graham’s review of the literature (2010) could be included in the present study, thus leaving out certain perceived causes of violence such as “perceived threats to the relationship”, “to get attention”, “communication problems”, “proving love”, and “punishment”.

The current study presenting a typology of IPV perpetrators based on the perceived causes of their violence has important clinical implications. As mentioned by Holtzworth-Munroe and Meehan (2004), IPV perpetrators correspond to a heterogeneous group and drawing attention to their differences leads to a greater understanding of aggression within intimate

relationships. The profiles identified in the current study represent a step towards more specific and adequate interventions that would serve to target subtypes of violent individuals based on the explanations they attribute to their aggression (Flynn & Graham, 2010). In addition, proposing a classification for IPV perpetrators in the young adult population contributes to a better understanding of perceived causes and high-risk situations that increase the likelihood of violence within this age group (Flynn & Graham, 2010), thus allowing for possible prevention of more serious acts of aggression in later years. In future studies, it would be important to examine the potential links between the perceived causes of IPV identified in this study and sexual violence.

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#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No competing financial interests exist.



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