

Introduction to the special issue: Insights into interpersonal violence, aggression, and maltreatment: Bridging relationship science with personality and social psychology

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Combating interpersonal violence and aggression has become a national priority for many countries around the world, with prevalence research suggesting that approximately 22% of individuals report violence and aggression within their romantic relationships (Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, & Fiebert, 2012). Among individuals who report violence and aggression within their relationships, about 50% of it is symmetrical in nature, with both members of a couple enacting violence and/or aggression (e.g., Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Therefore, addressing interpersonal violence and aggression by understanding the factors, mechanisms, and pathways that result in the perpetration of violence and aggression is critical to not only advance our understanding of this phenomena, but to also shape intervention programs and policy designed to combat it.

Research on this topic has spanned several decades. Throughout this time, interpersonal violence and aggression have been approached from multiple perspectives. Some have approached it with a strong focus on personality and individual differences (e.g., Dutton & White, 2012; Mauricio, Tein, & Lopez, 2007; Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005), whereas others have focused on social and contextual factors (Jewkes, 2002;

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Renzetti, 2013; Witte & Mulia, 2013). Over the last two decades in particular, integrative frameworks have been developed to explain the developmental processes that underpin violence and aggression (e.g., Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003; Malamuth, 2003). These frameworks suggest that violence and aggression are rooted in early experiences of abuse combined with difficulties in regulating aggressive impulses and endorsing norms that permit and perpetuate violence and aggression against partners. There are also frameworks that adopt an interactionist perspective (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Finkel, 2014) in which aggression is viewed as an outcome of the convergence of factors that heighten the propensity to aggress along with the absence of factors that mitigate aggression.

Despite the long history of research on interpersonal violence and aggression, and the various theoretical frameworks that have been proposed, a number of important gaps still exist in the literature. First, research from a relationship science perspective is sorely lacking. This is true even though the proximal variables that are most likely to contribute to violence and aggression within an interpersonal context center on the relationship in which acts of violence and aggression occur. Accordingly, it seems important, if not necessary, that research on this topic consider interpersonal processes that may trigger, sustain, exacerbate, or curtail violence and aggression. Second, research on interpersonal violence and aggression has been predominantly nondyadic in nature. As a result, it is difficult to determine the extent to which relationship partners mutually incite or buffer one another's abusive tendencies. Third, there has been little longitudinal research, and yet, this research is needed to provide insights about the directionality of associations found in cross-sectional studies. Fourth, much of the work on interpersonal violence and aggression to date may reflect a rather narrow focus on what constitutes maltreatment of close others. We contend that the study of interpersonal violence and aggression need not be limited to these negative interpersonal acts. This is because much of the research on destructive relationship processes and behaviors does not focus on these acts but rather involves the study of perceptions and behaviors that invalidate or deny respect for a relationship partner, which are harmful to both a person's well-being and to the quality of their relationship (see Simpson & Campbell, 2013). These destructive processes and behaviors often include conflict patterns such as negative reciprocity, demand-withdrawal, and contempt (Eldridge & Baucom, 2012; Gottman, 1999), subtle forms of sexual coercion (e.g., Brousseau, Bergeron, Hébert, & McDuff, 2011; Karantzas et al., 2016), and perceiving or treating others as less than human (i.e., dehumanization; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016).

In this special issue, we draw on diverse perspectives within relationship science and personality/social psychology more generally to address the topic of interpersonal violence, aggression, and partner maltreatment. The special issue is an outcome of an international symposium on the topic that was co-chaired by Gery Karantzas, Jeffry Simpson, and Peter Miller in 2017. The goal of the symposium was to bring together both established and emerging scholars in the area to share their distinct yet complementary views and research on the topic of interpersonal violence, aggression and maltreatment broadly defined. To this end, the papers that comprise this special issue approach the topic from different frameworks that include attachment theory,

dehumanization, emotion regulation, motivational processes, Life History Theory, and integrative models such as the I-cubed framework.

This special issue also highlights that the study of interpersonal violence, aggression, and maltreatment can yield novel insights when approached from more traditional perspectives within the violence and aggression field. In particular, it contains empirical papers that focus on individual difference variables, contextual factors, and of course interpersonal processes, each of which address some of the dynamics that unfold between perpetrators and targets of aggression and/or maltreatment. Finally, the special issue also includes papers that fill several gaps in prior research, particularly dyadic and longitudinal studies on abuse, aggression, and maltreatment. We now provide an overview of the excellent set of papers that constitute this special issue.

Papers in the special issue

Three papers in the special issue provide a narrative review or theoretical perspective on interpersonal violence, aggression, and maltreatment. Bastian applies a dehumanization lens to the study of abuse. Bastian proposes that dehumanization (i.e., perceiving or treating another as lacking human qualities) may be a key factor explaining why abusive relationships heighten relational dependence in situations of low relationship satisfaction. This article offers a complimentary perspective to an interdependence theory approach by articulating how and why partners may sometimes become entrapped and vulnerable in relationships in which maltreatment persists.

Beames and colleagues review correlational and experimental research examining links between emotion regulation strategies and aggressive behavior in interpersonal relationships. They focus primarily on the most widely researched emotion regulation strategies, namely cognitive reappraisal, suppression, angry rumination, and mindfulness. While doing so, they summarize the major associations between each of these strategies and various outcomes, including the experience of anger, cardiovascular responses, and behavioral acts of aggression. Their review suggests that cognitive reappraisal and mindfulness tend to mitigate anger-related responses, whereas angry rumination typically heightens anger and aggression in most interpersonal relationships.

Eckhardt and colleagues review the literature on alcohol-facilitated interpersonal partner aggression (IPA) and highlight the benefits of adopting a dyadic perspective. Their paper situates dyadic research on alcohol-facilitated IPA within both Bartholomew and Cobb's (2011) Dyadic Model of Interpersonal Violence and Finkel's (2014) I-cubed model, in which the presence of vulnerability factors, the absence of protective factors, and the presence of enabling contextual variables can create a "perfect storm" for the perpetration of maltreatment.

In addition, several empirically focused papers in this special issue draw upon different theoretical perspectives, research methodologies, and time scales to examine interpersonal violence, aggression, and maltreatment. Eller and colleagues address the dearth of dyadic and longitudinal research in the area by applying an I-cubed model approach to investigate IPA during the chronically stressful transition to parenthood. They find support for a specific set of predictions derived from the I-cubed framework. Specifically, male partners are more likely to report being the victim of aggression at

childbirth and at 2 years post-birth when their female partners experience higher parental stress, attachment insecurity (i.e., higher attachment avoidance), and lower relationship satisfaction.

Mullins and Karantzas also take a dyadic perspective to investigate the extent to which the perpetration of emotional and physical abuse is associated with the perpetration of subtle sexual coercion through approach and avoidance motivations. They find that avoidance motivations are a particularly important mechanism in explaining the abuse-to-sexual coercion association. Furthermore, one's own perpetration of emotional abuse as well as the abuse perpetrated by one's partner both contribute to one's own motivations to perpetrate and engage in sexual coercion. Much like Eller and colleagues, Mullins and Karantzas' findings illustrate the importance of using dyadic methods to clarify actor and partner effects associated with the perpetration and/or victimization of aggression and maltreatment.

In addition to this dyadic theme, the special issue also contains other empirical papers that utilize longitudinal research methods to unpack the directionality of factors associated with aggression and violence. Both Pizzirani and Karantzas as well as Szepenswol and Simpson, for example, examine unique predictions within a longitudinal perspective. Pizzirani and Karantzas investigate associations between the perpetration of dehumanization and emotional and physical abuse over an 8-week period and find that nonlinear changes in dehumanization best predict increases in abuse across time. This research reveals how upward accelerations in dehumanization significantly increase the tendency of individuals to engage in abuse or violence against their romantic partners. This article presents the first longitudinal evidence on interpersonal dehumanization and tests key assumptions regarding whether and how dehumanization might be one mechanism responsible for enacting abuse and aggression. The findings also provide support for some of the claims raised by Bastian in his paper concerning the role of dehumanization in the context of interpersonal aggression and maltreatment.

Szepenswol and Simpson report on data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation (MLRSA) to determine whether and how early life harshness and unpredictability heighten the risk of perpetration and victimization of interpersonal partner violence (IPV). They show that experiencing more unpredictability during the first 5 years of life prospectively predicts both the perpetration of, and being the victim of, IPV many years later. Moreover, conflictual friendships in adolescence serve as an explanatory variable linking early life unpredictability to IPV perpetration in adulthood. Szepenswol and Simpson highlight the value of applying evolutionary thinking to the study of IPV.

Finally, Karantzas and Kambouropoulos take an experimental approach to the study of aggression by integrating two complimentary theoretical perspectives—attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) and Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (Gray, 1987)—to identify the conditions under which attachment avoidance is more strongly associated with interpersonal aggression. They document a complex interplay between contextual triggers and individual differences, such that people who score high on attachment avoidance (and also have a tendency to engage in defensive fight responses) tend to display interpersonal aggression when they also perceive threat as high. These findings help to reconcile some of the inconsistencies in the literature pertaining to the association

between attachment avoidance and interpersonal aggression, and they have important implications for the study of interpersonal aggression from an attachment theory perspective.

Conclusion

Viewed together, the papers in this special issue reflect a diverse set of theoretical perspectives and viewpoints on the study of interpersonal violence, aggression, and maltreatment. A number of these papers, however, also share a lot in common, whether it be the research designs employed or the theories or models used to investigate interpersonal violence, aggression, and maltreatment. As a collection, we believe that these papers make an important contribution to the field. Not only do they provide novel perspectives and findings that address a number of the limitations of past research on aggression, violence, and maltreatment, they are also likely to shape the type of research undertaken in the future on this important very topic and pressing societal issue.

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