

Agreement on reporting acts of aggression in couples in a community sample

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Abstract

Background: Agreement about acts of aggression in couples on the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS-2) was evaluated. **Method:** We conducted a quota sampling method to recruit a community sample of 590 heterosexual adult couples from the Region of Madrid (Spain). **Results:** Prevalence rates based on the maximum dyadic report identified more aggressive behaviors than did individual reports of perpetration and victimization in men and women. Partner agreement about physical and psychological aggression was significant and moderate. However, partners agreed that Negotiation of Conflicts and Positive Behaviors assessed with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale were higher than the behaviors of the Physical Assault Scale. **Conclusions:** Correction factors are provided to estimate the prevalence of aggressive behavior and injuries when we only had individual reports of aggression. Partner agreement reveals the existence of variables at the individual level that significantly influence the assessment of aggression in the couple.

Keywords: Partner aggression, maximum dyadic report, agreement, reliability.

Resumen

Acuerdo sobre los actos de agresión en la pareja en una muestra comunitaria. **Antecedentes:** evaluamos el acuerdo en la pareja sobre los actos de agresión mediante la Escala de Tácticas de Conflicto (CTS-2). **Método:** se realizó un muestreo por cuotas para reclutar una muestra comunitaria de 590 parejas heterosexuales pertenecientes a la Comunidad de Madrid (España). **Resultados:** la prevalencia basada en el informe diádico máximo identificó más comportamientos agresivos que los informes individuales de perpetración y victimización, en hombres y mujeres. El acuerdo en la pareja en agresión física y psicológica fue significativo y moderado. Sin embargo, el acuerdo sobre la Negociación de Conflictos y los Comportamientos Positivos evaluados mediante la Escala de Ajuste Diádico fue mayor que en los comportamientos de Agresión Física. **Conclusiones:** se proporcionan factores de corrección para estimar la prevalencia de comportamientos agresivos y lesiones cuando solo se dispone de los informes individuales de agresión. El acuerdo en la pareja pone de manifiesto la existencia de variables a nivel individual que influyen significativamente en la evaluación de la agresión en la pareja.

Palabras clave: agresión en la pareja, informe diádico máximo, acuerdo, fiabilidad.

In recent years, the use of physical aggressive tactics during disagreements in intimate relationships has currently become a phenomenon of increasing interest and social concern, given the volume of international studies using the CTS-2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) in a broad range of samples (for review see Rathus & Feindler, 2004). One of the most relevant conclusions of the research in this field is, firstly, the rates of perpetration and victimization of IPV in men and women vary significantly as a function of the type of sample (for review see Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, & Fiebert, 2012a,b; Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012; Jose & O'Leary, 2009) and, secondly, the psychometric properties of the CTS-2 vary according to the type of sample used (Calvete, Corral, & Estévez, 2007; Corral & Calvete, 2006; Graña, Andreu, Peña, & Rodríguez, 2013;

Jones, Ji, Beck, & Beck, 2002; Loinaz, Echeburúa, Ortiz-Tallo, & Amor, 2012; Lucente, Fals-Stewart, Richards, & Goscha, 2001; Medina-Ariza & Barberet, 2003; Montes-Berges, 2008; Newton, Connelly, & Landsverk, 2001; O'Leary & Williams, 2006).

In community and representative samples of the general population, situational violence (Johnson, 2011) is the conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of aggressive acts not only associated with conflict management in couple relationships but also, as indicated by Muñoz and Echeburúa (2016), with the stress involved in the process of separation or divorce in clinical or forensic contexts. This type of violence, episodic and reactive, is characterized by mild acts of aggression (i.e., pushing or slapping) and is bidirectional in nature (Graña & Cuenca, 2014; Jose & O'Leary, 2009).

In our country, research on this phenomenon in community samples of couples reflects a high prevalence of psychological aggression compared with physical aggression, and a low rate of injuries (Cuenca, Graña, & Martínez-Arias, 2014; Cuenca, Graña, & Redondo, 2015; Graña & Cuenca, 2014). In this sense, one of the greatest challenges facing research in the area of partner aggression is to accurately determine the prevalence rates and, for this reason,

diverse studies have used agreement between men and women's perpetration and victimization reports as a methodological criterion to determine the validity of individual reports of acts of partner aggression. However, agreement may not only vary depending on the method used to estimate it, but also on the characteristics of the study sample (Armstrong, Wernke, Medina, & Schafer, 2002). In general, prior research with the CTS-1 (Straus, 1979) has shown, firstly, statistically significant but low relations between couples' reports on the Physical Aggression Scale and, secondly, a tendency to underestimate aggressive behaviors (Archer, 1999; Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Lipsky, 2009; Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 2002). These results have been observed with the CTS-2 (Cuenca et al., 2014; Cuenca et al., 2015; Marshall, Panuzio, Makin-Byrd, Taft, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2011; O'Leary & Williams, 2006).

Concerning clinical samples, research indicates a series of factors that can potentially affect levels of partner agreement, such as different motivations in perpetrators or victims to report aggression due to factors like social desirability or the legal repercussions of aggressive acts (Simpson & Christensen, 2005); problems understanding certain items of the CTS-2 that can be subjectively interpreted—for example, items of the Sexual Coercion scale—and even factors like the severity and frequency of aggressions, because the more frequent or severe an aggressive act is, the easier it is to remember (Caetano et al., 2009).

Few studies have examined reports of sexual victimization within couples because most studies that have investigated sexual coercion have done so predominantly from the perspective of one of the partners. Kar and O'Leary (2010) analyzed a sample of 453 married community couples, finding that almost twice as many women as men reported having experienced some kind of sexual coercion by their partner during the past year. Simpson and Christensen (2005) found that 26.51% of the women and 43.20% of the men agreed on occurrence of any act of sexual coercion, and the statistical value of the Kappa coefficient was lower in women than in men (.29 and .41, respectively). In clinical samples, women present significantly higher and more frequent rates of sexual coercion and threats or forced sex than do their male partners (Meyer, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1998).

The present study has various goals: (a) to estimate the prevalence of psychological, physical, and sexual aggression and victimization from individual reports and, in the couple, by means of the maximum dyadic report in a sample of 590 community couples from the Region of Madrid; (b) to analyze the extent to which men and women's individual reports of perpetration and victimization underestimate acts of aggression by calculating correction factors; and (c) to analyze the degree of partner agreement about acts of aggression assessed with the CTS-2.

Method

Participants

The participants of the study were 590 adult heterosexual couples, aged between 18 and 80, from the Region of Madrid. All participants provided the following sociodemographic data: age, sex, civil status, nationality, partner's sex.

As a function of the goals of the study, the inclusion criteria were being over 18 years of age and being in a heterosexual couple relationship either currently or in the past 12 months.

Of the participants, 78.9% were married, 14.3% were single with a partner but not cohabitating, 4.9% were common-law couples, and 1.9% were widowed, separated, or divorced and living with a partner. Men's mean age was 45.39 years ($SD = 10.43$) and women's mean age was 42.63 ($SD = 10.16$). The average relationship duration was 18.45 years ($SD = 11.96$). Of the sample, 97% were Spaniards, and 3% were of other nationalities. Concerning occupation, 43.2% were employees, 16.4% were civil servants, and 11.4% were self-employed or autonomous (Cuenca et al., 2014, p. 5; Cuenca et al., 2015, pp. 129-130).

Instruments

Sociodemographic Questionnaire. Diverse items were included to assess participants' sociodemographic and personal variables: age, sex, civil status, nationality, professional activity, and current partner's sex and age.

CTS-2. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus et al., 1996). We used the Spanish version of the CTS-2 (Graña et al., 2013). It is a self-report questionnaire with 39 duplicate items, that is, 39 questions as the perpetrator and 39 questions as the victim (78 items in total), on which participants rate the degree to which each member of the couple performs specific acts of physical, psychological, and sexual violence against the other partner, in addition to their use of justifications and negotiations to solve their conflicts.

Respondents of the CTS-2 scale should indicate how often they have carried out the acts mentioned in each item and how often their partner has carried them out. The response format ranges from 1 (*once in the past year*) to 6 (*more than 20 times in the past year*); 7 means *never in the past year but it used to occur before* and 0 means *it has never occurred*. For each item, participants indicate how frequently the incident has occurred in the past year. The scores used in the present study are:

Prevalence: These are dichotomic scores reflecting whether a participant reports the presence of a behavior defined in the scale in the past year. It is calculated by transforming responses 1-6 to 1, and responses 7 and 0 to 0. The item scores are not added, so the prevalence for each subscale will be 1 or 0 (Straus et al., 1996).

Scores based on the Maximum Dyadic Report: Maximum Dyadic Reports are based on whether a partner (husband or wife) reported that they perpetrated acts of aggression or had been the victim of acts of aggression. Sometimes the reports are considered either-or reports, as the question being addressed is as follows: Did either the husband or the wife report such acts of aggression in the past year? For example, in the case of a woman reporting an act of male physical aggression that her partner does not report, the variable would reflect the occurrence of male aggression; and vice versa: if a man reports perpetrating physical aggression against his partner but she does not report any physical aggression, the variable would indicate "male-to-female" physical aggression (Cuenca et al., 2015, p. 130).

Combined CTS-2 Scales. Some researchers prefer to assess the associations among composite measures of aggression and other variables. Two composite scales were calculated: (a) *Composite: Physical and Psychological Aggression* and (b) *Composite: Psychological, Physical, and Sexual Aggression*.

The CTS-2 scale shows good psychometric properties for the Spanish adult population (Graña et al., 2013). In the present study, Cronbach's alphas for perpetration and victimization scales were:

Negotiation ($\alpha = .74$ and $\alpha = .74$); Psychological Aggression ($\alpha = .72$ and $\alpha = .75$); Physical Aggression ($\alpha = .74$ and $\alpha = .77$); Sexual Aggression ($\alpha = .40$ and $\alpha = .60$); and Injuries ($\alpha = .19$ and $\alpha = .50$).

Procedure

The study used a quota sampling method to recruit a community sample of married or cohabitating couples from the Region of Madrid. In order to obtain the most representative sample possible of the active population of the diverse urban areas, 100 research assistants (RAs) from 300 candidates who wished to obtain research credits were selected from the Department of Clinical Psychology of the Complutense University of Madrid.

To achieve the aims of the study, the RAs were assigned to different areas of the Region of Madrid, taking into account the population census and the following geographical areas to obtain the sample for the study: (a) Madrid capital 55% (58 RAs), (b) northern metropolitan area 5% (5 RAs), (c) eastern metropolitan area 9% (10 RAs), (d) southern metropolitan area 24% (20 RAs), and (e) western metropolitan area 7% (7 RAs). The RAs were informed of the general characteristics of the study and that the general goal was to analyze different aspects of daily cohabitation of intimate couple relationships regarding the way they negotiate and resolve conflicts. This information was provided to the couples that consented to participate in the study. The participants who agreed to take part in the study had to complete the questionnaire and send it anonymously and independently of their couple to a PO Box.

The procedure was as follows: (a) each RA had to collect a quota of 8 couples from the assigned census area, 1/3 of whom could be acquaintances and the rest unknown, which had to be approached mainly by using a random dialing procedure and asking them if they wanted to participate in this study; (b) the couples were selected taking into account the following age range: 18-29; 30-50; +50; (c) after obtaining the study quota, the RA had to give the code of each couple member to the director of the Project (e.g., 1-a and 1-b up to 8-a and 8-b), the name, age, and phone number or email address of each couple, and (d) to confirm the veracity of the data, a random control of 10% of the participants of the study

was performed (Cuenca et al., 2014, p. 5; Cuenca et al., 2015, pp. 129-130).

We provided information on how to proceed if a victim of abuse was discovered, providing all the RAs with a resource guide for female victims of gender violence and a guideline of assistential resources for the aggressor members.

Initially, 1,600 protocols were handed out, and the response rate was 77.7%, that is, a total of 1,243 protocols were returned, of which 5% (63) were rejected because they had faulty data, had been completed randomly, or had low response consistency.

The missing data were replaced through the Expectation–Maximization (algorithm (SPSS, version 19.0)). The prevalence statistics reported in the present study are based on valid cases (i.e., missing data were not replaced prior to computing this statistic, and, as no differences were obtained then, they were replaced with imputed values).

Data analysis

Analyses were performed with the SPSS v. 19. In the results section, Pearson correlations, kappa coefficients, and rates of partner agreement are presented. Kappa coefficient was calculated from the prevalence responses of the past year. To interpret the Kappa coefficient, we used the norms proposed by Landis and Koch (1977), who suggest that they can be interpreted as follows: 0.0 = no agreement, 0.0 – 0.2 = insignificant, 0.2 – 0.4 = low, 0.4 – 0.6 = moderate, 0.6 – 0.8 = good, and 0.8 – 1.0 = very good. Pearson correlations were calculated from the frequency responses during the past year (0-6) on the CTS-2.

Results

Prevalence of aggression

Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of aggression with reference to data from previous studies in order to contextualize the analysis of such prevalence and of partner agreement (Cuenca et al., 2014; Cuenca et al., 2015; Graña & Cuenca, 2014). Individual reports of perpetration and victimization both in men and women reflect a majority use of conflict negotiation strategies. Psychological

Table 1
Prevalence statistical, maximum dyadic report and correction factor (CTS-2)

Scales	Male Perpetrators	Female Victims	Max	Female Perpetrators	Male Victims	Max
Negotiation	95.8	96.9	98.5	97.6	96.6	98.5
Correction Factor	1.03	1.02		1.01	1.02	
Psychological Aggression	68.1	68.0	80.7	72.2	65.9	81.4
Correction Factor	1.18	1.19		1.13	1.23	
Physical Aggression	12.4	9.7	16.8	10.3	11.9	17.6
Correction Factor	1.35	1.73		1.71	1.48	
Sexual Aggression	18.6	17.1	26.8	10.8	9.5	16.1
Correction Factor	1.44	1.57		1.49	1.69	
Sexual Aggression*	18.1	16.8	26.4	9.5	9.2	14.7
Correction Factor	1.46	1.57		1.55	1.60	
Injuries	2.2	2.9	4.4	0.8	3.4	3.7
Correction Factor	2	1.52		4.6	1.1	

Max = *Maximum Dyadic Report*
 *All prevalence rates of sexual coercion are based on the scale excluding Items 15 and 16: “I forced my partner to have sexual relations without a condom” “My partner did the same to me”.

aggression was the most frequent form of aggression in the couple, followed by physical aggression, and the prevalence rates of Injuries in the present sample were low. Concerning acts of sexual coercion, 19% of the men and 17% of the women were reported having perpetrated acts of sexual coercion. When the joint report of the couple was considered (Max), the prevalence of aggressive acts was higher than men and women's individual perpetration and victimization reports.

Underestimation of Aggression in the Couple

In order to examine the extent to which men and women's individual reports of aggression underestimated the prevalence of aggression in comparison with the prevalence based on the partners' reports, correction factors were calculated using a method similar to that used by O'Leary and Williams (2006). To calculate the correction factors, the prevalences based on the maximum dyadic report (Max) are divided by the prevalences based on men and women's individual reports, respectively. The individual reports are multiplied by the correction factor to estimate the prevalences of aggression that would be obtained if partner data were available. If the correction factor is higher than 1.00, this indicates underestimation by the perpetrators.

Regarding underreports of aggressive behavior, both men and women underreported physical and sexual aggression. In this sense, 71% of the women underreported physical aggression compared to 35% underreporting of physical aggression by men. Similarly, 49% of the women underreported sexual aggression compared to 44% underreporting of sexual aggression by men. Reports of psychological aggression by both men and women were quite high, and underreporting by men (18%) and women (13%) was low (Table 1).

Partner Agreement

According to the norms of Landis and Koch (1977), partner agreement was moderate in the Negotiation, Psychological, and Physical Aggression Scales, and low in the Sexual Coercion and Injury scales. According to Cohen's (1988) standard significance levels, agreement as a function of Pearson correlations was significant in all the CTS-2 scales. Nevertheless, partner agreement was moderate on the Negotiation and Psychological Aggression Scales and on the composite scales. Regarding the Physical and Sexual Aggression Scales, agreement was lower in women than in men and, in the Injury Scale, agreement was low in both sexes (Table 2).

Partner Agreement about Nonaggressive Behaviors

Partner agreement on the Negotiation Scale using Pearson's correlation was significant and moderate. Moreover, internal consistency of the scale was high in both sexes. Using Fisher's transformation r to z , no significant differences were found between agreement on the Negotiation Scale and the perpetration scale of Physical Aggression in men ($t_{(1178)} = 1.49, p = .93$). However, with regard to women, agreement was significantly higher on the Negotiation Scale than on the perpetration scale of Physical Aggression ($t_{(1178)} = -3.06, p < .001, d = 0.25$).

In order to appraise agreement with an additional measure, the scale of Positive Activity, recommended by O'Leary and Williams (2006), was created. The Positive Activity Scale includes six positive items (23-28) from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). These six items reflect the degree to which the couple engages in conjoint activities. The six elements included in the scale are: (a) *give my partner a kiss*, (b) *participate together*

Table 2
Statistical agreement on the CTS-2 scales by aggressor's sex

Scale and Aggressor	K	Occurrence agreement (%)	Non-occurrence agreement (%)	Total agreement (%)	r
Negotiation					
Men	.40**	98.4	36.0	95.8	.41**
Women	.52**	98.1	64.3	97.3	.40**
Psychological Aggression					
Men	.42**	81.3	60.6	74.7	.46**
Women	.43**	78.6	67.0	75.4	.49**
Physical Aggression					
Men	.41**	42.5	95.0	88.5	.48**
Women	.34**	44.3	91.9	86.9	.24**
Sexual Aggression					
Men	.39**	48.2	90.0	82.2	.40**
Women	.35**	39.1	94.1	88.1	.14**
Injury					
Men	.25**	30.8	97.7	96.3	.28**
Women	.23**	60.0	97.1	96.8	.18**
Psychological and Physical					
Men	.42**	81.7	60.5	75.1	.49**
Women	.42**	78.9	65.6	75.2	.45**
Psychological, Physical and Sexual					
Men	.44**	82.9	60.5	76.1	.49**
Women	.42**	78.2	66.0	75.6	.43**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$

in outdoor activities, (c) have a stimulating exchange of ideas, (d) laugh together, (e) discuss something quietly, and (f) work together on a project.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .73 in men and women. Pearson's correlation between the reports of men and women on the Positive Activity Scale was .55. Using Fisher's transformation r to z , no significant differences were found in agreement either on the Positive Activity Scale or on the perpetration scale of Physical Aggression in men ($t_{(1178)} = -1.63, p = .06$). However, with regard to women, agreement was significantly higher on the Positive Activity scale than on the perpetration scale of Physical Aggression ($t_{(1178)} = -6.39, p < .001, d = 0.52$).

Discussion

The CTS-2 is the most widely used scale internationally for the assessment of partner violence, but there is little research on partner agreement about acts of aggression (psychological, physical, and sexual aggression) in community samples. Moreover, partner agreement with the CTS-2 has rarely been reported and never with a Spanish population.

In the present study, the aggression prevalences observed in the individual reports of men and women and in the couple with the maximum dyadic report are potential indicators of partner disagreement. The results showed that psychological aggression was the most frequent form of aggression, but partner agreement was moderate. There is increasingly more evidence of the impact of certain variables on agreement about acts of psychological aggression. Variables at the individual level such as satisfaction with the relationship (Graña, Cuenca, & Redondo, 2017) and the intensity of love (Graña, Cuenca, Redondo, & O'Leary, 2015) have been found to have a significant impact on women when reporting this type of aggression in couple relationships and, consequently, on the level of agreement achieved. Marshall et

al. (2011) found that low satisfaction with the relationship could lead to a greater tendency to attribute negative events to the partner's behavior and, consequently, to blame the partner for relationship problems. Moreover, they observed that the individual psychological characteristics of the couple could contribute to explaining the lack of agreement. However, these authors did not use the DAS and more research in this field is needed. In the present study, agreement on the Negotiation of Conflicts and Positive Activity Scales was moderate and significantly higher than that of the Physical Aggression Scale in couples in which the woman reported exerting physical aggression. These results suggest that men and women may have difficulties acknowledging physical aggression and, consequently, they minimize or underestimate acts of aggression due to factors like legitimate forgetting or social desirability. Regarding underreports of aggressive behavior, both men and women in this Spanish sample underreported physical and sexual aggression. O'Leary and Williams (2006), in a similar study, found underreporting of both physical and sexual aggression by both men and women a suburban New York sample.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the sample represents the greater Madrid area, and as such, it cannot be considered a sample that is representative of the country of Spain. Second, the representativeness of the sample at the community level may have influenced the prevalence obtained, limiting the generalizability of the results to other types of populations, such as student (i.e., dating violence) or clinical samples. Finally, we recommend the use of dyadic data to achieve an more accurate estimate of partner agreement despite the fact that the answers to questions about the use of aggressive behavior may be influenced by the partner's response or by what the partner expects to hear due to social desirability. In this context, it is not easy to ensure independent measures, although the questionnaires of each member of the couple were sent to a P.O. box anonymously and independently of the partner.

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