

# Women College Students' Reasons for Engaging in Psychological Dating Aggression: a Qualitative Examination

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Published online: 10 July 2015  
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**Abstract** Dating violence frequently occurs within women college students' relationships, but few examinations of their reasons for engaging in psychological aggression have been conducted. Accordingly, the current study investigated psychological aggression initiated by women undergraduates against their male partners using a qualitative methodology. Overall, 72 of the 206 participants responded to an open-ended question examining their reasons for initiating psychological aggression. Six domains of reasons were identified; the two most frequently reported precipitants were negative affect and a partner's transgression. One domain, "self-soothing," (i.e., aggressing to help oneself feel better) had not been observed in studies of women's initiation of physical aggression. These reasons could be targeted in prevention and intervention programs for reducing dating aggression among undergraduates.

**Keywords** Women college students · Intimate partner violence · Dating violence · Psychological aggression · Qualitative research

Over the past four decades, investigations of intimate partner violence (IPV) have addressed the prevalence, nature, and consequences of numerous types of aggression within intimate relationships, including physical aggression, and, more recently, psychological aggression (e.g., Follingstad 2007;

Lohman et al. 2012). Research concerning the initiation of psychological aggression in particular has demonstrated that psychological aggression may occur frequently enough to be considered a "normative" phenomenon within intimate relationships (Jose and O'Leary 2009). For example, Jose and O'Leary's (2009) review of studies investigating the prevalence of IPV within community samples demonstrated that 75 % of the male and 80 % of the female respondents had initiated psychological aggression against their partners. Similarly, Carney and Barner's (2012) survey of the occurrence of IPV across several diverse samples estimated that the prevalence of emotional abuse, or psychological aggression, among intimate partners is likely between 70 and 80 %.

Existing research has also explored the empirical relationship between psychological aggression and physical aggression. Though numerous previous investigations have indicated that psychological aggression and physical aggression are often correlated, psychological aggression nonetheless appears to be more prevalent than physical aggression in both community and clinical samples (Capaldi and Crosby 1997; O'Leary and Mauiro 2001). Furthermore, like physical aggression, psychological aggression can negatively impact the wellbeing of its recipients (Carney and Barner 2012; Lawrence et al. 2009).

These high prevalence rates and the potential for adverse outcomes suggest that it is imperative for contemporary researchers to further examine the contextual factors contributing to psychological aggression between intimate partners. Additionally, researchers should investigate whether or not these precipitants differ from those previously implicated in the occurrence of physical aggression, so that efforts to develop effective prevention and intervention programs may be better informed. Historically, intimate partners' reasons for engaging in psychological and physical aggression have been studied using quantitative methods, though some qualitative investigations have been conducted. Regardless, many of the qualitative

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researchers examining the contextual factors that contribute to IPV have not directly asked participants about their reasons for initiating aggression. Therefore, this study sought to address this gap in the extant literature by asking its participants, women college students, to report their personal reasons for initiating psychological aggression against their male partners.

## Aggression Within Intimate Relationships

### Prevalence of IPV Initiation by Gender and Developmental Level

Researchers investigating the prevalence of IPV initiation by gender have indicated that men and women initiate physical aggression against their partners at similar rates (Jose and O’Leary 2009; Straus 2009; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Furthermore, other researchers have asserted that IPV is most frequently characterized by a pattern of mutual aggression perpetuated by both partners (Fiebert 2004, 2011), and that one partner’s aggressive act may be intended to reciprocate aggression previously initiated by the other partner (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012b). Williams et al.’s (2008) survey of women’s engagement in IPV provided support for these interpretations by demonstrating that 12 to 39 % of their participants had initiated physical aggression against their partners during the past year, and 40 to 90 % of the women had initiated psychological aggression. Accordingly, Williams et al. (2008) concluded that a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances contributing to female-initiated IPV is needed. Leisring (2011) echoed this sentiment when she asserted that it is critical for future investigators to identify the immediate precursors most relevant to women’s engagement in physical aggression. Considering the aforementioned correspondence between the occurrence of physical aggression and psychological aggression within intimate relationships, the argument for a thorough examination of the contextual factors underlying women’s initiation of psychological aggression seems equally compelling.

Other investigators have specifically examined the occurrence of IPV by developmental level, including among adolescents and emerging adults. These research efforts have been undertaken with the goal of developing prevention and intervention programs that address patterns of physical and psychological aggression occurring among dating couples within these age groups. This endeavor has proven to be particularly important in light of data indicating that engagement in physical aggression can begin as early as 13 or 14 years of age, become more frequent during adolescence, and then persist throughout the emerging adult years (Capaldi et al. 2012), with approximately 20–25 % of adolescents reporting the presence of IPV within their dating relationships (Desmarais et al. 2012). The trend towards young adults’ frequent

engagement in IPV has also been observed in studies examining psychological aggression in particular; Carney and Barner (2012) reported that the prevalence of psychological aggression among undergraduate students is as high as 80–90 %. In sum, these findings suggest that it may be especially important to explore factors influencing young adults’, particularly young adult women’s, initiation of and reasons for engaging in psychological aggression.

### Understanding the Context of IPV Initiation

Though the extant literature has demonstrated that IPV is highly prevalent within intimate relationships in general, and among young dating couples in particular, theories as to why and how this aggression arises have been difficult to establish. Researchers investigating the context of IPV initiation have generally taken one of two approaches in their work: they have examined the context of IPV in regard to “risk factors” for initiation, or they have considered how IPV might be explained using partners’ “motivations” for aggression.

#### *Risk Factors*

The earliest investigators to address IPV examined risk factors for engaging in physical aggression, and subsequently identified a number of characteristics that were associated with its occurrence. For example, in their recent literature review of risk factors for IPV, Vagi et al. (2013) found 53 factors to be significant predictors of adolescents’ initiation of dating aggression, which they then categorized as either an individual-level or a relationship-level risk factor. Examples of the first category included a partner experiencing a range of mental health problems or reporting an attitude that is accepting of aggression, while relationship-level risk factors included a partner displaying aggression towards his or her peers or experiencing a difficult relationship with his or her parents. In another recent review of risk factors for IPV, Capaldi et al. (2012) assigned each of the risk factors that they encountered to one of three categories that were derived from a dynamic developmental systems perspective. These three categories included contextual characteristics, developmental characteristics and behaviors of the partners, and relationship influences and interactional patterns (Capaldi et al. 2012).

#### *Motivations*

In addition to the identification of risk factors associated with engagement in IPV, other researchers have inquired about men and women’s self-reported motivations or reasons for initiating IPV against their partners. Follingstad and colleagues (1991) were among the first to ask women college students to review a list of possible motivations provided by the researchers, and to select the reasons most relevant to their

initiation of physical aggression against their male partners; both Fiebert and Gonzalez (1997) and Hettrich and O’Leary (2007) later conducted similar investigations.

Consequently, the existing IPV literature has identified many potential motivations or reasons for intimate partners’ engagement in IPV. In their recent comprehensive review of IPV research published between 1990 and 2011, Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012a) coded the various reasons noted in the review studies using one of seven categories: a) power/control; b) self-defense; c) expression of negative emotion; d) communication difficulties; e) retaliation; f) jealousy; and g) other. Notably, these broad categories were derived from a dataset that integrated reports provided by both men and women, that was representative of a variety of age groups, and that was obtained using participants’ responses to both open-ended survey items and researcher-constructed lists of potential motivations for IPV (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012a).

### *Conceptual Frameworks*

In an attempt to better understand the significance of previously identified risk factors and intimate partners’ reasons for engaging in IPV, several researchers have proposed conceptual frameworks that specify how the aforementioned variables might individually and interactively contribute to the occurrence of IPV. For example, Finkel (2007) offered a novel perspective on the risk factors associated with aggression between intimate partners by suggesting a two-stage process model that contrasts strong violence-impelling forces conducive to IPV initiation with weak impeding forces that inhibit engagement in IPV. Furthermore, Finkel (2007) included four categories of risk factors addressing distal, dispositional, relational, and situational factors as additional explanatory elements within each domain of violence-impelling or impeding forces. Finkel and colleagues later updated the original model by incorporating a third process of “instigation,” which interacts with the other two processes to increase or diminish the possibility of IPV occurring (Finkel et al. 2012). Bell and Naugle (2008) and Capaldi et al. (2012) used comparable approaches when they developed their own contextual frameworks comprising each of the risk factors for aggression that have been identified in past investigations.

A notable complement to the aforementioned theoretical models of risk factors for IPV initiation can be found in Flynn and Graham’s (2010) multi-level conceptual framework. This model represented an alternative approach to delineating the context of IPV because it incorporated existing data regarding risk factors for aggression with research concerning intimate partners’ self-reported motivations for initiating IPV. Specifically, Flynn and Graham (2010) examined the quantitative data associated with intimate partners’ explanations for the incidents of physical aggression that they

had experienced, and then employed attribution theory in order to conceptualize the motivations of the initiating partners. Additionally, the authors contended that the discipline’s development of a comprehensive understanding of IPV would likely necessitate the acknowledgement of bidirectional interactions occurring between multiple precipitating factors and an intimate partner’s immediate motivations for aggression.

The foundation of Flynn and Graham’s (2010) framework is that of Level 1, which considers the background and personality attributes of the initiator and victim, the most distal contributing factors to episodes of IPV. Level 2 notes the impact of the current life experiences and circumstances of intimate partners, and may include stress, depressive symptoms, or substance use. Finally, Level 3 incorporates the most immediate precursors or precipitants of aggression between intimate partners. Immediate precursors could include factors such as the emotional or mental state of the initiator, as well as other situational factors.

Flynn and Graham’s (2010) framework also includes secondary levels within Level 3 that correspond to specific reasons intimate partners might offer as explanations for their initiation of aggression. The first sublevel centers on IPV as a means of retaliation or self-defense, while the second sublevel addresses whether the emotional, mental, or physical state of the initiator is dysregulated (e.g., the initiator is significantly angry or intoxicated). Next, the third sublevel focuses on aggression as a method by which the initiating partner strives to communicate with, gain the attention of, or express his or her feelings (e.g., “prove one’s love”) to the receiving partner. Finally, the fourth and fifth sublevels describe individuals using aggression in order to intimidate, control, coerce, or exert power over their partners, and aggressing as a way to address “hot button” issues such as finances, distribution of household chores, and partners’ use of alcohol, respectively. In sum, Flynn and Graham’s (2010) framework acknowledges multiple forces, ranging from the potential risk factors included in Levels 1 and 2 to the more context-specific factors and motivations described in Level 3, all of which may interactively and uniquely contribute to the occurrence of IPV.

### *Impact of Gender, Developmental Level, and Role as Initiator*

A final perspective on the contextual factors contributing to IPV considers how the reasons for and circumstances in which intimate couples engage in aggression could differ as a function of the gender, developmental level, and initiator-versus-recipient role of the partners. Although Langhinrichsen-Rohling and colleagues’ (2012a) review of the IPV literature did not find gender differences for intimate partners’ reasons for engaging in physical aggression, Brooks-Russell et al.’s (2013) study of adolescent boys and girls, as well as Flynn and Graham’s (2010) survey of risk factors for IPV among college students, both noted differences between men and women with regard to their explanations for acts of

physical aggression. Since the participants included in Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al.'s (2012a) general review represented a wide range of ages, and Brooks-Russell et al. (2013) and Flynn and Graham (2010) restricted their samples to adolescents and college students, it is also possible that the developmental level of respondents may be a significant factor in the kinds of explanations intimate partners offer for the occurrence of aggression. Furthermore, Flynn and Graham (2010) observed variations in the reasons participants offered for their engagement in physical aggression that appeared to be a function of whether the respondent was the initiator or the recipient of IPV. Each of these findings suggests the need for future research to discern which interpersonal and intrapersonal factors uniquely contribute to young adult women's engagement in IPV.

Finally, the preceding review of the existing IPV research also indicates that a focused investigation of the possible reasons for intimate partners' initiation of psychological aggression is essential. Although some of the aforementioned studies have provided valuable information on the occurrence of psychological aggression between intimate partners (e.g., Capaldi and Crosby 1997; O'Leary and Mauero 2001), the majority of the existing literature has addressed only physical aggression. Therefore, the current study contributes to the literature by examining women's reasons for engaging in episodes of psychological aggression that occur independently of episodes of physical aggression.

### Contributions of Qualitative Research Methods

The existing literature on reasons for the occurrence of IPV has suggested a number of factors that may strongly influence how and why IPV arises. However, it should be noted that many of the investigations described above required their participants to report their motivations for initiating IPV using predetermined lists of possible reasons that one might offer for engaging in physical aggression. These previously constructed lists were often developed by the investigators themselves, using the extant literature, and may or may not have been originally derived from the spontaneous reports of men and women involved in intimate relationships. For example, the investigations conducted by Follingstad and colleagues (1991), Fiebert and Gonzalez (1997), and Hettrich and O'Leary (2007) all utilized an inventory of possible motivations for initiating IPV that was based on a prior literature review and required participants to indicate which of the listed reason(s) best reflected their own experiences of IPV.

Considering the trend for IPV researchers to examine the precipitants of physical aggression between intimate partners using quantitative data, several investigators, including Johnson and Ferraro (2000), have argued that qualitative methods should also be used to explore how typical relationship conflicts can escalate to physical aggression. Furthermore, Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012a) asserted that using both

quantitative and qualitative methods when collecting data could heighten the external validity of IPV research; qualitative research's focus on open-ended, participant-driven methods could serve as a complement to more frequently-used quantitative methods by eliciting additional information not readily derived from structured, forced-choice questionnaire items. Thus, by including open-ended questions that prompt participants to describe, in their own words, which factors contributed to their past experiences of IPV, investigators may be able to obtain valuable contextual information directly reflecting intimate partners' own perceptions of the "impelling, impeding, and/or instigating forces" (i.e., Finkel 2007; Finkel et al. 2012) precipitating their initiation of IPV. Qualitative data of this nature could be especially useful in the development of prevention and intervention programs addressing IPV among young women.

### *Qualitative Research and the Context of IPV Initiation*

Some researchers have already implemented qualitative methodologies in their examinations of the immediate precursors of IPV. For example, though they later instructed their women participants to indicate which motivations included on predetermined list were most relevant to their own experiences, Hettrich and O'Leary (2007) first asked their participants to respond to an open-ended question regarding why they had previously initiated physical aggression against their intimate partners. After aggregating and coding this qualitative information, the researchers identified 11 distinct categories of motivations to which the participants had attributed their initiation of IPV. The most frequently-reported categories included: feeling angry, experiencing the escalation of a milder verbal argument, being frustrated, having one's feelings hurt, retaliating against a prior verbal offense, struggling to communicate effectively with one's partner, and wanting to emphasize the seriousness of one's viewpoint (Hettrich and O'Leary 2007).

Foshee et al.'s (2007) qualitative examination of male and female adolescents' self-reported reasons for initiating physical aggression against their dating partners also contributed to a more nuanced understanding of young adults' perceptions of their own engagement in IPV. Like Brooks-Russell et al. (2013) and Flynn and Graham's (2010) findings, Foshee et al. (2007) observed differences between their male and female participants with regard to the type of reasons they reported as having shaped their physically aggressive behaviors. Specifically, the adolescent girls included in Foshee et al.'s (2007) study most often reported initiating physical aggression as a response to an adolescent boy whom they perceived as being physically or psychologically aggressive. Other motivations that Foshee et al.'s (2007) female participants spontaneously offered as explanations for their physical aggression included being angry because one's boyfriend was unfaithful or had lied, physically aggressing following the male partner's own escalation of the relationship conflict, and using physical

aggression as a method of informing one's male partner that he had done something wrong (e.g., flirted with someone else; talked rudely). Finally, the adolescent girls' fourth most frequently reported motivation was aggressing as a means of retaliation or self-defense (Foshee et al. 2007).

Both Hettrich and O'Leary (2007) and Foshee et al.'s (2007) use of qualitative methods to further investigate young adults' experiences of IPV allowed for a more phenomenological, participant-driven understanding of the common precipitants of physical aggression between intimate partners. However, neither of these studies assessed participants' reasons for initiating psychological aggression against their intimate partners. Thus, the current investigation was designed to explore young adults' reasons for engaging in psychological aggression using qualitative methods, so as to broaden IPV researchers' understanding of the immediate precursors most relevant to the occurrence of psychological aggression.

### Aims of the Present Study

The present study fills several gaps identified by the researchers within the existing IPV literature. First, the current project focused specifically on episodes of psychological aggression and the initiation of IPV by female partners; both of these areas have been heretofore understudied. In addition, the researchers sought to further examine the experiences of a group that is particularly at risk for IPV by drawing its sample from an undergraduate population. Next, qualitative methods were used to explore participants' reasons for engaging in psychological aggression in order to better understand women college students' subjective experiences of their own initiation of IPV. The investigators also used qualitative methods so as to compare participants' reported reasons with those described in the existing research examining physical aggression. Finally, the current investigation was conducted in order to gain insight into those issues that could be most relevant to the design of future prevention and intervention programs for women and undergraduates impacted by IPV.

## Methods

### Participants

Two hundred and six women enrolled at a mid-sized, Midwestern, private university participated in a larger study of dating aggression among undergraduate students. In order to participate, women were required to either have been in a dating relationship with a male partner for at least 1 month at the time of their participation, or, if they were not in a current dating relationship, to complete the study measures while reflecting upon their most recent dating relationship with a male partner that lasted at least 1 month.

A subset of 72 women (35 % of the larger participant sample) recruited for the original study was identified for inclusion in the present project. The majority of the women within this subsample were Caucasian ( $n=55$ , 76 %) and between 18 and 19 years of age ( $n=49$ , 68 %). Thirty-four of the participants (47 %) were freshmen. Approximately half of the participants ( $n=35$ ) reported that they were currently in a dating relationship of at least 1 month's duration, while the other half of the sample indicated that they had been in such a relationship in the past ( $n=37$ ). The subsample of 72 women included in the current project represented those participants whose responses to an open-ended question examining their experiences with initiating psychological aggression were judged to be clearly referring to their personal dating history (i.e., were not referring to hypothetical circumstances), and who did not also report perpetrating physical aggression against their male partners (i.e., initiated psychological aggression only).

## Materials

### Demographic Form

Participants completed a brief demographic form assessing their age, sex, academic year, racial-ethnic background, and current relationship status.

### Qualitative Question

Each participant responded to an open-ended question regarding her history of and the reasons underlying her use of psychological aggression against her male partner during either her current or most recent dating relationship. For the purposes of the current study, this qualitative question was excerpted from a longer instrument called the "Reasons for Conflict" scale, which was included in the larger study on dating aggression described above. The specific question to which the participants responded read as follows: "If you are a female and have used psychological means (e.g., *swore at*, *called derogatory names*; *blamed when you were upset*; *threatened to throw something at*) with your male partner, what were your reasons?" The examples of psychologically aggressive acts that were referenced in the open-ended question were drawn from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales' Psychological Aggression subscale items (CTS-2; Straus et al. 1996). Participants' qualitative responses to this question represented the primary data analyzed in the present project.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited through the electronic research participant pool system managed by the university's psychology department. A description of the present project was

displayed within the electronic pool system and participation in the study was voluntary.

Undergraduates who indicated an interest in participating were invited to the research laboratory and given a recruitment statement to read while additional directions were read aloud by the experimenter. After the overview of the study was completed, participants were encouraged to ask any questions they had regarding participation. Once the undergraduate women indicated that they fully understood the conditions of their participation, the measures to-be-completed were presented. Participants completed the demographic form first, then the open-ended question drawn from the Reasons for Conflict Scale, and then other scales that were included within the larger study. On average, participants required 30 to 40 min to complete the aforementioned measures. All study procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board.

### Data Analytic Plan

As described above, the current project utilized a qualitative methodology in order to address the dearth of data regarding women college students' subjective experiences of their engagement in psychological aggression. Moreover, a qualitative approach to collecting and analyzing information regarding participants' reasons for initiating psychological aggression was selected due to its value as a set of inductive techniques suitable for understanding and describing an event or topic of interest from the perspective of the participant, rather than by relying on pre-existing expectations or assumptions conferred by the researcher (Mertens 2010; Patton 2002).

Accordingly, the qualitative analysis of participants' responses to the open-ended question was conducted in several steps. The procedures used to conduct this analysis generally adhered to those described in the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach, as developed by Hill et al. (1997) and refined by Hill et al. (2005). The CQR approach is designed to introduce more objectivity into the qualitative analysis process by avoiding the possible idiosyncrasies of a single coder and allowing for the different perspectives expressed by a team of coders to gradually approximate a valid interpretation of the obtained data.

In the present study, the length of participants' responses to the open-ended question ranged from short phrases of three or four words to several sentences. Initially, the research team (i.e., three female graduate students, two of whom were moderately familiar with the existing literature on IPV) and the "auditor" (i.e., a female faculty member with considerable experience in the area of IPV research) coded the data for distinct, independent segments, each of which appeared to refer to a single reason for initiating psychological aggression. Although most women reported only one reason, some participants provided multiple, discrete reasons for why they had initiated psychological aggression, and thus contributed more than one segment to

the total number of identified data segments. Finally, the full research team met together to discuss and agree upon the number and content of the segments identified for analysis.

Following this discussion, 107 data segments were identified for inclusion in the remaining qualitative analyses. The research team members, working individually, grouped each of the 107 data segments by similarity in content and formed tentative categories. Next, the full research team met together to discuss the tentative categories proposed by each individual research team member, noted similarities and dissimilarities across the proposed categories, and then formally decided upon a finite set of "reasons for initiating psychological aggression" content domains into which the data segments would be categorized. Subsequently, two of the research team members, again working individually, re-coded each data segment into one of the content domains proposed during the research team's previous discussion. After the individual re-coding phase, the research team again met with the auditor to discuss the coding process and to resolve disagreements between research team members with regard to the reason domain most suitable for a particular data segment. After all segments had been definitively assigned to a reason domain, the research team again reviewed the segments grouped within each reason domain in order to agree upon a label for the reason domain that best reflected the theme of its exemplars.

The final step of the qualitative analysis consisted of examining the identified reason domains in order to determine if any supraordinate categorizations, or "core ideas," were present (Hill et al. 1997, 2005). In addition, all segments that had not appeared to fit any of the identified reason domains were judged by the coders to reflect the relevant participants' "process-type" orientations to the open-ended question, and not the actual content of their data. This approach was informed by the recommendation of Miles and Huberman (1994), who consider participant responses requiring the qualitative researcher to make additional inferences about their themes or intentions to be "pattern" codes, rather than standard descriptive codes.

### Results

Following the completion of the consensual qualitative analysis, six domains and one pattern code were identified as participant-generated reasons for their initiation of psychological aggression against their partners. The identified reason domains included, in order of frequency, 1) negative affect; 2) transgression by partner; 3) making the other person understand/pay attention; 4) retaliation; 5) self-soothing; and 6) joking. In addition, a "defensiveness" pattern code was also observed. The frequency with which segments were assigned to each of these reason domains/pattern codes, as well as sample exemplars for each category, are detailed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

**Table 1** Identified domains and pattern codes for participants’ reasons for psychological aggression

Label	Number of segments <sup>a</sup>
Reason domain	
Negative affect <sup>b</sup>	46 (43 %)
Partner transgression <sup>c</sup>	29 (27 %)
Making partner understand/Pay attention <sup>d</sup>	12 (11 %)
Retaliation <sup>d</sup>	8 (7 %)
Self soothing <sup>d</sup>	4 (4 %)
Joking <sup>d</sup>	2 (2 %)
Pattern code	
Defensiveness	6 (6 %)

<sup>a</sup> Total number of segments=107

<sup>b</sup> Typical reason domain (over 30 %)

<sup>c</sup> Frequent reason domain (20–30 %)

<sup>d</sup> Variant reason domain (>20 %)

The women college students participating in the current project primarily described their reasons for initiating psychological aggression against their partners as being a result of their own negative emotionality (e.g., anger; frustration), as occurring in response to a perceived offense committed by their partners, or as a means to more effectively communicate with their partners. Less frequently, participants reported engaging in

**Table 2** Representative exemplars for identified reason domains and pattern codes

Label	Representative exemplars
Reason domain	
Negative affect	“They just made me so...angry” “I have done some of these...out of frustration”
Partner transgression	“He cheated on me” “He was rude and said some very hurtful things”
Making partner understand/ Pay attention	“To make him realize I was upset for a reason” “To let him know I was serious”
Retaliation	“If he hurt you, you want to hurt him” “I swore because he swore at me”
Self-soothing	“Make yourself feel better” “He lets me blame him to relieve any emotions”
Joking	“I might say something toward him but I am only joking” “...It was only in a joking manner”
Pattern code	
Defensiveness	“...Only did once, if at all, and I don’t remember” “I swear a lot and so it just slips...”

psychological aggression as retaliation against their partners’ own aggression, as a way to soothe themselves when distressed, or as a way to playfully joke with their partners.

Notably, six women (6 %) provided responses (i.e., six distinct data segments) to the open-ended question that the coding team did not judge to be representative of one of the aforementioned reason domains. Rather, the research team agreed that these responses best reflected a defensiveness pattern code in which participants appeared to mention, yet deny a history of initiating psychological aggression (e.g., “If I did... it was only because...”).

In general, the reasons reported by the current participants for initiating psychological aggression against their partners corresponded with the categories of immediate motivations for physical IPV that have been identified in previous research. Specifically, the reason domains of negative affect, a partner’s transgression, making one’s partner pay attention or understand, retaliation, and joking have each been observed in earlier investigations of the precipitating factors for IPV. However, the domain of self-soothing appears to be unique to the present study and may represent a novel finding in regard to the extant IPV literature. Lastly, though a defensive approach to responding has been observed by previous qualitative researchers inquiring about participants’ initiation of IPV (e.g., Foshee et al. 2007), the defensiveness pattern code noted in the current project augments what is presently known about young women’s subjective experiences of IPV. The implications of these distinctive patterns of convergent and disparate results are discussed in greater depth below.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the current project was to examine women college students’ reasons for initiating psychological aggression against their male partners in order to better understand their subjective experiences of their psychologically aggressive behavior. This aim was fulfilled using a qualitative methodology; participants were instructed to respond to an open-ended question inquiring about their reasons for psychologically aggressing against their male partners during conflicts. This participant-driven approach allowed for the emergence of several distinct domains of reasons that were spontaneously generated by the young women themselves and were not artifacts of a predetermined list of reasons shaped by the assumptions and expectations of the researchers.

Overall, the women college students indicated that they had most frequently engaged in psychological aggression as a consequence of their own extreme negative emotions, in response to a transgression committed by their partners (e.g., “He cheated on me”), or in order to make their partner pay attention/understand. A small subset of young women reported psychologically aggressing as a direct retaliation against

the hostility of their partners, while fewer still described their initiation of psychological aggression as playful or joking in manner. Finally, the current qualitative analysis also produced one novel domain of reasons: psychologically aggressing as a way to soothe oneself and relieve the emotional distress associated with a conflict between intimate partners. The use of psychological aggression to promote self-soothing has not been observed in previous investigations of IPV, and may underscore the value of the present study's unique participant sample and incorporation of qualitative methods.

The results derived from the current investigation's focus on psychological aggression are, for the most part, consistent with those of several earlier studies that examined intimate partners' motivations for initiating physical aggression. For example, Flynn and Graham's (2010) multi-level conceptual model described numerous potential immediate precursors of physical aggression between intimate partners, including: 1) the initiation of IPV as a means of retaliation or self-defense; 2) initiating physical aggression as a consequence of one's own significant emotional, mental, or physical dysregulation; 3) physically aggressing in order to more effectively communicate with or gain the attention of one's partner; 4) using physical aggression as a way to intimidate or exert power over one's partner; and 5) physically aggressing in order to address "hot button" relationship issues, such as financial difficulties or the distribution of household chores. The retaliation, negative affect, and making the other person understand/pay attention reason domains observed within the present study appear to resemble Flynn and Graham's (2010) first three categories of potential reasons for initiating IPV. This similarity suggests that at least some young women who engage in psychological aggression may do so for the same or similar reason(s) cited by other young women who initiate physical aggression against their male partners. Additionally, this correspondence suggests that those participants included in the current study who reported psychologically aggressing in retaliation, in response to their own negative affect, or in order to make their partners understand/attend could possibly report these same motivations were they to initiate physical aggression against their male partners in the future. This hypothetical correspondence remains an important empirical question for future research.

Similarly, research conducted by Hettrich and O'Leary (2007) provides additional evidence that the current participants' reported reasons for engaging in psychological aggression may share important similarities with the motivating forces influencing other young women's initiation of physical aggression. Hettrich and O'Leary (2007) asked their sample of college-aged women to describe, in their own words, the precipitating factors that contributed to their past initiation of physical aggression against their intimate partners. Their participants most frequently reported physically aggressing as a consequence of their own anger or due to the escalation of a

verbal argument; other reasons provided by the young women appear to parallel several of the present project's reason domains, including making the other person understand/pay attention, retaliation, and in response to a partner's transgression.

Notably, the defensiveness pattern code observed in the present study has not been observed in previous investigations of IPV that utilized quantitative methods. However, Foshee et al.'s (2007) qualitative examination of male and female adolescents' engagement in dating violence did suggest that some young women who initiate IPV against their male partners may be reticent to speak openly about their experiences. Specifically, the authors noted that while 63 teenaged girls participating in their study indicated via a self-report checklist that they had previously been both a recipient and an initiator of physical aggression in an intimate relationship, 17.5 % of these same female participants, when interviewed later by a researcher, explicitly denied having ever initiated physical aggression. Similarly, 6 % of the women college students who participated in the current project provided responses that alluded to but then denied a history of psychological aggression, and were thus coded as being defensive in nature. The participants characterized as having responded defensively may have done so due to an awareness that initiating aggression against one's partner is not socially-acceptable behavior (e.g., Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012a), or because they were engaging in the kind of impression management often demonstrated by individuals concerned about social desirability (Straus 2004). Investigators' understanding of the defensive response pattern would benefit from further study.

The observation that some intimate partners initiate psychological aggression in order to make themselves feel better (i.e., self-soothing) is a notable finding, both in regard to the results of the current study, and in relation to the existing literature concerning immediate precursors of IPV. Although no previous investigations have found that intimate partners initiate psychological aggression for the specific purpose of soothing themselves, other researchers have suggested that psychological aggression may be associated with impaired emotion regulation. For example, Shorey et al.'s (2011a) examination of dating violence amongst college students demonstrated that many participants who had initiated psychological aggression against their partners had also exhibited maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, including pronounced anger and a difficulty with expressing how they feel in a non-aggressive manner. Moreover, Jakupcak (2003) and Shorey et al. (2008) each speculated that initiating psychologically aggressive acts could function as a method of emotion regulation for aggressive women, and reasoned that these displays of psychological aggression were likely to be negatively reinforced and, thus, occur again.

The results of the present project provide significant support for this premise, in that some women college students directly



reported that they had engaged in psychological aggression as a means of soothing themselves. Regardless, only a few participants described their aggressive behavior as a form of self-soothing (4 %), and this reason domain was not anticipated by the current investigators. Thus, a replication of this project's design with another sample of women college students is needed in order to examine if this reason domain is unique to the current sample, or if it is a truly a significant facet of some young women's experiences of psychological aggression.

### Limitations

The design of the present study is characterized by several limitations that could potentially impact the generalizability and replicability of the current findings. First, the participants included in the present investigation were primarily 18 or 19 years of age, Caucasian, and were enrolled as undergraduates at a private, Midwestern university. Though these characteristics could be considered fundamental determinants of the phenomenological, participant-generated data collected for the current project, these attributes nevertheless reduce the generalizability of the present study's conclusions to women of different ages, developmental levels, and racial-ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, the setting in which the current data were collected could limit the applicability of the present findings for women not enrolled in higher education, for those attending public institutions, or for those women whose undergraduate classes are represented by greater socioeconomic diversity than was observed in the current sample.

Finally, the current results may have been limited by the format and content of the open-ended question used to assess participants' reasons for initiating psychological aggression. This item encouraged the women college students to respond via a short-answer format, rather than a longer, narrative format; it is possible that the inclusion of an open-ended question encouraging narrative responses could have produced more detailed or even different explanations of participants' motivations for initiating psychological aggression.

### Future Research

The results of the present project indicate that there are several issues within the IPV literature that remain unclear and warrant further examination. These areas include gathering more detailed information about the similarities and distinctions between the precipitants of psychological aggression and the context of physical aggression among intimate partners. For example, since the current findings suggest that some women college students initiate psychological aggression for the same reasons as do other young women who initiate physical aggression against their intimate partners, it may be important to identify the presently unknown individual-level or contextual factors that explain how and why undergraduates' use of

psychological aggression sometimes escalates to episodes of minor physical aggression (e.g., Hettrich and O'Leary 2007).

Another potentially fruitful area of research could center on identifying any "violence-impeding" contextual factors that may counteract the "violence-instigating" and "violence-impelling" factors observed in the present study. According to Finkel's (2007; Finkel et al. 2012) three-process theoretical framework, IPV is influenced by a combination of distal, situational, relational, and dispositional factors; future investigators could consider further exploring each of these domains in order to identify those factors that serve to discourage intimate partners' engagement in IPV. Put another way, researchers must not only examine the risk factors and dynamics associated with the escalation of typical relationship conflicts to IPV, but should also isolate those forces that effectively de-escalate conflicts between intimate partners. For example, Surell (2011) found that dispositional self-control moderated the likelihood that both male and female college students would engage in psychological aggression. Thus, investigating how intimate partners' use of emotion regulation strategies is related to the occurrence of psychological aggression appears to be a suitable starting point for future research addressing "violence-impeding" forces within intimate relationships.

### Implications for Prevention and Intervention

The results of the current project may also prove valuable in the design and implementation of prevention and intervention programs for young people at risk for or currently experiencing IPV. For instance, a substantial number of the present participants indicated that negative emotions, such as anger, motivated them to initiate psychological aggression. This finding suggests that incorporating a module about how to regulate one's negative affect using adaptive coping strategies could be an important consideration for clinicians delivering prevention or intervention services (e.g., Shorey et al. 2011b). A prevention or intervention program focused on enhancing one's emotion regulation skills may also benefit those individuals likely to use psychological aggression to manage their own distress, such as the young women included in the present study who reported psychologically aggressing as a means to self-soothe (Leisring 2013). Additionally, it is likely that many women college students who are at risk for or engage in psychological aggression would benefit from a prevention or intervention program that presents strategies conducive to more productive communication with one's intimate partner, such as the Safe Dates prevention curriculum (Foshee et al. 1998; 2004), and other communication skills programs (Bradley et al. 2014; Cornelius et al. 2010). A focus on improving one's communication skills could be particularly helpful for any young women who demonstrate difficulties similar to those of the current participants who reported having used psychological aggression to force their partners to acknowledge or understand their distress.

## Conclusions

The results of the present study contribute to a preliminary understanding of women college students' motivations for initiating psychological aggression against their male partners. The current project's qualitative approach to data collection and analysis allowed for the participants to report on their subjective experiences of psychological aggression within their dating relationships, and facilitated a comparison of their responses with previous research concerning young women's motivations for initiating physical aggression. While many of the reasons offered by the present participants were similar to those noted in qualitative examinations of physical aggression, the emergence of the novel self-soothing reason domain underscores the need for researchers to continue isolating the precipitants that are unique or particularly relevant to the occurrence of psychological aggression. Qualitative methodologies akin to those used in the present investigation may prove essential in identifying these precipitating factors, and subsequently enhance prevention and intervention programs aimed at reducing IPV among college students.

**Acknowledgments** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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