Communication competence plays a role in several problematic relational issues such as conflict management, interpersonal aggression, loneliness, and sexual coercion. This study examined the relationship between communication competence and aggression. Thirty-one individuals (26 females, 5 males) experiencing aggression during conflict episodes with romantic partners were interviewed, generating 967 pages of transcribed data. The qualitative data analysis revealed that many of the participants assessed their use of aggression according to social customs, finding it inappropriate and ineffective. However, many noted their aggression was appropriate and effective given the circumstances of their relationship. These findings suggest a unique relational culture where aggression is perceived in ways that deviate from social norms. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of all close relationships (Cahn, 1992; Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Hocker & Wilmot, 1995). Inextricably linked to people's management of conflict is their (in)ability to communicate effectively. For example, Canary and Spitzberg (1989) found that integrative, or cooperative conflict strategies that promote relational outcomes (e.g., seeking information or commonality, attempting to understand the other, compromising) were positively related to communication competence. In contrast, distributive, or competitive strategies (e.g., shouting, blaming, threatening) and avoidant behaviors (e.g., evading topic, denying knowledge or involvement) were viewed as less competent. In general, conflict strategies and communication competence significantly affect relational outcomes, such as trust, control mutuality, intimacy, and satisfaction.

Additionally, researchers have examined the relationship between communication incompetence and destructive behaviors such as relational violence. Specifically, past studies identified connections between the use of verbal aggression and violence (deTurck, 1987; Carey & Mongeau, 1996; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Sabourin, Infante, & Rudd, 1993) and the tendency for violent couples' to reciprocate negative behaviors (e.g., Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995), suggesting that these couples are less communicatively competent.

Without minimizing the importance of these studies, the understanding of violent couples' communication is limited in scope because many of these studies drew participants from mental health professionals (e.g., Infante et al., 1989; Sabourin, 1995; Sabourin et al., 1993; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995) and social service agencies (e.g., Hegde, 1996; Infante et al., 1990; Rudd, Beatty, & Burant, 1994;
Rudd, Dobos, Vogl-Bauer, & Beatty, 1997). Consequently, the understanding of the relationship between interpersonal aggression and communication competence is limited to the more severe cases of domestic violence. Therefore, because of the minimal amount of research drawn from a community sample, there is a need to better understand how individuals within the general population experience various forms of aggression during conflicts.

Furthermore, many of the past studies examining communication patterns of violent couples inferred that existence of unhealthy patterns constitutes a sign of communication incompetence. However, because other researchers (e.g., Greenblat, 1983; Sebastian, 1983; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995) have noted differences in relational cultures toward violence, more research that directly examines the relationship between communication competence and aggression and that which is grounded in the lived experiences of the individuals is necessary. In other words, generating more knowledge about how the individuals themselves feel about their communication competence as it relates to use of aggression during conflicts is needed. Thus, combining the aforementioned gaps in the extant literature, the present study examines how individuals from the general population evaluate their own and their partner's communication competence during aggressive conflict episodes.

This study has important theoretical and practical implications for the study of interpersonal aggression. Theoretically, it can advance our understanding of the "dark side" of interpersonal relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1994) and communication competence by broadening our knowledge of communication patterns within violent relationships, an under-studied interpersonal communication phenomenon. Moreover, a better understanding of aggressive couples' assessment of communication competence also has important practical applications. Practically, this study can help communication scholars better understand the sense-making process couples use to legitimize use of aggression. This information can assist practitioners, social workers, therapists and other health professionals working with violent couples, making interventions more successful.

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In general terms, communication competence can be compared to a two-sided coin with skill on one side and impression on the other (Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach, 1994). Traditionally, competence was synonymous with ability and focused on the individual's skills to obtain a goal. Viewed in such a light, a skills-based approach to competence makes it an antecedent condition that affects the outcomes of a particular interaction (Spitzberg et al., 1994). The more a person is skilled communicatively, the more success in reaching desired outcomes.

More recently, however, competence has been redefined to include the subjective evaluation of the quality, or the impression, of a person's skills (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg et al., 1994). The reason for the reconceptualization of competence was the recognition that all human interaction is contextual and varies according to the situation (Spitzberg et al., 1994). In other words, behavior that is viewed as competent in
one situation, may be considered incompetent in another. In this vein, competence as an interpersonal impression is a consequence or outcome of human interactions (Spitzberg et al., 1994). Competence becomes a mechanism by which individuals judge the quality of both their own and others interactions.

Researchers identify two fundamental properties of communication competence: appropriateness and effectiveness (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1989, 1990; Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989; Spitzberg et al., 1994; Wiemann, 1993). Effectiveness derives from control (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989) and the accomplishment of intended function, goals or objectives (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987; Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989; Spitzberg et al., 1994). Appropriateness is comparable to tact or politeness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989) and the avoidance of violating situational or relational rules governing the communicative context (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987; Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989; Spitzberg et al., 1994). Both appropriateness and effectiveness are evaluated in light of the specific situation or context. Individuals' successful combination of these two concepts makes the interaction optimal and provides the basis for judging the interactants' competence.

Spitzberg, Canary, and Cupach (1994) presented a 2 x 2 grid, accounting for four ways in which appropriateness and effectiveness can be combined to represent different combinations of communication (in)competence. "Maximizing" is when an individual acts effectively but inappropriately. "Sufficing," on the other hand, occurs when a person is appropriate but ineffective. "Minimizing" occurs when a person acts both inappropriately and ineffectively, thus violating rules and failing to obtain desired outcomes. Finally, "optimizing," the highest form of communication competence, is defined as the use of effective and appropriate strategies, allowing the individual to achieve desired goals while also acting in accordance to social norms governing the relational context (Spitzberg, 1994; Spitzberg et al., 1994).

In general, the competent communicator is one who adapts his or her behavior to the situation, uses more constructive conflict management strategies, and is sensitive to the needs of others while maintaining the ability to achieve individual goals. Conversely, the incompetent communicator engages in negative, destructive conflict and exhibits antisocial behaviors such as loneliness (Spitzberg & Canary, 1993) or sexual misconduct (for review, see Spitzberg, 1998). Researchers' findings suggest that communication competence is especially salient within the context of interpersonal relationships experiencing violence (for review, see Spitzberg, 1997) and, as such, will become the focus of the remainder of this review.

COMMUNICATION (IN)COMPETENCE AND VIOLENT INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

According to Spitzberg (1997), violence inherently jeopardizes communication competence. Further, violence seems an inevitable byproduct of inappropriate and ineffective conflict situations (Spitzberg, 1997). A few studies have been designed to better understand the nature of abusive couples' talk in hopes of uncovering its qualitative
dimensions and the couples' communication level of competence. For example, Cordova and colleagues (1993) reported on the talk of 29 couples and found that the abusive couples reciprocated negative behaviors more than the nonviolent distressed or nondistressed couple control groups. According to these scholars, battered women made no attempts to neutralize or placate their husband's aggressive behavior. But, instead, both parties were less facilitative in conversations, suggesting more communicative incompetence and inability to repair negative communication behavior.

Additionally, Sabourin and Stamp (1995) examined the interactional patterns or qualifies of communication within abusive and nonabusive couples' talk and looked at how the couples managed dialectical tensions. The authors identified seven dialectical tensions that differentiated abusive couples' talk from their nonabusive counterparts. In general, they found that, when compared to nonabusive couples, abusive couples were less balanced in the way they managed day-to-day tensions, leading to a less constructive environment for relational development and conflict management.

In addition, researchers have found that individuals' communication skills deficiencies can result in physical aggression (deTurck, 1987; Infante et al., 1989; Infante et al., 1990). The basic premise of Infante, Chandler, and Rudd's (1989) Communication Skills Deficiency Model of Interpersonal Violence is that argumentative skill deficiencies lead to verbal attacks on the other's self-concept. This verbal attack can prompt a reciprocal verbally aggressive exchange that can easily result in physical violence.

Some researchers have found support for the Communication Skills Deficiency Model of Interpersonal Violence. For example, scholars have found that the existence of violence in marriage was more likely when there were high levels of verbal aggressiveness and low levels of argumentativeness (Infante et al., 1989; Sabourin et al., 1993). In replicating Infante and colleagues' work, Carey and Mongeau (1996) found mixed support for the model. While verbal aggressiveness provided the strongest predictor of physical aggression, argumentativeness was not as strong a predictor for the deterrence of aggression as the researchers had hypothesized (Carey & Mongeau, 1996).

The results of these studies suggest that the relationship between verbal aggression and physical violence is very complex. For example, Sabourin (1991) found that in instances of high levels of physical abuse, abused women reported lower and infrequent use of verbal aggression. Moreover, the results from a larger project conducted by Olson (2000), of which the present study was a part, revealed that aggression functioned as an antecedent, consequential, and intervening variable of escalating symmetry in conflicts between romantic partners. In some cases, the use of aggression prompted the use of escalating symmetry. At other times, aggression was the result of escalating symmetry. While, in other instances, aggression moderated the use of escalating symmetry, altering the course of the aggressive conflict. Olson discovered that issues of power and control were at the heart of reciprocated aggression and the use of escalating symmetry. More specifically, she found that when power was balanced between relational partners, the aggression was more likely to be reciprocated. Conversely, in relationships characterized by unbalanced power, the aggression was not reciprocated.
The research reviewed, along with many others, has greatly advanced our understanding of communication and interpersonal violence. However, many of the studies' participants came from social service agencies and mental health professionals (e.g., Infante et al., 1989; Infante et al., 1990; Rudd et al., 1994; Rudd et al., 1997; Sabourin, 1991; Sabourin, 1995; Sabourin et al., 1993; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995), thus limiting our scope to the most severe cases of domestic violence. After conducting a national study on family violence, Straus and Gelles (1986) estimated that approximately 50% of American couples experience some form of violence in relationships. Therefore, there is a need to broaden our sampling to include couples from the general population who might experience more minor forms of violence.

In addition, many of the past studies (e.g., Cordova et al., 1993; deTurck, 1987; Infante et al., 1989; Infante et al., 1990; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995) have indirectly examined the relationship between communication competence and interpersonal aggression. However, since various researchers (e.g., Greenblat, 1983; Sebastian, 1983; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995) have noted that aggressive couples manage violence differently, resulting in a relational culture that is divergent from nonviolent couples, we need more research that directly examines the relationship between aggression and communication competence and that which is grounded in the lived experiences of the individuals. Toward that end, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: How do individuals experiencing aggression during conflicts evaluate their own communication competence?

RQ2: How do individuals experiencing aggression during conflicts evaluate their partner's communication competence?

METHOD

The method used in this study was within the interpretive, qualitative tradition (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of qualitative research is to gain an in-depth understanding of human experience and the meaning individuals ascribe to those experiences (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Maxwell, 1996).

Data Collection Procedures

Stage one of data collection. Stage one of the data collection process involved a series of steps taken to create a sample that represented maximum variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), maximum variation is a purposeful sampling strategy intended to capture diverse variations of a specific phenomenon in order to identify important common patterns. This sampling strategy was used in the present study to create an initial sample of individuals who all had experienced aggression and who also had significant variation in the level of aggression experienced.
Participants were recruited from the community-at-large via referrals from acquaintances and colleagues and communication classes at a large Midwestern university and two urban community colleges. This convenience sample of men and women completed a short sampling survey that included three conflict scenarios, describing different ways couples may resolve conflicts, including the use of mild aggression, moderate to severe violence, or no violence (see Table 1). (1) The individuals chose which scenario most accurately represented how they and their partners managed conflict. A fourth open-ended option, entitled "Other" was included, allowing the participants to describe their own scenario should the others not reflect their own conflict management history.

A manipulation check was completed before distributing the sampling survey to potential participants. Sixty-two individuals read the three scenarios and indicated, on a 5 point Likert Scale, the severity of the violence. The Wilks' Lambda test was significant, ([lambda] = .671, p = < .05), indicating significant differences among the three descriptions. Follow-up paired t-tests revealed significant differences between the descriptions: Moderate/Severe Violence and Mild Aggression descriptions (M = .32, SD = 1.20), t (61) = 2.12, p < .05; Moderate/Severe Violence and the No Violence descriptions (M = 1.45, SD = 2.24), t (61) = 5.11, p < .001; and the No Violence and the Mild Aggression descriptions (M = -1.13; SD = 1.65), t (61) = -5.37, p < .001.

In total, 142 individuals completed the sampling survey, 86 of whom received extra credit from instructors for so doing. Eighty-two of the 142 participants (58%) indicated that they had experienced some form of aggression within their relationship. Additionally, of the 142 completed questionnaires, 87 individuals (61%) volunteered for interviews. Of that 87, 60 (69%) individuals reported experiencing aggression. The interview sample came from this group of 60.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conflict Scenarios Presented in Sampling Survey</strong></td>
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<td>1. <strong>Mild Aggression</strong> While we try to resolve our conflicts in the best way we can, one or both of us, at least once within the last 5 years or less of our relationship, has insulted or swore at the other, called or refused to talk, stomped out of the room, cried or said something to spite the other one. (One or both of us may have even threatened to hit or throw something at the other person, or kicked, hit, threw, or smashed something out of frustration.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Moderate to Severe Violence</strong> While we try to resolve our conflicts in the best way we can, at least once within the last 5 years or less of our relationship, one or both of us has reacted to the anger by physically pushing, shoving, slapping, biting, or throwing something at the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>No Aggression or Violence</strong> While my partner and I have occasional conflicts, we are able to discuss and resolve the issue calmly and without any name calling, verbal insults, or physical displays of anger.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Other:</strong></td>
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*Note: The bracketed terms were not included in the sampling survey presented to participants.*

Stage two of data collection. Stage two of the data collection process involved conducting follow-up interviews with 31 individuals who, in the first stage, indicated they had experienced aggression and were willing to be interviewed. Again using the sampling strategy of maximum variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994), individuals selected for the interviews reported experiencing various levels of aggression. Specifically, of the 31 participants (26 females, 5 males) interviewed, 21 had checked the mild aggression scenario, five the moderate-severe violence scenario, two the mild and moderate-severe scenarios, one all three, and two the "other" category. Those individuals who checked the Other category completed interviews because of their use of verbal aggression and the desire to interview individuals who had experienced various levels of aggression.
The interviewees ranged in age with fifteen of them between the ages of 19-25, nine between 26-36, six between 36-50, and one was over 50. While five of the individuals were not currently in a relationship, three of them had ended one within three months prior to our interview, one within six months, and one within 12 months. Two of these five had been married but had divorced within three months of the interview. Therefore, 26 of the 31 individuals were involved in a romantic, heterosexual relationship at the time of the interview. Of the 26, 17 were married, two were cohabiting, and seven were dating but not cohabiting. The relationships for these 26 individuals ranged in length with five being together more than 10 years (range = 12-49 yrs.), six 5-10 years, nine 3-4 years, four 1-2 years, and two being together less than one year. Nineteen of the 31 were college students (many of whom were older than the 18 to 22 traditional college age) and 27 employed. The sample also included 28 European Americans, 1 African American, 1 Native American, and 1 Asian American.

The interviews, conducted in private locations chosen by the participants, were audiotaped and lasted an average of 67 minutes (range = 40 to 110). The interview began with the participants completing a brief demographic questionnaire. The verbal portion of the interview involved the use of a modified version of the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT). Used by other scholars to capture romantic relationship development (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), blended family development (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), post-divorce relational changes (Graham, 1997), and organizational socialization (Bullis & Bach, 1989), the RIT allows researchers to develop a portrait of a particular phenomenon over time (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981). More specifically, researchers using the RIT typically ask interview participants to identify and plot on a graph significant turning points in their relationship. The abscissa axis on the graph usually symbolizes time in a predetermined amount, such as months or years. The ordinate axis represents some relational outcome such as commitment or closeness, typically measured in percentiles ranging from 0% to 100%. At each turning point, the interviewer probes for additional information about that point.

In the present study, a modified version of the RIT was used to identify, over time, critical incidents defined as the use of verbal and/or physical aggression in conflicts that "stood out to" to the participants and involved the use of aggression. Participants marked on the X axis the month and year of conflicts involving aggression and indicated on the Y axis the degree of severity of the aggressive behavior (ranging from 0% to 100%). To help standardize the process, the individuals focused on the lessor of the most recent five years or the entire length of the relationship.

After the participants identified a critical incident (conflict involving the use of aggression), the interviewer asked them the same series of questions about the conflict in general (e.g., Please describe what happened during this conflict episode. What did you [your partner] do and say?), their use of aggression (e.g., In instances where physical or verbal aggression was used, why do you think it was used?), and their assessment of communication competence during each incident (e.g., How appropriate do you think your [your partner's] actions were during the conflict episode? How effective do you think your [your partner's] actions were during the conflict episode?). This process of
identifying the time and date of a critical incident, plotting severity of aggression, and describing the conflict in detail continued until the participants had discussed each critical incident they recalled or until the maximum five year time frame had been exhausted.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 967 pages of text-based data that was then analyzed qualitatively. (2) More specifically, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) was used to identify common patterns and themes. This process entailed three phases. First, each transcript was read two times to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. Second, using the NUD.IST software program, the researcher coded each transcript according to common themes and categories (Huberman & Miles, 1998).

During the second phase, the researcher qualitatively analyzed communication competence in two ways. First, after describing a specific conflict episode involving aggression, individuals were asked to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness (the two dimensions of competence) of their and their partner's use of aggression. Participants defined these terms for themselves. However, in the rare instances when the interviewees needed clarification, the interviewer made follow-up statements after each question to clarify the meaning of the terms, appropriate and effective. For example, to clarify the meaning of appropriateness, the interviewer stated, "By appropriate, I mean was it socially correct given the specific context?" For effectiveness, the interviewer stated, "By effective, I mean were you [your partner] able to get what you [he/she] wanted?" The researcher inductively identified common themes from the participants' responses to these descriptions. Second, the judgment of both the effectiveness and appropriateness for each conflict episode was coded and combined to determine the presence of the four dimensions of competence, maximizing (effective-inappropriate), sufficing (ineffective-appropriate), minimizing (ineffective-inappropriate), and optimizing (effective-appropriate, Spitzberg et al., 1994). For example, when a participant described her aggressive actions used during a specific conflict as effective but inappropriate, the researcher coded an instance of maximizing. This same process was used to identify the other three dimensions of competence as well.

Finally, after the various themes and categories were identified, the data were reviewed one last time, checking for any significant discrepant, or unaccounted for, cases (Huberman & Miles, 1998). Rigorous examination of the data revealed several discrepancies relating to the four dimensions of communication competence. Specifically, many of the participants' assessment of their competence did not fit into the categories created by Spitzberg and colleagues (1994). Thus, the analysis led to the identification of new dimensions specific to these relationships presented later in the results section.

RESULTS

Participants' Assessment of Their Communication Competence
Participants' appropriateness. For the most part, participants' assessment of their own appropriateness during conflict episodes was very much in line with social conventions. They felt they acted appropriately when direct, tactful, and non-aggressive. In fact, several individuals used the level or type of aggression as a marker of appropriateness.

Some participants judged avoidant types of behavior and communication as appropriate because it prevented the conflict from escalating. While, on the other hand, some participants viewed avoidance and silence as an inappropriate means of preventing an aggressive interaction with partners. In Kathy's (3) instance, her lack of silence prompted her to judge an interaction with her husband as inappropriate. She explained, "I don't think I was appropriate. I should never, I mean, not saying I shouldn't stand up for myself, but I should know better than to challenge the situation when he's in that bad mood, or when he's been drinking" (1088-1090). (4)

So, while participants assessed some of their communication as appropriate, they admitted to communicating inappropriately as well. The assessment of inappropriateness usually included instances when they were either verbally or physically aggressive. For instance, Tiffany admitted to being inappropriate and acting "ridiculous" for insulting her boyfriend's mother during a conflict. Liz disclosed that her communication was inappropriate because "swearing is not needed to get your point across" (532).

In addition to the participants' assessment of their communication as appropriate or inappropriate, there were several instances when they judged their communication as both appropriate and inappropriate. One example of this included several participants' disclosure that, while their behavior and communication may have been inappropriate, they, in retrospect, did not think they could or would have handled it differently. Carrie's description captured this sentiment. When asked about her appropriateness during a specific conflict episode, Carrie mentioned,

Well, I think I got too angry, but I don't think it was, I mean, I should have been more civil about the whole thing. I think it would have been a lot better if I had kept myself not so angry, but if it happened again or it, I mean, when I think about it, I don't think I could have prevented the anger. (777-781)

Other individuals had similar assessments of their appropriateness. To them, their behavior and communication was both appropriate and inappropriate simultaneously. It was a both/and situation rather than an either/or. Anger influenced their judgment of appropriateness, justifying the use of aggression. Many participants viewed aggressiveness as appropriate because it was a justified reaction to the situation. Kristi was one individual who depicted an instance of justifiable aggression that she viewed as appropriate. She and her husband were living in Germany at the time, and he surprised her with the announcement that they were moving back to the United States, not having consulted with her. This announcement led to a physically aggressive encounter between the two of them. When asked how appropriate she felt her behavior and communication were, Kristi responded as follows,
In crying and getting hysterical and upset? Extremely. I really, I mean, the physical part of it even. I felt that, I felt that it was warranted. And, I still feel that that was one place where I was entirely in the right (chuckles). I don't feel guilty about that exchange at all.... Um, because I wasn't given any sort of choice. I wasn't given any say or warning that this was happening. That this was forced upon me and because it was forced upon me, I had a right to react in whatever manner would best express what I was feeling. (896-912)

Tina mentioned an instance when her aggression was deemed appropriate because it was a form of self-defense. She and her husband had had an argument that included physical aggression on both of their parts. When assessing the appropriateness of her actions and communication, Tina indicated,

At the time, I thought it was warranted because I felt threatened. And, I felt scared and I felt, I knew at that point that I had to basically nip the bud right away to let him know I wasn't going to tolerate certain things.... Because there was no way I was going to let that man, that size, pin me down, and leave me helpless. (967-997)

For some of the participants, like Kristina and Tina, aggression became a justifiable means of defense or expression of anger and, therefore, they judged it appropriate.

Another instance when participants felt their communication was both appropriate and inappropriate was when they had different conflict styles from their partners. So, while they felt their communication was inappropriate according to social standards, they deemed it appropriate given the context and the specific interaction. For example, Lisa, a more confrontative communicator, believed her aggressive behavior was inappropriate, but justified, because it was the only way to get her husband's, an avoidant communicator, attention. Additionally, participants contextually evaluated the appropriateness of their aggressive communication within their relationships. Liz's comment revealed such an assessment when she stated, "Appropriate for me. Maybe not appropriate for someone else (chuckles). Appropriate for my relationship, yes" (1550-1552).

Finally, several individuals noted that their communication was both appropriate and inappropriate throughout different stages of the conflict. Their behavior may have started out appropriate and become inappropriate or vice versa. Most often, this represented an initial calmness or tactfulness that was deemed appropriate, followed by aggression that was judged inappropriate. Dave explained this process, "I think they were appropriate, um, on me telling her what I wanted. But, it wasn't appropriate with me taking it to the level that I did" (889-891). This finding underscores the dynamic, evolving nature of conflict and highlights the fact that communication competence is not a static phenomenon.

Participants' effectiveness. Similar to the evaluation of the appropriateness of their communication and behavior, many participants' judged the effectiveness of their actions according to social standards. Many participants admitted that they were most effective when they were able to calmly, directly, and tactfully discuss the conflict with their partners. Several of them stated that their effectiveness was a result of not only being
calm but of also showing a willingness to listen. For others, non-reciprocated anger was effective because it stopped the argument from escalating. The effectiveness of non-reciprocated anger was exemplified in the following excerpt from John,

I guess probably for myself, I thought I was effective by not yelling back per se. Cause I feel like if you, if both people are just yelling back and forth nothing gets resolved and the conflict just gets more heated, I guess. (483-485)

Another instance in which non-reciprocated aggression was viewed as effective was described by Mark who, in the middle of an extremely aggressive argument with his wife, was able to maintain control. Mark remarked,

I was [effective] because I avoided losing control. That's the only respect that I was effective is that, that I got right dead center in the middle of the ring, and there was no gloves on, there was no holes barred, and I actually, I was able to not do something that I would regret.... So, as ugly and painful as it was, it was effective. (1478-1485)

According to several participants, such as John and Mark, maintaining self-control by not engaging aggressively in the argument was one of their most effective means of communicating. This theme was most apparent in couples experiencing higher forms of aggression and described by participants who appeared to be the recipients of the aggression. It was an indirect, yet effective, form of self-defense. However, for John and several others, there was a fine line between non-reciprocated aggression and perceived nonengagement on the part of their partners. In other words, sometimes their partners perceived the participants' lack of affect as not being involved in or committed to the issue at hand. The partners' perception sometimes prompted them to become angrier with the participants. In some instances, the partner's heightened state of anger led to the participants finally engaging in the conflict, creating a pattern of escalating symmetry. As a result, the participants occasionally viewed themselves as less effective communicators.

While some participants viewed aggression as an ineffective form of communication, others reported that aggression was an effective form of communication, helping them achieve their goals. After several failed calmer attempts at conflict resolution, many participants mentioned that the use of aggression was effective because it was a way to get their partner's attention or to get their partners to take them seriously. Others noted that the use of aggression, while inappropriate, was effective because it deviated from the way in which they usually reacted to conflict. For example, Debbie described an instance where her use of verbal aggression was effective because it was unusual for her to react in such a way. Her aggression made her boyfriend take notice. She commented,

I think it was very effective because I don't think I'd ever stand up to him like that and I would completely yell what I thought was wrong. And, what I thought needed to be done, and why he was being such an ass [chuckles]. So, I don't think he ever thought I would ever say those things. And, I wasn't saying anything mean, it was just I stood up for what I thought was right and usually I'm really laid back, and "ok, whatever," you know? (503-509)
Assessment of one's effectiveness changed over the course of the conflict. Participants described conflict episodes in which their effectiveness lessened the angrier and more aggressive they became. While they viewed lower levels of aggression as effective, the participants reported that the use of higher, more severe types of aggression lessened their effectiveness because it either caused their partners to retreat or to retaliate with heightened aggression as well. In instances in which the partner retreated, the conflict was not resolved, making the use of aggression an ineffective conflict tactic. Further, when partners retaliated with their own aggression, the conflict often escalated out of control, resulting in conflicts that "got out of hand" and became unresolvable due to the use of high levels of aggression by both parties.

Conversely, others stated that they became more effective during conflicts when they became angrier and more aggressive. As previously mentioned, several participants remarked that they would attempt to resolve the conflict calmly. But after several failed attempts, they would resort to the use of aggression out of frustration and anger because of their partner's apparent lack of involvement in the conflict or lack of desire to address the issue. They reported that it was only by becoming angrier and more aggressive that they were able to successfully get their partner's attention and resolve the issue. As a result, they believed their heightened aggression was effective when used under such circumstances.

Interestingly, assessment of one's effectiveness changed over the course of the relationship. Several participants noted that their effectiveness in using aggression to get their partner's attention often waned over time. The use of aggression lost its effectiveness because the partners became desensitized to it. The partners were no longer as upset by the verbal or physical outbursts because they became a "normal" part of the initiator's repertoire of conflict tactics. This desensitization process happened with Lisa, who said, "It's like, it doesn't get to him as much as I used to when I'd get, you know, yell at him and get upset" (1482-1484). The potential danger of this pattern is that while Lisa's aggressive conflict style was becoming less effective, her husband's was becoming more aggressive and, therefore, more effective in accomplishing his goals. Several participants noted that the recipients of the aggression, like Lisa's husband, would occasionally begin to match the initiator's aggression with his or her own. In so doing, the initiator's use of aggression became less effective, while the other's aggression became more effective because it deviated from his or her previous pattern of nonengagement. The danger in this pattern, however, is that it set in motion a cycle of one-upmanship characterized by ever-increasing aggression.

Participants' Assessment of Their Partners' Communication Competence

Partners' appropriateness. The participants' assessment of their partners' appropriateness was similar to the judgments made of their own. More specifically, the participants felt their partners were most appropriate when communicating in empathic, nonaggressive ways. Several participants also felt that their partners' aggressive responses were appropriate when done in self-defense or as a response to the participants' initiated acts of aggression.
Another instance when participants judged their partners' aggression as appropriate was when they perceived it to be a learned behavior or innate characteristic. For example, Airin reported that her boyfriend's physical aggression was appropriate "seeing what he was coming from" (701). As with Airin and several others, the participants excused their partner's aggression because they came from families that communicated aggressively with one another or from families that were characterized as abusive. Due to their partner's childhood circumstances, the participants believed that their partners "didn't know any better," or were the way they were because that was how they were taught to communicate in their families of origin. These findings suggest that a person's assessment of his/her partner's appropriate use of aggression is related to the latter's exposure to violence as a child. This previous exposure then becomes a rationalization and justification for a partner's future acts of aggression. In these instances, the untoward behavior is judged appropriate because of childhood circumstances.

In contrast, several participants judged their partners' communication as inappropriate when the partners acted defensively or aggressively. For example, when asked why she perceived her partner's communication as inappropriate, Tori stated, "because he never tried to calmly talk about it. He just started yelling from the first moment and then he started pushing me and that is very inappropriate in my opinion" (1186-1188). Other participants judged their partners' communication as inappropriate for defensively dismissing the participants' feelings. For instance, one of the male participants, John, commented that his wife's tendency to "shoot down his ideas" (880) hurt him and therefore was inappropriate.

Several participants believed their partner's communication was inappropriate if he or she avoided the conflict. Lisa, for example, felt her husband was inappropriate because he "doesn't stick up for himself. He doesn't give me his opinion about the conflict. He just doesn't say really anything" (452-453). Others complained that their partners were inappropriate for not being willing to communicate at all. They were completely disengaged and ignored everything.

Partners' effectiveness. The participants judged their partners' effectiveness in ways similar to their own. Several individuals noted that their partners were most effective when they remained or became calm, respectful, and nonaggressive. Additionally, the more the partners listened and sought understanding, the more effective they were judged to be.

In contrast, other participants stated that their partners were most effective when they acted aggressively. For some, it underscored the seriousness of the argument and got their attention. John's judgment of his wife's aggression reflected this assessment, "I guess as far as the raising her voice and stuff, I think that gets the point across to me more than, and makes me think about it more" (506-507). For others, their partners' acts of verbal aggression were effective in silencing participants, causing them to "give up" or "drop" the argument. Or, in Hannah's case, her partners' aggression scared her enough to reconsider how much she would engage her partner in future arguments. She explained, "basically he scared me and so actually just maybe he taught me a lesson that I'm not
Conversely, partners' acts of aggression were sometimes judged as ineffective because it made the participants ignore or "shut out" their partners. In Sarah's case, her husband's stomping and slamming of doors lost its effect on her because, in her words, "I grew numb to it after awhile" (1259-1260). In other instances, their partners' use of aggression made the participants even madder, causing the arguments to escalate. These individuals were typically not deterred by the aggression and, instead, stood up to their partners because, as Liz stated, "we're both strong people" (557). Severe acts of aggression were viewed as ineffective because they were so damaging to the relationship. While such acts could be viewed as effective, some of the participants who experienced this type of aggression described them as having the opposite effect. The partners' use of severe aggression lost its effectiveness because of the emotional damage it caused the participants. As a self-defense mechanism, these individuals eventually disengaged emotionally and/or physically from the relationship, making their partners' aggressive communication ineffective.

The Impact of Aggression on the Assessment of Communication Competence

Dimensions of communication competence. By combining the participants' assessment of their own and their partners' appropriateness and effectiveness, the dimensions of their communication competence were identified. Specifically, the results of the second phase of the present analysis revealed that participants' and their partners reportedly used some optimizing (effective-appropriate), sufficing (ineffective-appropriate), and minimizing (ineffective-inappropriate) in their conflict episodes. More commonly, however, the participants described instances of maximizing. Because these types of interactions often involved the use of aggression, they were judged effective but inappropriate. For example, Tiffany described how inappropriate but effective her boyfriend was during a conflict in which he had been verbally aggressive toward her in front of friends. When asked how appropriate she thought his actions were, Tiffany stated,

Oh, very inappropriate. That comment first of all was just, whether he meant it to be a joke or not, you know, it's like the whole principle of the thing, kinda, you know? ... Honestly, he doesn't understand why that hurt me so. (969-972)

Further, when asked if she thought he was effective, Tiffany commented,

Yeah ... I mean, I eventually gave up. Maybe that's what he wanted, you know, to just end like the discussion or whatever. Not saying anything is gonna work. Like talking to a brick wall, you know? I gave up, so, yeah, I think it was effective. (986-989)

Tiffany's experience is representative of many others who described the maximizing dimension of communication competence. In other words, the behavior was inappropriate but extremely effective. Unfortunately for several, the inappropriateness involved severe
verbal and physical aggression that was an extremely effective communicative means for achieving the aggressor's intended goal.

Although maximizing was a frequently reported dimension of communication competence, further analysis indicated that many of the participants' assessment of their aggression did not fit into the extant categories. Furthermore, in many instances, the participants' unique evaluation of aggression as a competent form of communication diverged from social norms, revealing a nontraditional judgment of aggression. These unexpected observations led to the creation of three new variations to the Spitzberg, Canary, and Cupach (1994) typology.

The most frequent type of interaction was labeled "unyielding." This category was operationalized as communication that was ineffective and inappropriate but was not a form of avoiding or minimizing as defined by Spitzberg and colleagues (1994). Instead, the individuals' communication was engaging, direct, and aggressive. John's experience was representative of others who described unyielding forms of competence. Specifically, after describing a conflict with his wife that had involved the use of both verbal and physical aggression, John assessed his actions, "I don't think they were very appropriate cause it didn't do anything for the argument. It just made it escalate at an even pace. Each of us were just going up at the same rate" (1067-1069). He further stated that his actions were also very ineffective because, "what we started arguing about got lost in the mix" (1097-1098). As evidenced in John's description, unyielding forms of communication, while inappropriate and ineffective, were not characterized by a minimizing posture, but, instead, took on a more combative tone.

The second new interaction labeled, "vindicating," involved communication which was judged appropriate and effective but not in a positive, optimizing way. Rather, it was judged as justifiable, appropriate aggression and viewed as effective. Mark's situation captured the essence of this dimension of competence. After experiencing an escalating pattern of verbal and emotional abuse from his wife, Mark had had enough. One particularly aggressive conflict stood out in which Mark verbally fought back. He explained,

The aggression was just a huge exclamation mark that I was as serious as I was. The words themselves probably would have rolled off her back. But, I said it in such an angry tone that any other human being listening to the conversation would have said, "hey, the sonofabitch is serious! You better listen. Don't push this one." This is not, "I'm kidding." This is serious life or death. (1751-1755)

In his mind, Mark felt completely justified acting so aggressively because of the type of abuse he had endured. Thus, he felt his aggressive actions during the conflict were completely appropriate and "fantastically effective" (1786). Like Mark, others described engaging in aggression that they believed was an appropriate and effective form of vindication, thus revealing an important and unique relationship between aggression and competence.
Finally, the third new interaction was labeled, "agitating," and included communication that was judged appropriate but ineffective. It differed from the sufficing category, however, in that it involved the person aggressively standing up for him or herself but was ineffective while doing so. Debbie, for instance, described a verbally aggressive encounter while making wedding plans with her husband-to-be. According to Debbie, her husband acted appropriately because she "started it and raised [her] voice. It was appropriate because it was equal to [hers]" (821-822). However, even though his aggression was understandable, it was still ineffective in getting Debbie to change her actions. So, while one person often agitated the situation by challenging the other, their actions were unable to create change, thus proving ineffective.

DISCUSSION

In general, many participants judged their communication competence according to social convention. Further, the participants' use of aggression indicated an inability to communicate competently, supporting the findings of other researchers (e.g., Cordova et al., 1993; deTurck, 1987; Infante et al., 1989; Infante et al., 1990; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995).

Interestingly, however, there were several instances when the participants reported that the use of aggression was appropriate. For some, the use of aggression was actually viewed as a constructive way of dealing with their conflicts because it helped them "clear the air," get their partner's attention, and reach resolution sooner. Others noted that a particularly aggressive episode was constructive because it became a relationship-changing event, forever altering the way they and their partners dealt with conflict. For others, the assessment of aggression as an acceptable form of communication competence involved the use of "justifiable aggression." So, while the aggression was inappropriate by social standards, they felt its use was appropriate given the situational context. Participants assessed partners' use of aggression as appropriate when they perceived it to be a learned or innate characteristic or the result of past exposure to violence as a child. Domestic violence researcher Lenore Walker (1979, 1983) also found in her study of abused women that they often believed their partners' use of aggression was an appropriate way of dealing with their anger because it had been learned in their families of origin. The results of the present study also show support for people's tendency to use the Social Learning Theory of aggression (for reviews, see Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 1997; O'Leary, 1988) as justification for their partners' untoward behavior.

Moreover, the participants reported that the use of aggression was most effective when it deviated from a relational partners' normal pattern of behavior. This deviation was effective because it prompted the other partner to take notice. The participants described situations when effectiveness changed over the course of a conflict and/or the relationship. For example, some individuals reported that the angrier they became, the more effective they were. Conversely, some individuals stated that their use of aggression became less effective over time. Its effect on their partner "wore off."
By combining the dimensions of appropriateness and effectiveness, the analysis found that the participants and their partners frequently employed the "maximizing" form of communication competence (Spitzberg et al., 1994). In other words, they used several communication patterns that were inappropriate but still effective. However, their use of aggression also indicated a unique assessment of communication competence. This evaluation deviated from social standards. More specifically, while many participants noted that the use of aggression was an incompetent form of communication, they also described many instances when employing aggression was appropriate and effective, allowing them to justifiably achieve their goals. Further, the assessment of the appropriateness and effectiveness of their aggressive behaviors did not fit within the Spitzberg et al. (1994) categories of communication competence. Thus, three new dimensions of communication competence were identified and labeled, unyielding, vindicating, and agitating.

While this study provides new insight in aggressive couples' communication competence, a few limitations must be noted. First, the heavily-weighted female and European American sample sets limitations of the generalizability of the findings. It is quite possible that other cultures may view the relationship between aggression and communication competence differently. Future studies need to intentionally sample more males and racially diverse individuals to ascertain whether such differences exist. A second limitation to the present study was the focus on the "conflicts which got out of hand." While a narrower perspective allowed for a deeper understanding of interpersonal aggression, the findings need to tempered and caution must be used when generalizing to aggressive couples' communication patterns as a whole. The next step, as also suggested by Lloyd (1996) and Sabourin and Stamp (1995), is to conduct more research that examines the everyday language of aggressive couples as compared to non-aggressive couples. While the results of the present study increase our awareness of how aggressive couples assess their communication competence during significant, memorable conflicts, analyses which focus on everyday talk and typical conflicts are needed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the holistic nature of how their communication competence functions on a daily basis.

Remaining mindful of the limitations, the current findings do have several theoretical and practical implications for the study of interpersonal aggression. First, giving the participants in the present study opportunity to judge their own and their partners' communication competence, rather than using objective measurements, allowed a unique perspective on how individuals experiencing aggression viewed their use of aggression to naturally emerge. These findings advance our understanding of how individuals in aggressive relationships assess communication competence, demonstrating important extensions of past communication competence research (i.e. Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1989, 1990; Spitzberg et al., 1994). Second, the results also advance our theoretical understanding of interpersonal aggression by not only helping us understand "what" and "how" violent couples communicate, but they also shed light on "why" certain couples use aggression. Such a perspective extends the individually based attribution research to one that is dyadically situated.
These findings have important practical implications as well. For instance, if a couple judged the use of aggression as appropriate and effective, then it may become an acceptable form of communication. Conversely, if seen as inappropriate and ineffective, then aggression should be a less acceptable form of communication. A few researchers (e.g., Greenblat, 1983; Sebastian, 1983) have examined the relational culture of violence. Sebastian (1983), for example, posited an "instigation and inhibition of aggression" hypothesis, indicating that if the strength of the instigation out-weighs the inhibition, then aggression will occur. In contrast, if inhibitions are stronger than instigation, then aggression will not occur. The role communication plays in creating different types of aggressive relational scripts is an especially important area in need of future examination. Such discoveries can provide important practical information for counselors working with couples and helping them to reconstruct aggression-free relational scripts.

TABLE 1
CONFLICT SCENARIOS PRESENTED IN SAMPLING SURVEY

1. [Mild Aggression] While we try to resolve our conflicts in the best way we can, one or both of us, at least once within the last 5 years or less of our relationship, has insulted or swore at the other, sulked or refused to talk, stomped out of the room, cried, or said something to spite the other one. One or both of us may have even threatened to hit or throw something at the other person, or kicked, hit, threw, or smashed something out of frustration.

2. [Moderate to Severe Violence] While we try to resolve our conflicts in the best way we can, at least once within the last 5 years or less of our relationship, one or both of us has reacted to the anger by actually pushing, shoving, slapping, biting, or throwing something at the other person.

3. [No Aggression or Violence] While my partner and I have occasional conflicts, we are able to discuss and resolve the issue calmly and without any name-calling, verbal insults, or physical displays of anger.

4. Other: --

Note. The bracketed terms were not included in the sampling survey presented to participants.

NOTES

(1) The descriptions were created based upon the types of violence captured by the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). They were developed as a way to efficiently screen and identify individuals who had experienced different types of aggression. Attachment scholars (e.g., Guerrero, 1996; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Shaver & Hazan, 1993) have used a similar technique and have found that individuals reliably report relational styles based upon brief descriptions.
The raw data are available for review upon request to the author.

To protect their confidentiality, all participants' names are fictitious.

The numbers in parentheses represent the transcript lines from the NUD.IST data file. So, for example, this quote from Kathy was on lines 1088-1090 of the NUD.IST file.

REFERENCES


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