Trajectories of Change in Physical Aggression and Marital Satisfaction

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Physical aggression and marital satisfaction were assessed in 172 newlywed couples annually over the first 4 years of marriage to examine (a) stability of aggression over time and (b) the degree to which fluctuations in aggression precede versus follow fluctuations in marital satisfaction. The stability of aggression varied as a function of initial levels of severity; spouses who were most aggressive early in marriage had greater fluctuations in aggression. Rates of change in aggression predicted changes in satisfaction more than dissatisfaction predicted aggression. Husbands’ physical aggression predicted marital discord, whereas wives’ aggression predicted marital dissolution. By indicating that aggression (a) is a precursor to adverse marital outcomes and (b) varies across spouses in initial levels and in patterns of temporal change, the present findings highlight the need to understand the contextual factors that govern within-person and within-couple fluctuations in intimate violence.

Keywords: aggression, violence, marriage, abuse, couples

Physical aggression occurs in about half of all new marriages (Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Leonard & Senchak, 1996; O’Leary et al., 1989) and has harmful effects on the physical and psychological well-being of victims and their children (Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996). Recent studies help to delineate theoretically significant characteristics of aggressive partners and their relationships (including personality styles, patterns of alcohol use, aggression in their families of origin, and marital satisfaction; see Leonard, Collins, & Quigley, 2003; Schumacher, Feldbau-Kohn, Slep, & Heyman, 2001), and there is growing recognition of the need for longitudinal analyses that describe and explain marital aggression as it unfolds over time (O’Leary & Cascardi, 1998). Prospective intergenerational studies are clear in documenting the early familial roots of later aggression in intimate relationships (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Mag-dol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998), but basic questions remain regarding (a) whether aggression fluctuates over time versus remains stable in marriage and (b) whether aggression foreshadows versus follows from relationship distress. The present study was designed to address these two issues, using multivariate data on physical aggression and marital satisfaction collected over 4 years from a sample of newlywed couples as they negotiate the early, high-risk period for marital distress and dissolution.

Clarifying the temporal nature of physical aggression in marriage is important because evidence of stability would draw attention to within-subjects factors in explanatory frameworks (e.g., personality disorders, family backgrounds), whereas evidence of change would implicate relatively transient within-subject (e.g., substance use, job stress) and within-marriage variables (e.g., communication processes) as contributors. Several studies shed light on change in aggression, and they point to three main conclusions. First, there tends to be continuity in relationship aggression, in that partners aggressing early in a relationship are likely to aggress later in the relationship. For example, Capaldi, Shortt, and Crosby (2003) found that 60% of men and 68% of women who were physically aggressive toward their partners at age 18 or 19 were physically aggressive toward these same partners 2 years later, and Quigley and Leonard (1996) found that 76% of husbands who were aggressive during the first year of marriage engaged in aggression over the next 2 years. Second, the use of aggression in a relationship tends to decline over time. O’Leary et al. (1989) reported that wives’ prevalence rates declined significantly from 44% before marriage to 36% at 18 months to 32% at 30 months, whereas husbands’ prevalence rates declined nonsignificantly from 31% to 27% to 25%, suggesting that gender may moderate the association between aggression and time. Similar prevalence rates over
time have been found in other samples (Woffordt, Mihalic, & Menard, 1994). Finally, the severity of early aggression appears to predict whether aggression will continue. In the Quigley and Leonard (1996) study, husbands who engaged in an isolated incident of minor physical aggression in Year 1 were most likely to desist in Years 2 and 3, whereas those using severe aggression were least likely to desist.

In sum, existing longitudinal studies suggest that although aggression tends to decline in the early years of marriage, it does continue over time for a significant proportion of couples, and the severity of early aggression may predict its course. Less apparent from these studies is information about the form that these changes take. One possibility is that aggression will increase in severity over time. Indeed, Patterson’s (1982) coercion and reciprocity model would suggest that escalation is reinforced through a process of negative reinforcement. Feminist or patriarchal theories of aggression would also suggest that aggression increases over time as aggressive spouses exert more control over their victims (Koss et al., 1995; Walker, 2000). A second possibility is that aggression will decrease over time as spouses (or relationships) mature. Indeed, existing cross-sectional studies demonstrate an association between overall prevalence rates of physical aggression and age, with older couples reporting lower levels of aggression (Pan, Neidig, & O’Leary, 1994). In the O’Leary et al. (1989) longitudinal sample, aggression declined over time significantly for wives and nonsignificantly for husbands. A third possibility is that aggression might fluctuate (alternately increase and decrease over time) longitudinally as a function of some external variable. For example, a vulnerability–stress model would suggest that for couples who are inclined to use aggressive tactics during conflict, the severity of the aggression might increase during times of increased stress (e.g., transition to parenthood, job instability) and then decrease once the salience of the immediate stressor subsides. Given the range of possible developmental trajectories, the first goal of the present study was to build on prior studies by examining 4-year changes in physical aggression, particularly as a function of initial severity.

Clarifying whether aggression precedes or follows from marital distress and instability also has important implications for how aggression is conceptualized and treated. On one hand, assuming that aggression precedes relationship distress will lead to questions about the origin and magnitude of this effect and about the steps that can be taken to contain aggression. Conversely, assuming that aggression is a consequence of marital outcomes will lead to prioritizing other predictors of marital distress (e.g., deficits in communication and associated cognitions) and efforts to modify these factors as an indirect means of reducing aggression. Although there is a large and growing body of longitudinal research on marriage, aggression is rarely considered as a predictor of distress and dissolution (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), suggesting that it tends to be viewed more as a consequence of (rather than a precursor to) relationship difficulties. The few studies that do address this point indicate that the role of aggression in understanding marital satisfaction and stability is being underestimated.

To begin, evidence that aggression occurs at a surprisingly high rate among newlyweds (e.g., 52% of couples in Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; 57% of couples in O’Leary et al., 1989) is consistent with the possibility that aggression is present early in relationships and then erodes the quality of those relationships over time. Seminal studies help to corroborate this point and once again highlight the importance of distinguishing among more and less severe forms of aggression. In the O’Leary et al. (1989) study, partners of spouses who were stably aggressive over 30 months of marriage were more maritaly distressed than were partners of stably nonaggressive spouses, and wives who were victims of serious premarital aggression reported significant declines in marital satisfaction and increases in divorce-related thoughts over 30 months of marriage (Heyman, O’Leary, & Jouriles, 1995; also see Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2003). Similarly, Lawrence and Bradbury (2001) assessed aggression once early in marriage and then monitored marital distress and dissolution over the following 4 years. Severe, unremitting discord (defined in that study as Marital Adjustment Test scores that dropped and stayed below 80) was reported by 67% of the aggressive couples as compared with 25% of the nonaggressive couples; 44% of the aggressive marriages ended in divorce or permanent separation as compared with 21% of the nonaggressive marriages.

In sum, the few available studies indicate that aggression precedes the onset of marital distress and dissolution. Additional information is now needed on two important issues. First, although there is some evidence that prior levels of marital dissatisfaction do not predict initial incidents of physical aggression (Murphy & O’Leary, 1989), little is known about whether drops in relationship satisfaction instigate aggression in the early years of marriage. Analysis of this path is important, because it may suggest a vicious cycle whereby aggression gives rise to declines in satisfaction, which in turn leads to increases in aggression, and so on. The general trend for aggression to decline over time in marriage argues against this type of escalating pattern, yet O’Leary et al.’s (1989) finding that husbands’ aggression tends to be more stable than wives’ aggression hints at the possibility that drops in husbands’ satisfaction do serve to maintain their aggressive behavior. Second, the role of aggression severity in the association between aggression and marital distress is unclear. Contrary to predictions, Lawrence and Bradbury (2001) found that initially moderately aggressive couples were at no greater risk for marital distress or dissolution than were initially nonaggressive couples; both were at lower risk than initially severely aggressive couples. How could moderate aggression not elevate risk for marital discord and instability? One possibility is that moderate levels of aggressive acts, particularly if they are relatively rare and isolated, are discounted by spouses. Alternatively, initially nonaggressive couples may become moderately aggressive over time and thus achieve comparable outcomes to those couples who were moderately aggressive at the beginning of marriage. Finally, mod-
erately aggressive couples may become nonaggressive over time, such that they resemble nonaggressive couples in their outcomes. Multiwave data on aggression and marital satisfaction were collected in the present study to distinguish among these possibilities.

The first aim of the present study was to examine the changing nature of aggression over the early years of marriage. Two hypotheses were tested using 4-year trajectories of husbands’ and wives’ aggression, which were generated by analyzing the initial levels of aggression and rates of change in aggression over time. First, we predicted an association between initial levels of aggression and its continuation, such that initially nonaggressive spouses were expected to remain nonaggressive whereas initially aggressive spouses were expected to continue in their aggression. Second, an association was hypothesized between initial levels of aggression and changes in aggression over time. Specifically, to the extent that spouses’ levels of aggression were greater at the beginning of marriage, continuation of their aggression was expected to be more likely.

The second and more important aim of this study was to examine the degree to which aggression is a consequence of versus a precursor to relationship distress. Although longitudinal associations have been reported between aggression at one point in time and later relationship dissatisfaction, the covariation between these variables when represented as across-time trajectories has not been examined. Using growth curve modeling techniques, we estimated the temporal links between physical aggression and marital satisfaction in two ways. First, we used the initial level of each variable to account for variance in the parameters of the trajectory of the other variable. Here, aggression can be viewed as a precursor to marital distress to the extent that initial levels of physical aggression predict changes in marital satisfaction more than initial satisfaction predicts changes in aggression. Second, we used rates of change in one variable to account for changes in the other variable. At this level, aggression can be considered a precursor to marital distress to the extent that changes in aggression are associated more strongly with trajectories of marital satisfaction than changes in satisfaction are associated with the trajectories of aggression (Karney & Bradbury, 2000).

Extrapolating from existing findings (Heyman et al., 1995; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; O’Leary et al., 1989), we predicted that initial levels of aggression and rates of change in aggression would predict rates of change in satisfaction, whereas initial levels of satisfaction and rates of change in satisfaction would not predict changes in aggression. Few data address the link between changes in satisfaction and aggression; thus, forming a strong hypothesis on this point was not possible. Following Murphy and O’Leary (1989), we adopted a conservative position on the link between changes in satisfaction and subsequent aggression and predicted that it would not be reliable, supporting the predictive dominance of aggression over satisfaction for husbands and for wives. Finally, initial levels of aggression and changes in aggression were used to predict marital dissolution. Prior research (Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999) leads to the prediction that dissolution will be more likely to the extent that initial levels of aggression are higher and rates of aggression are more stable (i.e., do not decline over time).

**Method**

**Participants**

 Couples who applied for marriage licenses (N = 3,606) were sent letters inviting them to participate in a research project on marriage. Individuals who contacted the laboratory were given a description of the project and were asked questions to determine their eligibility. Couples were eligible to participate if the spouses were between the ages of 18 and 35, were in their first marriages, had been married less than 6 months, were living together, had no children, were not currently expecting a child, were in good health, had at least a 10th-grade education, and could read and speak English. More than 637 couples contacted the laboratory, and 56% of those couples met all of the eligibility requirements. The first 172 who met criteria and kept their scheduled laboratory appointment were included in the sample. Five couples provided fewer than three data points, and their data were removed. Data were missing from three other spouses so that trajectories could be estimated only for one partner. Consequently, data from 164 couples were analyzed.

Husbands averaged 27.6 (SD = 3.9) years of age, 15.6 (SD = 2.2) years of education, and a gross annual income ranging from $21,000 to $30,000. Wives averaged 26.0 (SD = 3.4) years of age, 16.2 (SD = 2.1) years of education, and a gross annual income ranging from $11,000 to $20,000. Sixty-four percent identified themselves as Caucasian, and 36% identified themselves as ethnic minorities; the latter figure compares favorably with U.S. Census data on ethnicity (43%) and with the marital literature, in which minority participants are rare. There were no significant differences between initially aggressive and nonaggressive husbands and wives on age, education, income, or race.

**Procedure**

After eligibility was confirmed through a telephone screening process, couples who had been married less than 6 months were scheduled for a 3-hr laboratory session (Year 0). First, spouses completed a set of questionnaires, including the measures analyzed in the present study. Second, spouses completed a series of procedures beyond the scope of the present study. Couples were paid $75 for these sessions. Every 12 months thereafter (Years 1–3), couples were mailed similar questionnaires, which they completed at home, and were paid $25. For all questionnaires, spouses were instructed to "complete the questionnaires independently and seal their completed packets in the separate envelopes provided."

**Measures**

 The Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979) is an 18-item self-report inventory of conflict tactics. The items include rational
problem solving and psychologically aggressive, withdrawing, and physically aggressive tactics. Items on physically aggressive tactics were used for quantifying physical aggression trajectories. Respondents indicated whether they or their spouses engaged in any of eight types of physically aggressive acts during a conflict in the year prior to assessment. Frequency scores were summed across the eight types of physically aggressive acts to obtain sum scores. Straus (1979) classified acts as mildly aggressive (acts that we refer to in the present study as “moderately aggressive”: throwing something at partner; pushing, grabbing, shoving partner; slapping partner) or severely aggressive (kicking, biting, or hitting partner with a fist; hitting partner with something; beating up partner; threatening to use a knife or gun on partner; using a knife or gun on partner).

The Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) is a widely used 15-item self-report measure assessing global relationship satisfaction. It has been shown to discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples in numerous studies and yields scores that range from 2 to 158.

For the classification of marital status, couples who permanently separated or divorced were considered dissolved.

Data Analyses

All analyses were conducted with growth curve modeling techniques (GCM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) and the HLM 5 computer program (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2000). GCM allows for a two-stage process in data analysis. The first stage (Level 1) estimates a trajectory of change (growth curve) for a variable that is described by two parameters: intercept (initial level of the variable) and slope (rate of change over time). GCM provides tests of whether, on average, intercepts and slopes differ significantly from zero and whether there is variability in parameter estimates across spouses. Linear trajectories for physical aggression and marital satisfaction were estimated from the four longitudinal data points in the present study. Time was measured in days since the couple’s wedding. The linear model was specified by the following equation:

\[ Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Time}) + r_{ij}, \]

where \( Y_{ij} \) is the outcome variable for individual \( j \) at Time \( i \); \( \beta_{0j} \) is the intercept of individual \( j \) at Year 0 (i.e., the initial level of the outcome variable); \( \beta_{1j} \) is the rate of change in the outcome for individual \( j \) over time (i.e., slope); and \( r_{ij} \) is the residual variance in repeated measures for individual \( j \), which is assumed to be independent and normally distributed. In GCM, the coefficients can be understood as functionally similar to unstandardized regression coefficients, and they represent the degree of association between two variables. Each parameter includes a constant and a unique error term such that \( \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \mu_{0j} \) and \( \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \) (Moderator) + \( \mu_{1j} \), where \( \gamma_{00} \) is the intercept of the outcome when the moderator is low and \( \gamma_{10} \) the intercept of the outcome when the moderator is dissolution; \( \gamma_{11} \) is the mean slope of the outcome when the moderator is high (or 1 when the moderator is dissolution); \( \mu_{0j} \) and \( \mu_{1j} \) are the error terms (residual variances across \( j \) subjects).

Continuous variables were entered as group mean centered at Level 1.

The second stage of GCM (Level 2) allows for the examination of between-subjects differences in associations between time-invariant covariates and outcomes; that is, individual characteristics can be examined as predictors of the intercepts and slopes. At Level 2, Level 1 coefficients were modeled as a function of time-invariant moderators—initial aggression, initial satisfaction, and dissolution—using the following equations: \( \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \) (Moderator) + \( \mu_{0j} \) and \( \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \) (Moderator) + \( \mu_{1j} \), where \( \gamma_{00} \) is the intercept of the outcome when the moderator is low and \( \gamma_{01} \) is the intercept of the outcome when the moderator is dissolution; \( \gamma_{10} \) is the mean slope of the outcome when the moderator is low and \( \gamma_{11} \) is the mean slope of the outcome when the moderator is high; and \( \mu_{0j} \) and \( \mu_{1j} \) are the error terms (residual variances across \( j \) subjects).

Results

Preliminary and Descriptive Analyses

Physical aggression scores were positively skewed; an inverse transformation greatly improved the distribution, and all analyses used transformed scores. Comparisons were made for husbands’ and wives’ reports for each physically aggressive tactic and husbands’ and wives’ reports on mean levels and severity of aggression. Several points are worth noting. First, husbands and wives did not differ on reports of overall prevalence rates (chi-square tests were nonsignificant at all waves) or mean rates (t tests were nonsignificant at all waves). Second, reports of partner aggression were greater than reports of one’s own aggression. Third, associations between husbands’ and wives’ reports of husbands’ and wives’ aggression (i.e., husbands’ and wives’ reports on husbands’ aggression, and husbands’ and wives’ reports on wives’ aggression) were uniformly strong and significant (rs ranged from .56 to .63, all ps < .001). Both reporters’ scores were then averaged to yield one aggression score per spouse. For example, husbands’ reports of their own aggression and wives’ reports of husbands’ aggression were averaged to yield composite scores for husbands’ aggression.

In Table 1 we present spouses’ prevalence rates, means, and standard deviations for physical aggression over 4 years. At the onset of marriage (Year 0), 29% of couples (16% of husbands and 24% of wives) were aggressive. As in prior studies of young couples, more wives than husbands were aggressive. Pushing, grabbing, and shoving were the most prevalent tactics used and were more frequent than severe tactics; extremely severe tactics were rare. Separate analyses indicated that aggressive husbands generally were

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2 As recommended by Raudenbush, Brennan, and Barnett (1995), we analyzed husbands’ and wives’ data within the same equations (as opposed to nesting spouses within couples) and we included actor and partner effects in the same equations (i.e., husbands’ aggression and husbands’ satisfaction; wives’ aggression and wives’ satisfaction; husbands’ aggression and wives’ satisfaction; and wives’ aggression and husbands’ satisfaction). For clarity we present simplified equations in the text. Further details regarding the equations may be obtained from Erika Lawrence.
paired with aggressive wives and that nonaggressive husbands generally were paired with nonaggressive wives. However, a nontrivial number of couples reported unidirectional aggression, in particular wife-to-husband unidirectional aggression, regardless of whose report was used.3

Mean aggression scores and prevalence rates of moderate and severe aggression for husbands and wives are also presented in Table 1. Overall mean scores were moderate in size and were slightly higher for wives than for husbands; means ranged from 3.48 to 6.08 for husbands and from 4.05 to 8.72 for wives. For both spouses, moderate aggression was slightly more common than severe aggression. This finding is similar to Lawrence and Bradbury’s (2001) findings, in which half of aggressive couples were classified as moderately aggressive and half as severely aggressive.

Finally, Table 1 includes the mean scores for marital satisfaction at each phase of data collection. Taken as a group, husbands and wives were relatively maritally satisfied across all four waves of data, with means ranging from 117 to 130 on the Marital Adjustment Test. Individual scores ranged from 10 to 158. By Year 3, 15 couples had scores ranged from 10 to 158 on the Marital Adjustment Test. Individual scores ranged from 10 to 158. By Year 3, 15 couples had ranged from 10 to 158 on the Marital Adjustment Test. Individual scores ranged from 10 to 158. By Year 3, 15 couples had.

Changes in Aggression as a Function of Initial Aggression Severity

Next we examined whether fluctuations in aggression over time varied as a function of initial severity of aggression. Husbands’ and wives’ Year 0 reports were used to classify spouses as initially not aggressive, moderately aggressive, or severely aggressive using Straus’s (1979) severity categories. Specifically, if neither respondent endorsed any moderate or severe items, the target person was classified as nonaggressive. If either respondent endorsed any moderate item, the target person was classified as moderate. If either respondent endorsed any severe item, the target person was classified as severe. If both moderate and severe items were endorsed, the target person was classified as severe.

For the three subgroups, husbands’ and wives’ mean aggression scores were plotted over time. Figure 1 represents mean changes in aggression across time as a function of spouses’ initial severity groupings. These curves indicate that the degree of stability in aggression varies as a function of its initial level. Several observations are worth noting. First, patterns tend to be similar for husbands and wives. Second, spouses who were not aggressive initially tended to stay nonaggressive (or at least rarely aggressive) across time, and spouses who were moderately aggressive initially tended to stay moderately aggressive. Third, spouses who are initially severely aggressive declined dramatically in their mean aggression scores.

Does Physical Aggression Change Systematically Over the Early Years of Marriage?

Physical aggression. We tested the linear model examining the slope of each spouse’s physical aggression over 4 years and the mean of Year 0 aggression scores for each spouse: $Y_{ij} (\text{Aggression}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (\text{Time}) + r_{ij}$ (see Table 2). This model was estimated successfully, providing reliable estimates of all of the model parameters. Reliability is defined as the proportion of variance in each parameter that can be treated as meaningful (i.e., “true”) variance. This definition of reliability is mathematically and conceptually distinct from cross-sectional definitions of reliability, such as scale reliability (e.g., split-half or coefficient alpha) and interrater reliability (e.g., intraclass correlation coefficient or $r_p$), and it is not expected to be as high as scale reliability estimates. The reliability coefficients of the intercepts (ag-

Note. Aggregated across couple, prevalence of aggression was 29% (Year 0), 23% (Year 1), 26% (Year 2), and 25% (Year 3).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Year 0</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Husbands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% aggressive</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% moderate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% severe</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>6.08 (5.90)</td>
<td>3.48 (3.63)</td>
<td>4.88 (4.65)</td>
<td>3.77 (2.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>126.9 (17.1)</td>
<td>124.5 (20.1)</td>
<td>120.5 (21.7)</td>
<td>117.0 (22.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% aggressive</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% moderate</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% severe</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>6.94 (7.83)</td>
<td>8.72 (8.46)</td>
<td>6.88 (10.28)</td>
<td>4.05 (4.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>130.3 (16.2)</td>
<td>127.2 (17.7)</td>
<td>123.0 (19.5)</td>
<td>120.4 (21.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Aggression in this sample consists of what researchers have termed situational or reactive aggression rather than battering, intimate terrorism, or proactive aggression (see Chase, O’Leary, & Heyman, 2001; M. P. Johnson, 1995; M. P. Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).
gression at Year 0) were .82 for husbands and .94 for wives. The reliability estimates of the slope parameters (rate of change in aggression over time) were .52 for husbands and .92 for wives. Growth curve analyses use only the reliable variance in the parameters for coefficient estimation.

Descriptive statistics for each parameter of the linear model are also presented in Table 2. We tested the hypothesis that the mean of each parameter differs significantly from zero using a $t$ test, a relatively conservative test recommended by Bryk and Raudenbush (1992) when sample

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>$t(163)$</th>
<th>$\chi^2(163, N = 164)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intercepts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td>753.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,494.39***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands</td>
<td>120.93</td>
<td>14.24</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td></td>
<td>474.30***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives</td>
<td>124.77</td>
<td>13.02</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td>475.82***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slopes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>-1.50</td>
<td>367.69***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>795.30***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>-5.45***</td>
<td>263.80***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>-6.20***</td>
<td>289.37***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** $p < .001$.
sizes are small. As the t tests reveal, husbands’ and wives’ aggression slopes did not differ significantly from zero, indicating that there was no systematic linear change in physical aggression over time. Finally, the chi-square statistic in the rightmost column represents a test of whether the residual variance of the parameter is significantly different from zero. The significant chi-square statistics for husbands and wives indicate that there is significant variance in all of the parameters to support a linear model of change in aggression.

Marital satisfaction. The same procedure used to estimate physical aggression trajectories was used to model marital satisfaction trajectories (see Table 2). Specifically, we examined the slope of each spouse’s marital satisfaction over 4 years and the mean of the Year 0 satisfaction scores for each spouse: $Y_{ij} (\text{Satisfaction}) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{Time}) + r_{ij}$. The baseline model was estimated successfully, providing reliable estimates of all of the model parameters. The reliability coefficients of the intercepts were .58 for husbands and .92 for wives. The reliability of the slope estimates were .34 for husbands and .42 for wives. The t tests indicate that the slopes for husbands and wives significantly differ from zero and are negative, demonstrating that satisfaction declines over time: husbands, $t(163) = -5.45, p < .001$; wives, $t(163) = -6.20, p < .001$. The significant chi-square statistics for husbands and wives indicate that there is significant variance in all parameters to support a linear model of change in satisfaction (i.e., in intercepts and slopes for both husbands and wives).

In sum, all of the parameter estimates for physical aggression and marital satisfaction were estimated with adequate reliability, and there was significant between-spouse variability in initial level and rates of change in aggression and satisfaction. Thus, examination of variables that moderate rates of change in these factors is warranted.

**Within-Subject Associations Between Rates of Change in Aggression and Satisfaction**

**Does marital satisfaction change as a function of physical aggression?** First, we examined whether trajectories of aggression are associated with trajectories of marital satisfaction (see Table 3). Husbands’ and wives’ physical aggression scores were entered as time-varying covariates associated with the trajectory of marital satisfaction for each spouse: $Y_{ij} (\text{Satisfaction}) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{Time}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{Aggression}) + r_{ij}$. Because of the increase in number of parameters relative to our sample size, we fixed the error terms in the Level 2 equations predicting $\beta_{2j}$. To the extent that the coefficients representing the covariates are significantly different from zero, then changes in husbands’ and wives’ marital satisfaction are associated with changes in physical aggression after accounting for change due to the passage of time. Changes in husbands’ physical aggression were associated significantly with changes in their own satisfaction, $t(163) = -2.00, p < .05$.

Does physical aggression change as a function of marital satisfaction? Second, the order of variables was reversed, so that husbands’ and wives’ aggression scores, centered around each spouse’s group mean, were entered as time-varying covariates in the equation expressing the trajectory of physical aggression for each spouse (see Table 3). Thus, the Level 1 (within-couple) equation was modified: $Y_{ij} (\text{Aggression}) = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} (\text{Time}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{Satisfaction}) + r_{ij}$. The error terms in the Level 2 equations predicting $\beta_{2j}$ were fixed in order to achieve model convergence. To the extent that coefficients representing the covariates are significantly different from zero, then changes in husbands’ and wives’ marital satisfaction are associated with changes in physical aggression above and beyond the linear model already tested. The coefficients and effect sizes of the time-varying covariates reveal that changes in marital satisfaction were not associated with changes in aggression for husbands or wives.

In sum, changes in husbands’ physical aggression were associated significantly with changes in their own satisfaction; wives’ physical aggression was not associated with any changes in satisfaction. Moreover, the reverse hypothesis—that changes in satisfaction would be associated with changes in aggression—was not supported. Thus, at the within-subject level, physical aggression appears to have predictive dominance over marital satisfaction, at least for husbands.

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4 In this and all subsequent analyses, we also tested the hypotheses controlling for length of relationship prior to marriage, and there were no changes in the pattern of results.
Predicting the Trajectories of Physical Aggression and Marital Satisfaction

Do trajectories of marital satisfaction change as a function of initial levels of aggression? To evaluate the associations between initial levels of aggression and trajectories of satisfaction, we entered husbands’ and wives’ Year 0 physical aggression scores into the Level 2 (between-couple) equations accounting for variance in each of the parameters specified at Level 1 (within-couple). The Level 1 equation was \( Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Time}) + r_{ij} \), and the Level 2 equations were \( \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} (\text{Year 0 aggression}) + \mu_{0j} \) and \( \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} (\text{Year 0 aggression}) + \mu_{1j} \) (see upper half of Table 4). Husbands’ initial aggression was associated with their own initial satisfaction, \( t(163) = -4.31, p < .001 \), and with changes in their own satisfaction, \( t(163) = -10.87, p < .001 \). However, wives’ initial aggression was significantly associated with their own and their husbands’ initial satisfaction: husbands, \( t(163) = -3.77, p < .001 \); wives, \( t(163) = -3.25, p < .005 \); and with both partners’ rates of change in satisfaction: husbands, \( t(163) = -2.17, p < .05 \); wives, \( t(163) = -7.00, p < .001 \).

Do trajectories of physical aggression change as a function of initial levels of satisfaction? To compare the reciprocal effects of initial levels of marital satisfaction on physical aggression trajectories, we entered husbands’ and wives’ Year 0 physical aggression scores into the Level 2 (between-couple) equations accounting for variance in each of the parameters specified in the Level 1 (within-couple) equation. Thus, our Level 1 equation was \( Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Time}) + r_{ij} \), and our Level 2 equations \( \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} (\text{Year 0 satisfaction}) + \mu_{0j} \) and \( \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} (\text{Year 0 satisfaction}) + \mu_{1j} \) (see lower half of Table 4). Husbands’ initial satisfaction was significantly associated with their own initial aggression, \( t(163) = -11.82, p < .001 \), and with rates of change in their own aggression, \( t(163) = -3.31, p < .005 \). However, wives’ satisfaction was not associated with trajectories of aggression for either spouse.

In sum, husbands’ aggression at the beginning of marriage foreshadowed their own trajectories of satisfaction, whereas wives’ aggression at the onset of marriage foreshadowed both spouses’ trajectories of satisfaction. Moreover, husbands’ satisfaction at marriage predicted their own trajectories of aggression.

Marital Dissolution and the Trajectories of Physical Aggression and Marital Satisfaction

Are trajectories of physical aggression associated with dissolution? To evaluate the link between trajectories of aggression and dissolution, we entered relationship dissolution in the Level 2 (between-couple) equations accounting for variance in each of the parameters specified in the following Level 1 (within-couple) equation: \( Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Time}) + r_{ij} \). Level 2 equations were \( \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} (\text{Dissolution}) + \mu_{0j} \) and \( \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} (\text{Dissolution}) + \mu_{1j} \) (see Table 5). Dissolution was coded 0 for couples who stayed together and 1 for couples who permanently separated or divorced. For husbands, dissolution was not associated with intercept or slope of aggression. For wives, higher initial aggression, \( t(163) = 3.73, p < .001 \), and relatively stable levels (i.e., gradual decline) of aggression, \( t(163) = 1.89, p < .05 \), were associated with dissolution.

Are trajectories of marital satisfaction associated with dissolution? Next, husbands’ and wives’ relationship dissolution was entered in the Level 2 (between-couple) equations accounting for variance in each of the parameters specified in the following Level 1 (within-couple) equation: \( Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}(\text{Time}) + r_{ij} \). The Level 2 equations were \( \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} (\text{Dissolution}) + \mu_{0j} \) and \( \beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} (\text{Dissolution}) + \mu_{1j} \) (see Table 5). Trajec-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Spouse</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>( t(163) )</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>( t(163) )</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>-0.33</td>
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<td>-7.00***</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.69</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-3.31**</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-1.45</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
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</table>

* \( p < .05 \). ** \( p < .005 \). *** \( p < .001 \)
organisms of satisfaction were associated with relationship dissolution for husbands and wives. For husbands, low initial satisfaction, $t(163) = -2.03$, $p < .05$, was significantly associated with dissolution and (marginally) associated with steeper declines in marital satisfaction, $t(163) = -1.76$, $p < .10$. For wives, lower initial satisfaction, $t(163) = -4.26$, $p < .001$, and steeper declines in satisfaction, $t(163) = -3.17$, $p < .005$, were associated with dissolution.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the developmental course of physical aggression in the early years of marriage using advanced methods that allowed for (a) the description of change over time and (b) a close examination of the associations between trajectories of aggression and relationship satisfaction and stability. The findings and their implications are discussed.

Summary of Results

In the present sample, 29% of couples were classified as physically aggressive. This rate is lower than the prevalence rates of 52% and 57% reported by Lawrence and Bradbury (2001) and O’Leary and colleagues (1989), respectively. This difference may be accounted for by the use of a different recruitment strategy than the one used in the current study; both of those samples were recruited from newspaper advertisements rather than public marriage licenses, which generally results in a sample at greater risk for adverse marital outcomes (Karney et al., 1995). However, McLaughlin, Leonard, and Senchak (1992) reported that 36% of husbands were physically aggressive in a sample recruited using marriage licenses—a prevalence rate higher than that found in the present study despite the use of a similar recruitment strategy. (Rates of wife-to-husband aggression were not assessed in the McLaughlin et al. study.)

Consistent with previous studies, more wives than husbands were aggressive in the early years of marriage, and wives were as likely as husbands to use severely aggressive tactics. However, there was considerable between-subjects variation in physical aggression over time, and the nature of longitudinal change in physical aggression was associated with the severity of the initial aggression. Spouses who were initially nonaggressive generally remained nonaggressive; spouses who were initially moderately aggressive remained relatively stable in their aggression (see Figure 1). Surprisingly, by the third year of marriage mean levels of aggression for spouses who were initially severely aggressive declined to the point where they appeared quite similar to the (initially) nonaggressive couples. Given the small group sizes, these findings need to be replicated before strong conclusions can be drawn. Nevertheless, we found no evidence of systematic escalation or of systematic decline in aggression over time for husbands or wives. Prior studies suggested that group prevalence rates of marital aggression decline over time, but our results indicate that initially aggressive spouses’ developmental course of aggression varies widely, and to some extent, the developmental course of aggression can be predicted by the severity of the aggression at the beginning of marriage.

Lawrence and Bradbury (2001) found that couples classified as initially nonaggressive and moderately aggressive did not differ in their risk for marital distress or dissolution over 4 years. In light of the findings in the present study, we cannot conclude that the similarity in marital outcomes for nonaggressive and moderately aggressive couples is a function of moderately aggressive couples becoming nonaggressive over time or nonaggressive couples becoming aggressive. Although Lawrence and Bradbury (2001) showed that those couples marked by severe aggression initially were at greatest risk for marital distress and dissolution over the next 4 years, the findings in the current study suggest that this risk does not come about from continued severe aggression. Moreover, couples who dissolved their relationships during the course of the study were not included in Figure 1. Thus, the fact that spouses who were initially severely aggressive declined markedly in aggression over time was not an artifact of the most severe aggressors divorcing.

The second main set of findings concerned the question of whether aggression foreshadowed versus followed from relationship distress. The findings yielded a far more complex relation between aggression and satisfaction and stability than was originally theorized. Husbands appear to demonstrate a vicious cycle wherein their initial levels of

<table>
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<th>Spouse</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>$t(163)$</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>$t(163)$</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
</tr>
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<td>3.73***</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>$-20.09$</td>
<td>$-4.26^{**}*</td>
<td>$-.32$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>$-.11$</td>
<td>$-1.76^+$</td>
<td>$-.14$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>1.89*</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>$-.26$</td>
<td>$-3.17^{**}$</td>
<td>$-.24$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^\dagger p < .10$.  $^* p < .05$.  $^{**} p < .005$.  $^{***} p < .001$.
aggression and satisfaction are highly intertwined, and changes in their aggression over time influence changes in their satisfaction, which then lead to dissolution. These results do not support the notion that husbands’ aggression grows out of a distressed marriage. Instead, it seems possible that some husbands use aggressive tactics during conflictual interchanges and that the ineffectiveness of the aggression as a method of conflict resolution leads these husbands to become dissatisfied with their marriages. Regardless of the specific mechanisms involved, husbands’ aggression clearly can no longer be viewed simply as a by-product of marital dissatisfaction.

The links among aggression, distress, and dissolution were quite different for wives. Wives’ aggression at the beginning of the marriage covaried with both spouses’ levels of marital satisfaction, suggesting that initially, wives’ aggression has a stronger influence on husbands’ satisfaction than does husbands’ aggression on wives’ satisfaction. However, rates of change in wives’ aggression did not predict changes in satisfaction for either spouse. Even though more wives than husbands were aggressive at each time point, these findings suggest that husbands’ fluctuations in aggression are more influential in determining marital satisfaction compared with wives’ fluctuations in aggression. Wives’ trajectories of aggression did predict relationship dissolution, however. So whereas husbands’ aggression had a stronger influence on satisfaction, wives’ aggression had a stronger influence on dissolution, demonstrating the need to assess both husbands’ and wives’ physical aggression, and both types of marital outcomes, in future studies.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study**

Two methodological features of the present study—the use of four waves of data to estimate changes in satisfaction and aggression and the exclusive focus on a sample of newlywed couples as they negotiate a period of great change and adjustment—distinguish it from most prior studies of aggression in marriage and enhance the strength of the present conclusions. At the same time, several factors limit interpretation of the present findings. First, although the longitudinal design allows for statements about predictive relationships, any causal inferences must be regarded as tentative. Second, although the present sample compares favorably in size with other longitudinal studies of marriage, the power to detect effects on different parameters of trajectories would be greater with larger samples. Third, we included eligibility criteria to enhance internal validity in this sample (e.g., first marriages, no children), which necessarily lowers our external validity. Fourth, the current sample may be at relatively less risk for aggression or marital instability than samples recruited through different procedures (see Karney et al., 1995). Finally, the study relied solely on self-report questionnaires of physical aggression, which are likely to prove insufficient for capturing episodes of aggression and the circumstances in which they occur.

**Implications for Theory, Research, and Intervention**

Five main implications and conclusions can be drawn from the present study. First, we call for researchers to begin to view physical aggression in intimate relationships as a temporally dynamic phenomenon. Such a shift in conceptualizing aggression would help us to see that there is a notable between-couple variability in how any given couple fluctuates and changes in its aggression over time. Static one-shot assessments of physical aggression cannot capture this kind of fluctuation, and they underestimate the degree to which aggression changes. Moreover, the variability in aggression trajectories across couples suggests the need to examine husbands’ and wives’ aggression and the factors that predict both partners’ initial levels and fluctuations in aggression.

Second, we were surprised to find that for spouses who are severely aggressive at the beginning of marriage, mean levels of aggression decline markedly over time, whereas mean levels of aggression remain relatively stable for spouses who are moderately aggressive early in marriage. One possible explanation for this pattern of results is that newlywed spouses are affected more by the presence of severe aggression than by moderate aggression such that they recognize this behavior as problematic and become motivated to change it. However, they may not know what behaviors to implement in place of the aggressive behavior during disagreements (i.e., a skill deficit). In the absence of promising alternative strategies, they may retreat to a position of emotional disengagement and behavioral withdrawal. Less dyadic engagement would leave the couple with fewer opportunities for conflictual discussions, which would lead to fewer opportunities to be physically aggressive. However, it would also leave them with fewer opportunities for positively engaging interactions such as spousal support or sexual intimacy. Thus, factors such as growing distrust, disengagement, and reduced intimacy may mediate the association between initial aggression and adverse relationship outcomes. In contrast, moderately aggressive spouses may not be as affected by the presence of such behavior early in their marriages and thus not disengage in the same way. Instead, they would continue engaging more globally with their partner; this continued engagement would include using moderately aggressive tactics during conflictual interactions but would also include the continued presence of positive interactions.

A third implication of this study is that physical aggression among couples has often been conceptualized as worsening (e.g., becoming more severe) over time (e.g., Koss et al., 1995; Walker, 2000) and as transforming from expressive to instrumental in function, yet our data do not support this view. It is possible that spouses in these samples are pursuing a specific instrumental goal; for example, the immediate goal of withdrawing from a heated conflict might lead one to push his or her partner out of the way. However, such a goal seems to be qualitatively different from the way instrumental violence has been viewed in the literature, in which the function of physical aggression is to achieve dominance, isolation, and subjugation of one’s partner.
Similarly, there is evidence from longitudinal studies that prior conduct problems and antisocial behavior predict later physical aggression toward one’s partner (Capaldi et al., 2003; Ehresna , et al., 2003), associations that we believe are more likely to be found among spouses engaging in the latter type of instrumental violence. In sum, to capture the changing nature of aggression in marriage, and the kinds of actions that are taking place in and around the context of aggressive interchanges, future studies will benefit from pairing the kind of molar analyses presented here with molecular analyses of what is happening during these potent exchanges.

Fourth, the influence of physical aggression on marital satisfaction indicates that in order to be able to predict and ultimately prevent marital distress and dissolution, existing conceptual models and intervention programs would likely be enhanced to the extent that physical aggression was considered as a precursor to distress—or at least that aggression and distress may influence each other, particularly among husbands—rather than simply as a correlate or consequence of such decline. A shift from examining the predictors of marital discord and instability (e.g., conflict management behaviors, associated attributions) to examining the predictors of aggression (e.g., family-of-origin conflict, personality traits) and mediators of the link between aggression and adverse marital outcomes now seems warranted. Research of this kind might help reveal how aggression does not solve spouses’ problems and in fact might create new ones. More practically, the present findings suggest that an intervention focused on aggression would be appropriate, and perhaps beneficial, for couples reporting aggression at the onset of marriage. However, for couples who do not report aggression early in marriage, an intervention component targeting aggression appears unwarranted.

A fifth implication is that consideration of gender differences in the present study revealed important similarities and distinctions in husbands’ and wives’ aggression. Consistent with prior research, wives were as likely as husbands to engage in physically aggressive tactics during conflict and were as likely to use severely aggressive tactics. Associations between severity of aggression at the onset of marriage and rates of aggression across time also were similar for husbands and wives. Nevertheless, the roles of husbands’ and wives’ aggression in predicting marital distress and dissolution were found to differ. Husbands’ physical aggression and satisfaction were associated bidirectionally, whereas wives’ aggression had predictive dominance over marital satisfaction. These findings imply that changes in husbands’ aggression, more so than changes in wives’ aggression, are governed by changes in marital satisfaction. Over time, husbands may become more physically aggressive (or remain relatively stable in their use of physical aggression) to the extent that their marital satisfaction is declining; wives, in contrast, may use physically aggressive tactics to express themselves regardless of their marital satisfaction. Husbands’ aggression was also shown to be a stronger predictor of marital satisfaction whereas wives’ aggression predicted dissolution, indicating that although newlywed husbands and wives typically use aggressive tactics with similar prevalence rates and more wives may use aggressive tactics than husbands overall, husbands’ and wives’ aggression may play functionally different roles in the developmental course of marital discord and instability. Alternatively, husbands’ and wives’ aggression may stem from different factors (e.g., family-of-origin factors vs. current levels of stress or distress) that may differentially correlate with marital outcomes. Future studies are needed to clarify the apparently different bases and consequences of husbands’ and wives’ aggression, a task that will be complicated by the bidirectional nature of many acts of aggression.

References


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