



Measuring Reciprocity of Aggression Within Relationships: Validity of the Conflict Tactics Scales

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Introduction

The Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS; Straus, 1979) and its recently revised version (CTS2; Straus, Hmaby, McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) represent two of the most widely used and extensively validated measures of aggression in close relationships. However, since its inception, the CTS has been criticized on the basis that it yields findings which understate the victimization of women and overstate females' use of violence in relationships (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998).

The theoretical framework behind the CTS is conflict theory; this theory assumes that conflict is an expected part of human relationships, but that violence as a means of dealing with conflict is not (Straus et al., 1996). The CTS is designed to measure violence that is conflict-related rather than individually motivated. However, it remains unclear whether the CTS measures conflict-related aggression at the expense of "pure" aggression or violence, or whether it has the ability to get at both of these possible occurrences in a relationship.

The current study sought to examine rates of victimization and perpetration of aggression in close relationships by investigating the CTS in a sample of adolescent males and females who are at risk for violence.

Method & Procedure

Participants. The current sample consisted of 90 adolescents (37 male, 53 female) between the ages of 12 and 18 ($M = 15.24$; $SD = 1.48$). Participants were gathered from custody centers (54%), residential treatment programs (44%), assessment centers (1%) and probation offices (1%). Most youth identified themselves as Caucasian (65%), with the remainder Aboriginal (27%) or of other ethnicity (8%).

Materials.

Conflict Tactics Scale, Revised. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979; revised Pepler et al., 1996) was modified from the original 80 item version to include 7 indices of violence and victimization within family, peer, and romantic relationships (e.g., "slapped mother/father; "slapped by mother/father"). Each item is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 – Never to 4 – Always.

Procedure. Reports from males and females regarding levels of victimization and perpetration of aggression were measured across parental, peer and romantic relationships. Regression analyses were performed in order to investigate whether a youth's age or gender was predictive of overall perpetration or victimization scores on the CTS-R. Correlations between victimization and perpetration levels were also analyzed in order to assess whether the CTS measures reciprocal or individually-motivated aggression in relationships.

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Mean Levels of Aggression: Victimization & Perpetration¹

	Mother	Father	Peer	Romantic Partner
MALES				
Victimization	8.97	8.50	10.94	8.33
Perpetration	8.39	8.28	11.62*	8.03
FEMALES				
Victimization	10.81	9.40	9.94	8.93
Perpetration	9.63*	8.75	9.81	9.67*

* The difference between the male and female mean is significant at $p < .05$.

1 Aggression score comprised of: insulting, threatening to destroy or destroy something of value, pushing/grabbing/shoving, throwing something, slapping, kicking/biting/hitting, hitting with an object.

Correlations Between Levels of Victimization & Perpetration

	Mother	Father	Peer	Romantic Partner
MALES	.36*	.94**	.90**	.75**
FEMALES	.83**	.77**	.78**	.75**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Results Summary

The means of boys and girls significantly differed on indices of aggression towards family members, peers, and romantic partners. Specifically, girls were seen to perpetrate higher levels of aggression towards their mother figures and romantic partners, while boys perpetrated higher levels of aggression towards peers. Means were not seen to differ by gender on indices of victimization (i.e., aggression inflicted by family members, peers, or romantic partners).

Levels of perpetration and victimization reported by boys and girls were highly correlated, thus suggesting a reciprocal pattern of aggression in relationships for both genders.

Neither the age nor gender of the youth was predictive of total perpetration or victimization scores on the CTS-R (p 's $> .2$).

Discussion

Consistent with the work done by Archer and colleagues (2000, 2003), results from the current study suggest that there is little difference in the frequency of aggressive acts both perpetrated and experienced by males and females in key relationships. However, as the version of the CTS used in this study did not enquire about severe forms of aggression (e.g., choking, using a weapon, etc.), it is possible that gender differences would be more pronounced had such incidences been included.

Overall, results highlight the reciprocal nature of aggression in key relationships for both girls and boys. Reciprocal aggression was observed in relationships between youth and both parents, as well as within peer and romantic relationships. The findings underscore the importance of understanding aggression from a relational perspective; in particular, the types of relationships (e.g., mother-daughter, male to male peers) seem to play a role in the level of aggression evidenced.