

When is Verbal Abuse Serious? The Impact of Relationship Variables on Perceptions of Severity

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of verbal abuse were examined in a sample of 120 female undergraduate students. Participants read a scenario depicting a verbally abusive situation between a male and a female college student. The scenarios varied by type of relationship (friendship vs. dating), duration of relationship (1 month vs. 2 years), and genders of perpetrator and victim. Participants rated the perpetrator's behavior, the victim's behavior, the severity of the overall situation, and the likelihood of future violence. Results indicated that the incident was seen as more serious when the perpetrator was male. However, more blame was placed on the female perpetrator than the male perpetrator. Interestingly, when the male was the perpetrator, the female victim's behavior was perceived as less appropriate in a friendship than in a dating relationship. The authors suggest further research should continue to isolate variables that may affect perceptions of verbal abuse.

Verbal abuse is a prevalent form of communication that has been shown to have damaging effects. Research suggests that verbal abuse often escalates into physical abuse (Stets, 1990; Straus, 1974; Walker, 1979). Furthermore, verbal abuse alone can result in psychological damage. These effects have the potential to be equally or more damaging than those associated with physical abuse (Buss, 1971). Consequently, the current study will examine the factors that affect the perception of verbal abuse in the hope of better understanding its implications.

Research on verbal abuse has focused on "verbal aggression". Verbal aggression is an attack on another's self-concept with the intent or perceived intent to harm the other's self-image (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Roloff & Greenburg, 1979). Verbal aggression is distinctive from arguments, which can be defined as verbal interchanges that "involve presenting and defending positions on controversial issues while attacking the positions taken by others on the issues" (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Therefore, it is the intent to harm that defines verbal aggression.

Verbal aggression has traditionally been studied in conjunction with physical or other types of aggression (sexual, psychological, etc.). However, Infante & Wigley III (1986) argue that verbal aggression is important to study on its own. By focusing on verbal aggression, we can learn how verbal aggression relates to other types of aggression and, at the same time, learn more about verbal aggression itself. The effects of verbal aggression can range from temporary feelings of embarrassment, anger, irritation, etc. to more serious damage to one's self-concept (Infante, Trebing, Shepherd & Seeds, 1984).

There are several variables that have been found to affect individuals' perceptions of

abuse. The current study focused on three central variables: genders of the perpetrator and victim, length of relationship, and type of relationship.

Research regarding the effects of perpetrator gender on perceptions of abuse has typically focused on episodes of physical abuse. A physically violent act, when committed by a female, is judged less harshly than the same act committed by a male. For instance, Harris and Cook (1994) found that participants judged a battering incident committed by a wife to be less serious than the same incident committed by a husband. Similarly, Bethke and DeJoy (1993) reported that participants rated a slap by a male to be less acceptable than the same action by a female. These gender differences probably result from people perceiving males to have the ability to incur more physical damage than females.

In addition to the gender of the perpetrator, another variable that has been shown to have an effect on perceptions of abuse is the attribution of blame. For example, Harris and Cook (1994) found that participants blamed a male perpetrator more than a female perpetrator. Participants read a fictitious newspaper report in which a wife either battered a husband or a husband battered a wife. Results indicated that when the husband was the batterer, he was held more responsible for the incident than when the wife was the batterer. Based on this study of physical violence we might expect that male perpetrators will be blamed more than female perpetrators in incidences of verbal abuse.

Research regarding the effects of length of relationship also has traditionally focused on physical violence. Physically violent acts, when occurring in more casual relationships, are perceived as less acceptable than those same acts when occurring in a more serious relationship (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993). When asked about the appropriateness of slapping a partner, participants rated the slap as less appropriate when the relationship was casual than when it was serious. Perhaps when participants perceive that the people in a relationship are more committed to each other, participants may be more willing to overlook flaws in the relationship because they presume the partners are more emotionally attached to each other.

Previous research has concluded that physical violence occurs more frequently in longer, more serious rather than shorter, more casual relationships (VanVoorhis, 1996). Epperson, Wilson, Estes and Lovell (1992) found that participants who read a scenario depicting an act of physical violence gave fewer suggestions to leave the relationship when the couple was married and the abuse was severe and frequent. Based on these studies of physical violence, we might then expect that verbal abuse will be judged more harshly when it occurs in shorter, more casual rather than longer, more serious relationships.

There is little to no research that compares abuse in friendships to abuse in romantic relationships. Indeed, physical abuse appears to be less common in non-romantic friendships. However, friendships can be verbally abusive. The current study was designed to explore differences in perceptions of verbal abuse when comparing romantic and non-romantic relationships.

The current study examines the impact of genders of perpetrator and victim, length of relationship, and type of relationship on the perceptions of the severity of abuse. In regards to gender of perpetrator, we expect that participants will rate a verbally abusive scenario more seriously when the gender of the perpetrator is male. We also expect that participants will rate verbal abuse in a short-term relationship more seriously than verbal abuse in a long-term relationship. Finally, with no substantial literature on the topic, we have no hypothesis regarding the effect of the type of relationship. Overall, the results will help researchers and practitioners begin to understand the parameters of verbal abuse. This may, in turn, further the investigation of the ramifications of verbal abuse and help initiate abuse prevention programming.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 120 female undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a mid-sized midwestern university. The mean age was 19.1 (SD = 2.27) with 90% of the students classified as freshmen or sophomores. Ninety-five percent of the respondents were Caucasian with the rest evenly split among other ethnic groups. The median longest romantic relationship was 18 months (SD = 28.81).

Materials & Procedure

Eight scenarios depicting a verbally abusive situation between a man and a woman were developed. The scenarios varied by the genders of the perpetrator and victim, the type of relationship, and the length of relationship (See Appendix A). The final scenario was “toned down” as the result of pilot work, which suggested that the initial version might have produced a ceiling effect. The questionnaire consisted of 22 items that measured the dependent variables of the severity of the incident, overall perpetrator behavior, overall victim behavior, and the likelihood of physical violence. Three items regarding the believability of the scenario were used as a manipulation check. Each item was answered using a line scale anchored at 0 cm. (meaning “not at all”) and 11.6 cm. (meaning “very”). Participants marked the line with a slash to indicate their level of agreement. Additionally, there were three open-ended questions that asked the participants to explain the difference between verbal abuse and verbal aggression. As they arrived, participants were instructed to read the scenario and complete the survey. Following completion of the survey, participants were debriefed.

RESULTS

Results indicate a moderately high internal consistency in the scales measuring believability of the scenario ($\alpha = .89$), victim behavior ($\alpha = .73$), and perpetrator behavior ($\alpha = .71$). Questions relating to the incident as a whole had a coefficient alpha level of .57. According to participant ratings, the incident was viewed as moderately believable (mean = 19.45, SD = 7.00) with no change in believability among the independent variables. The moderate believability rating is interesting given 77% of the respondents reported that they knew someone who had been in a relationship like the one portrayed in the scenario. Consequently, there appears to be a contradiction between the perceived probability of a hypothetical verbally abusive situation and the participants’ actual experiences. Future researchers may find it worthwhile to investigate this contradiction further.

Results were analyzed by conducting a series of 2x2x2 ANOVAs to look for main effects and interactions. A main effect of gender was found on the dependent variable of incident [$F(1, 112) = 5.374, p < .05$] in that the participants rated the incident as more serious when the perpetrator was a man. Table 1 shows that the mean scores for both genders are well over the midpoint of the possible range of scores, indicating that all scenarios were interpreted as being quite serious. None of the other main effects or interactions were significant.

Table 1. Ratings of Incident Dependent upon Perpetrator Gender

Perpetrator	Possible Range	Actual Range ^a	Mean ^b	SD
Ben	0.00 to 92.80	38.30 to 79.80	63.42	10.67
Carrie	0.00 to 92.80	38.70 to 88.80	60.91	9.78

^a Higher scores indicate a more serious incident.

^b Responses made on a line scale, anchored at 0 cm. = “not at all” and 11.6 cm. = “very.”

A dependent variable of perpetrator blame was created based on three questions relating to provocation, blame, and fault of the perpetrator's behavior. A main effect of gender [$F(1, 112) = 6.855$; $p < .01$] revealed that respondents blamed the female perpetrator more than the male perpetrator (See Table 2). It is interesting to note that while both of the mean perpetrators' blame ratings were above the midpoint of the possible range, there was more variability in the male perpetrator's ratings than in the female perpetrator's ratings. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

Table 2. Ratings of Perpetrator Blame Dependent upon Gender

Perpetrator	Possible Range	Actual Range ^a	Mean ^b	SD
Ben	0.00 to 34.80	11.90 to 34.80	27.29	9.78
Carrie	0.00 to 34.80	16.40 to 34.80	29.58	4.03

^a Higher scores indicate more blame.

^b Responses made on a line scale, anchored at 0 cm. = "not at all" and 11.6 cm. = "very."

Ratings of the victim's behavior resulted in a Type of Relationship by Gender interaction [$F(1, 112) = 5.029$; $p < .05$] (See Table 3). Specifically, the female victim's behavior was seen as less acceptable in a friendship than in a dating relationship. A Student-Newman-Keuls post hoc test revealed that the male victim's behavior was rated the same regardless of type of relationship and did not differ from the ratings of the female victim in either type of relationship (See Figure 1). It should be noted that all means were below the midpoint of the scale, indicating that the victim's behavior in all scenarios was generally considered appropriate.

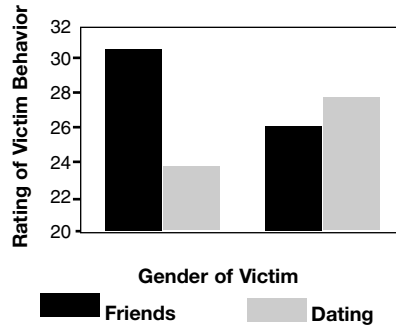


Figure 1. Interaction of type of relationship and gender on ratings of victim behavior.

Table 3. Ratings of Victim Behavior Dependent upon Type of Relationship and Gender of Victim

Relationship	Victim	Possible Range	Actual Range ^a	Mean ^b	SD
Friendship	Ben	0.00 to 81.20	5.80 to 47.20	23.67	8.94
	Carrie	0.00 to 81.20	6.20 to 56.00	29.81	13.88
Dating	Ben	0.00 to 81.20	8.10 to 60.30	24.87	11.46
	Carrie	0.00 to 81.20	2.10 to 41.70	21.62	10.85

^a Higher scores indicate less appropriate behavior.

^b Responses made on a line scale, anchored at 0 cm. = "not at all" and 11.6 cm. = "very."

A dependent variable was created based on a question involving the likelihood of the perpetrator becoming physically violent. A main effect of gender was significant [$F(1, 112) = 31.48, p = .000$] in that the respondents indicated a much greater likelihood of future physical violence when the perpetrator was male than when the perpetrator was female (See Table 4). No other main effects or interactions were significant.

Table 4. Likelihood of Future Violence Dependent upon Perpetrator Gender

Perpetrator	Possible Range	Actual Range ^a	Mean ^b	SD
Ben	0.00 to 11.60	1.20 to 11.60	8.34	2.35
Carrie	0.00 to 11.60	0.00 to 11.40	5.46	3.16

^a Higher scores indicate greater likelihood of future violence.

^b Responses made on a line scale, anchored at 0 cm. = "not at all" and 11.6 cm. = "very."

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis was supported in that participants rated a verbally abusive scenario more serious when the perpetrator was male. This is similar to research conducted by Harris and Cook (1994), which indicated that a battering incident was considered less serious when the wife was the batterer. Actually, the participants may have related the severity of the scenario to their beliefs about the potential for physical abuse. For example, if participants thought it was more likely that a man would become physically violent with a woman, they might rate the incident as more serious. In fact, when asked about the likelihood of future violence, respondents did indicate a much greater likelihood of physical violence when the perpetrator was male. Future research should explore the possible relationship between the perceived seriousness of a verbally abusive incident and the participants' beliefs about future violence.

Results also show that the female perpetrator was blamed more than the male perpetrator. This is contrary to previous research on physical abuse when Harris and Cook (1994) examined the amount of blame placed on a husband battering his wife, a wife battering her husband, and a gay man battering his partner. Results indicated that the husband was blamed more for battering his wife than the wife for battering her husband. This may be explained by the different nature of physical and verbal abuse. With physical abuse, people often see males as having an unfair advantage: physical strength. On the other hand, males and females are likely seen as having an equal ability to be verbally abusive. However, while aggression in boys is acceptable, girls are taught that aggression may be harmful to their relationships (Campbell, 1993). Therefore, when the woman in the scenario became aggressive, she would be seen as violating a social norm. With this in mind, respondents may be prone to blame a woman more than a man for the same level of aggression.

Our second hypothesis was not supported. Length of relationship was not found to be a significant factor in perceptions of the scenario. This is contrary to research regarding physical abuse in which abuse in short-term relationships was perceived as less acceptable than abuse in long-term relationships (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993). It is possible that this occurred because respondents didn't take note of the length of relationship, since it was mentioned only briefly in the first paragraph. It would have been interesting to see if respondents could have correctly identified the length of relationship after filling out the survey. It is also possible however, that respondents just didn't consider the length of relationship to be an

important factor. This may suggest that there are different “rules” for interpreting verbal abuse as opposed to physical abuse. For this reason, it is important that verbal abuse be studied independent of physical or other types of abuse.

We had no hypothesis regarding the independent variable of type of relationship. Interestingly, respondents rated the female victim’s behavior as less acceptable in a friendship than in a dating relationship. A possible explanation is that participants are using a combination of two perspectives to rate the female victims in a friendship. First, respondents may consider friendships as having less emotional commitment than dating relationships. In this case, they may suggest that a better course of action for the woman would have been to either drop the subject or leave the situation instead of retaliating. This would be supported by research in which participants expect women to be submissive, timid, and forgiving, and expect men to be aggressive and dominant (Williams & Best, 1990). When a woman retaliates against an aggressive person, she is violating the norms for her gender. This may lead participants to rate females, but not males, more negatively when they retaliate in an aggressive situation.

A number of social psychology theories could be explored in relation to the aforementioned results. For example, Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) social exchange theory would explain this perspective by suggesting that the costs of staying in an abusive friendship may outweigh the benefits. Specifically, a friendship might not have as many benefits as a dating relationship. Therefore, the social exchange theory would not support staying in the current aggressive situation. Another theory that would be interesting to investigate is the “just world” hypothesis. This theory states that people like to believe that they live in a “just world.” Therefore, when someone is a victim, they are somehow deserving of being a victim (Lerner, 1980). If the participants in this study believed in a “just world,” they may have rated a victim’s behavior as less appropriate in order to restore their own beliefs in a “just world.” Continuing research could examine how various social psychology theories could explain the perceptions of verbal abuse.

The second part of this explanation is that it is traditionally assumed that aggression is a masculine trait, while women are expected to be more submissive (Williams & Best, 1990). Although many people, especially women, claim not to believe in these traditional gender stereotypes, research consistently indicates that most people still conform to them. Infante and Rancer (1996) found that participants overestimated the number of verbally aggressive statements made by a woman. They suggest that because women are not expected to engage in verbally aggressive behavior, when they do, the extent of their aggressiveness is magnified. Therefore, in our study, when the female victim retaliated, instead of being passive, respondents might reflect their disapproval by rating the female victim’s behavior more negatively than the male’s behavior. If the participants combined these perspectives, it would lead them to rate a female victim, but not a male victim, more negatively in a friendship than in a dating relationship.

While verbal aggression has often been studied in conjunction with other types of aggression, the current study provides a reasonable motive to study verbal aggression by itself. It appears that people perceive verbal aggression differently when not paired with other types of aggression. Furthermore, the research regarding abuse has traditionally focused on familial and romantic relationships. The current study has laid a foundation for much needed research in other types of relationships (i.e., friends, college roommates, coworkers, etc.). Finally, one of the limitations of the current study is that the participants were all female. Future research

should examine men's perceptions of a verbally abusive scenario to assess whether gender of respondent is a significant factor in judging the severity of verbal abuse.

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APPENDIX A: Scenario

Ben and Carrie¹ have been **friends**² for **two years**³. They have taken several classes together and have lived in the same dorm. Carrie asked Ben to join her for lunch to talk about a problem with a class. Ben was ten minutes late for their meeting. The following conversation took place when they met for lunch.

Carrie: “You’re late, I was starting to get worried about you.”

Ben: “I’m only ten minutes late. Anyway, I told you today is a busy day for me, but you wanted to meet. So what’s wrong now?”

Carrie: “Well, I just wanted to say that you were right. That class is really difficult. I don’t know if I can do it.”

Ben: “I’m not surprised. I doubted you could handle that class. I told you not to take it. You should have just listened to me.”

Carrie: “What is that supposed to mean?”

Ben: “Hey, let’s face it. You’re not exactly the kind of person who can handle stress. Remember when we were in Speech? You were always freaking out about everything. But, lucky for you, I was always there to bail you out. Even though you still screwed up our final project. You know, it’s your fault that we didn’t get an A. You can’t do anything right.”

Carrie: “I didn’t ask you to meet me so you could sit here and be an asshole.”

Ben: “Why are you so mad at me? I’m doing you a favor. It’s about time that you realize that everyone has their limits. Your’s are just a lot lower than most peoples’.”

Carrie: “I can’t believe this. Why do you have to be such a bastard/bitch?”

Ben: “Don’t be pissed at me. The mess that you’re in is all your fault. It’s not my fault that you’re so stupid. I’m the one who said you would fail and look at you now. You don’t even really deserve to be here. God, I don’t know how anyone can stand you. You’re lucky you have me.”

¹ Genders of perpetrator and victim manipulation reversed names throughout the scenario.

² Type of relationship manipulation varied as follows: *friends* OR *dating*.

³ Length of relationship manipulation varied as follows: *one month* OR *two years*.