



Revisiting “Ill Will Versus Poor Skill”: Relationship Dissatisfaction, Intimate Partner Violence, and Observed “Communication Skills Deficits”

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Abstract

For decades, researchers, interventionists, and the lay public have subscribed to the notion that couples low in relationship satisfaction and/or experiencing psychological, physical, or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) have communication skills deficits. In contrast, experimental studies of communication have concluded that differences were more likely due to partners’ “ill will than poor skill.” We revisited this debate by recruiting a fairly generalizable sample of couples ($N=291$) via random-digit dialing and asking them to discuss two top conflict areas (“at your best” and “as you typically do”), thus measuring will — conscious inhibition of hostility and negative reciprocity and production of positivity (i.e., the “conflict triad”). The conflict triad was observed with the Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System, 2nd Generation (Heyman et al., 2015). We found partial support for the hypotheses grounded in Finkel’s (2013) I³ meta-model. Frequency of hostility was associated with a complicated satisfaction \times IPV-extent \times conversation type \times gender interaction, indicating that couples’ communication skills are multi-determined. Unhappier couples showed almost no change in positivity when at their best, whereas happier couples nearly doubled their positivity despite their considerably higher typical positivity mean. Negative reciprocity was associated with satisfaction and IPV-extent but not conversation type, implying that immediate instigation combined with risk factors overwhelms conscious inhibition. Intervention implications are discussed.

Keywords

couple communication; relationship satisfaction; intimate partner violence; communication skills

One of the outgrowths of the 1970s behavioral revolution in couple research and therapy was the ascendance of the “communication skills deficit” model of couple intervention (e.g., Gottman et al., 1976). Simply put, proponents of this approach assumed that the replicable observed differences in conflict behaviors — that distressed¹ couples (a) are more hostile, (b) are more likely to reciprocate their partners’ hostility, and (c) emit less positive behavior

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¹We have adopted the following terminology common in the couple field: “Relationship Distress” refers to couples scoring below the clinically significant threshold on a questionnaire (e.g., Dyadic Adjustment Scale [Spanier, 1976] scores less than or equal to 97). “Relationship Satisfaction” refers to scores on a continuous measure.

than nondistressed couples (Heyman, 2001), what we will refer to as the “conflict triad” — imply that distressed couples have a communication skills deficit that can be rectified via training. Likewise, multiple behavioral theories (e.g., Bell & Naugle, 2008; Slep et al., 2016) of intimate partner violence (IPV) without power/control motivations (i.e., “situational couple violence” in Michael Johnson’s [2010] typology) hypothesize communication skills deficits, which have been empirically confirmed (e.g., see meta-analysis by Love et al., 2020).

In other words, the “communication skills deficit” model posits that partners in relationships marked by dissatisfaction or situational IPV act/react hostilely and soften the conflict with less overt positive behavior because they do not know how to do better (e.g., Markman et al., 2010). This approach remains one of the most widely used active ingredients in preventing (Halford et al., 2008) and treating (Benson et al., 2012) relationship problems and situational IPV (see review by Armenti & Babcock, 2016). With the ascendance of the couple education movement and the pouring of over \$1B of U.S. taxpayer dollars into “Healthy Marriage Initiative” and “Strengthening Healthy Marriage” skills-based programs (Cowan & Cowan, 2014), naïve stakeholders would understandably deduce that it is settled science that communication skills deficits are a primary cause of relationship distress and situational IPV and that such deficits can be ameliorated via education.

Does Dissatisfaction and Situational IPV Stem from Individual Deficits?

But is it settled science? Is the inference “if couples act destructively, they need to be taught how to act otherwise” supportable? Let’s begin with the foundational studies developing behavioral approaches to couple research and therapy in the 1960s–1970s. One of the earliest to observe couple conflicts — the widely cited study by Vincent et al. (1975), later replicated by Noller (1980, 1981) — demonstrated that individuals in distressed relationships did *not* have stable communication deficits. Vincent et al. (1975) observed two types of dyads: (a) mixed-gender couples in distressed relationships and (b) the same individuals paired in mixed-gender dyads with a partner other than their own. If individuals in distressed relationships were skills deficient, they should have been hapless in their attempts in both dyads. However, when paired with strangers, they were far more positive and less negative.

Two subsequent studies attempted to isolate deficits. Gottman and Porterfield (1981) explored specific “sender” and “receiver” communication deficits by having partners and strangers interpret experimentally manipulated messages. Distressed men had deficits in interpreting the valence of messages from their own partners (but not from those of strangers). Burleson and Denton (1997) tested four different communication skills — cognitive complexity, predictive accuracy, perceptual accuracy, and communication effectiveness — and did not find main effects for relationship distress but did find some complicated gender \times degree- of-satisfaction associations with some skills. Because they found significant differences in motivation but not behavioral skills, they concluded, “This pattern of results raises the possibility that the negative communication behaviors frequently observed in distressed [individuals]... may result more from ill will than poor skill” (Burleson & Denton, 1997, p. 897). To summarize across these five experimental studies,

one can infer that, by and large, observed behavioral differences among couples are unlikely to result from individuals' communication skill ineptitude (of the types measured).

Disentangling Contributions of Dissatisfaction, Situational IPV, and Consciously Applied Skills

This study was designed to take a fresh look at the “ill will versus poor skill” debate via a meta-model of conflict behavior (Finkel, 2008) that posits that destructive behaviors occur when there is a “perfect storm” (Finkel, 2014) of instigation (i.e., conflictual event/evocation or provocative behavior) and impellance (i.e., Finkel's term for risk factors for destructive behaviors, such as dissatisfaction and history of IPV) that exceed partners' capacity at inhibition (i.e., conscious or unconscious tamping down of urges to respond destructively). Instigation, impellance, and inhibition form the basis for the I³ Meta-Model (Finkel, 2008).

Regarding instigation, we will evoke and observe conflict by eliciting from couples the areas in which they most desire partner change and have them discuss these topics. This conflict paradigm has been used in hundreds of couple observation studies (Heyman, 2001). Regarding impellance, we sought to disentangle the contributions that two key risk factors (dissatisfaction and IPV) make toward observed behavior during mixed-gender couple conflict. Relationship distress/satisfaction has been the field's key outcome variable since the 1930s (e.g., Locke & Wallace, 1959; Terman et al., 1938) and was the primary focus of earlier research. However, since the 1980s, IPV has been the focus of considerable research. Distress and physical IPV are interrelated, with an overlap of one-half to two-thirds in general and clinical populations (Heyman, Lorber, et al., in press). Although rarely acknowledged, the study of distressed couples has been primarily the study of those with both distress and physical IPV, and this study sought to test both factors' unique and interactive contributions to couple behavior. Furthermore, Burleson and Denton (1997) noted the importance of measuring satisfaction as a continuous variable when testing associations with behavioral skill. This need extends to IPV, the impact of which might also differ by degree, not dichotomy. Although IPV is most often measured continuously, it is typically dichotomized based on a single occurrence. We thus created an ordinal index of IPV severity (i.e., “IPV-extent”), from none to psychological (mild and then severe) to physical/sexual (mild and then severe) to injurious. By measuring the influence of both IPV and satisfaction continuously (rather than categorically), this study can disentangle the associations of these two critical risk factors, believed to have unique and synergistic contributions to observed problematic behavior (Bell & Naugle, 2008).

Finally, we viewed the final I³ factor, inhibition, as a skill unexplored in couple observation research. We decided to overtly test one form of this skill, conscious inhibition, by asking couples to discuss two top conflict areas “at your best” and “as you typically do.” Conscious inhibition of the conflict triad directly gets at the “more ill will than poor skill” hypothesis of Burleson and Denton (1997). Although conscious inhibition/production has not been studied before in observational research, a growing corpus of studies has confirmed its theorized effect. For example, Finkel et al. (2009; 2012) found that lower inhibition is related to higher aggressiveness toward romantic partners. Buck and Neff (2012), using daily diaries,

Crane et al. (2014), using daily telephone reports, and Testa et al. (2020), using ecological momentary assessment, all found that lower inhibition was related to relationship anger and arguing. In sum, inhibition appears to be linked to partners' hostility but has not been studied observationally to date.

Current Study

We recruited a fairly generalizable sample of couples via random digit dialing, instigated conflict, and studied the effects of (a) key risk factors' unique and interactive effects and (b) conscious inhibition on observed conflict triad behaviors. First, we hypothesized that both satisfaction ($H_{1.1.1-1.1.3}$) and IPV-extent ($H_{1.2.1-1.2.3}$) would account for unique variance in the conflict triad (i.e., main effects). Relationship satisfaction is a stable affective variable that influences appraisal and behavioral-priming processes, thus impacting behavior (Sanford, 2006). In contrast, IPV-extent is a marker variable for behavioral learning history. Patterson's (1982) Coercion Theory explains how aversive behavior increases in frequency and intensity across time, as each person is intermittently positively reinforced for hostility (i.e., rewarded for escalating) and intermittently negatively reinforced for ceasing hostility (i.e., rewarded for capitulation). Because each partner is trying to coerce the other into ceasing aversive behavior, individuals have to increase their behavioral intensity over time to "win," moving from the conflict triad to psychological and physical IPV. We believed both risk factors would have direct associations with the conflict triad.

Second, we made hypotheses regarding inhibition, operationalized via our best-versus-typical skill manipulation, which is an analog for naturalistic situations that require downregulation of hostile responding, which can occur consciously (e.g., fighting on the way to a party and dropping the hostility on arrival) and unconsciously (e.g., responding to perceived slights when tired but not when rested). Such situations may also involve upregulation of positive responding, which can occur consciously (e.g., using active listening skills when a conflict appears to be starting) and unconsciously (e.g., responding to partner's positivity with one's own positivity). Using Finkel's (2014) "Perfect Storm Theory", we hypothesized that the two measures of relationship risk — affective (satisfaction) and behavioral (IPV coercive learning history) variables — will each show stronger associations with the conflict triad variables when inhibition is lower (i.e., in the typical vs. "at your best" discussions). Thus, we hypothesized two-way interactions of (a) both satisfaction and IPV-extent and (b) inhibition (best vs. typical) in predicting conflict triad outcomes ($H_{2.1.1-2.1.3}$; $H_{2.2.1-2.2.3}$). Similarly, the affective and behavioral risk variables are hypothesized to interact with each other and with inhibition; these effects should result in a three-way interaction (satisfaction \times IPV-extent \times conversation) in their associations with conflict triad outcomes ($H_{3.1.1-3.1.3}$).

Finally, gender differences have been consistently found in mixed-gender couples' observed conflict behavior (Heyman, 2001) and were found by Burleson and Denton (1997) to impact skill display. Although there is not sufficient theory to hypothesize specific interactions, we will use post-hoc comparisons to test for gender-related effects on the above hypotheses (i.e., three- and four-way interactions that add gender).

Method

All study procedures were approved by the university institutional review board.

Participants

Participants were 291 English-speaking, mixed-gender couples (582 individuals) who were married ($n = 262$; 90%) or living together for at least one year ($n = 29$; 10%). Couples were recruited from a representative sampling frame of Suffolk County, New York in 1998–2003 using random digit dialing. A total of 229,106 phone numbers were dialed by research assistants, who ultimately reached 12,009 individuals that answered at least one question in the interview. Respondents were screened for eligibility via the telephone interview, of which 2,212 were considered eligible for the study. Of these respondents, 291 ultimately participated in the study and received \$250 for completing the 4-hour laboratory protocol. Participants in the phone survey were found to be fairly representative of the county population (via the 2000 U.S. Census), and study participants were quite representative of phone respondents who were eligible but did not participate in the main study (for detailed information, see Slep et al., 2006 “Couples Study”).

To be invited to participate in the lab study, phone respondents had to report that (a) they were married or cohabiting for at least one year, and (b) both respondents and partners could understand and read English. To ensure broad distribution of both relationship satisfaction and IPV, we oversampled couples reporting IPV in the last year and those who reported relationship distress without IPV. Mean family income was \$84,194 ($SD = \$47,158$) and mean relationship length was 12.88 years ($SD = 10.97$). Individuals’ demographic and descriptive statistics for the main study variables can be found in Table 1.

Procedure

On arrival, participants read and signed informed consent forms. Partners were led to separate rooms to complete relationship satisfaction and IPV measures and the Areas of Change Questionnaire (Weiss & Birchler, 1975), which was used to determine the topics for three ten-minute videotaped discussions. To control the gender of the partner pursuing change, which can impact observed behaviors (e.g., Heavey et al., 1993), the first two topics were randomly selected from the woman’s top areas of desired change. Because women’s scores on a host of measures relate more closely to relationship outcomes than men’s, women have been called the “barometers” of relationship well-being (Floyd & Markman, 1983). Thus, when faced with time limitations preventing a fully crossed design, we decided to use women’s two topics for the best vs. typical discussions. (As recommended by Crenshaw et al., 2021, we tested if women indeed desired change on these topics more than men did. They did in 86.3% and 84.9% of the “at your best” and typical conversations, respectively.) The randomization procedures worked (i.e., no significant difference between the amount of change that women desired between the two topics $t(285) = 0.201, p = n.s.$).

Before the first interaction, researchers met with each partner privately to let him/her know the topic, and said, “We’d like you to have a conversation about [topic] for 10 minutes and try to get somewhere with it. In this conversation, we’d like you to communicate as you

do at your best. By that, I mean when you think that you're handling things as well as you possibly can. I want you to think for a moment about the things you do during a discussion that help it go well so that you can keep those in mind during the interaction here. [pause] OK, now I want you to think to yourself about the things that sometimes go wrong during your discussions and think of some strategies you could use to help keep things on the right track." After the instructions, partners were brought together in the living room-like space equipped with video cameras and microphones and were asked to begin once the researcher left. After 10 minutes, the researcher re-entered the room, accompanied participants to separate rooms, and asked each to complete the typicality questionnaire. Partners separately participated in additional tasks not germane to the current study before the procedure for the second conversation was initiated.

Before the second interaction, researchers met with each partner, let him/her know the topic, and said, "We'd like to see you demonstrate how you typically discuss problems when you are at home. We've already seen what it's like when you're at your best, and this time we'd like to see what it's like when you're not at your best, but you're just being yourselves." After finishing the full protocol, participants were paid, debriefed, and provided with a list of community resources.

Measures

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)—The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus et al., 1996) is the most widely used IPV measure, with established reliability and validity (e.g., Newton et al., 2001; Straus, 2004). Participants indicated the frequency they (i.e., perpetration) and their partners (i.e., victimization) engaged in specific acts during the preceding 12 months on a scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*). Using Straus et al.'s (1996) classifications, mild physical IPV comprised the following items: threw an object that could hurt, twisted arm or hair, pushed or shoved, grabbed, slapped. Severe physical or sexual IPV comprised the following items: beat up, burned or scalded on purpose, kicked, slammed against a wall, choked, punched or hit with an object that could hurt, used a knife or gun, used force to make partner have sex. Mild psychological IPV comprised the following items: insulted or sworn at, shouted or yelled, done something to spite partner. Severe psychological IPV comprised the following items: called partner fat or ugly, destroyed something belonging to partner, accused partner of being a lousy lover, threatened to hit or throw something. IPV impact/injury comprised the following items: broken a bone or passed out from being hit on the head by partner during a fight; and gone, or needed to (but didn't) go, to the doctor because of a fight with partner. As is typically done when data from both partners are available (e.g., Heyman & Schlee, 1997), if partners differed in their ratings on a particular item (e.g., how frequently partner A pushed partner B), the higher score was used.

To integrate the various forms and severity levels of the CTS, we created an ordinal IPV variable as follows: 0=endorsed no IPV, 1=endorsed only mild psychological IPV, 2=endorsed any severe psychological IPV, 3=endorsed only mild physical IPV, 4=endorsed any severe physical/sexual IPV, and 5= endorsed injury due to IPV. The individual-level, ordinal variables showed significant criterion-validity associations with measures

of male and female control, IPV justification, and flooding (see Online Supplement). As is frequently found in mixed-gender couple research (e.g., Heyman & Schlee, 1997), there was high concordance between male-to-female and female-to-male IPV, with 64% matching identically and 22% differing by one level (see Table 2). Thus, to simplify the already complicated analytic plan (and reduce the need for complicated decomposition of multiple-way IPV interactions), we created a dyadic-level ordinal variable by summing the individual IPV scores into a couple-level score with a range of 0–10 ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 2.92$). This couple-level scoring approach has demonstrated criterion validity in two recent studies (Heyman, Slep et al., in press; Wojda et al., 2022).

Finally, Heyman, Slep et al. (in press) reported that almost all of our participants (93–97% of men and 96–98% of women) disapproved of male-to-female physical IPV, indicating their attitudes are consistent with the “situational couple violence” type (Johnson, 2010).

Relationship Satisfaction—The Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983) is a six-item inventory that assesses relationship satisfaction using broadly worded global items; we replaced “marriage” with “relationship” (e.g., “We have a good relationship”). Respondents indicate the degree of agreement with each item on a scale ranging from 1 (very strong disagreement) to 7 (very strong agreement). Scores can range from 0 to 39, with higher scores indicating higher satisfaction. The QMI has excellent ($r > .90$) convergent validity with other measures of relationship adjustment and satisfaction (Heyman et al., 1994) as well as excellent internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = 0.96$ for men; $\alpha = 0.98$ for women).

Behavioral Assessment

Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System, 2nd Generation (RMICS2; Heyman et al., 2015). RMICS2 is the most recent iteration of a micro-analytic coding system adapted from the Marital Interaction Coding System–IV (MICS–IV; Heyman et al., 1995) and RMICS (Heyman, 2004). RMICS2 consolidates RMICS’ elements² into seven codes: high hostility, low hostility, constructive problem discussion (neutral), low positivity, high positivity, dysphoric affect, and other. (A default “attention” code is given to listeners who emit no other behavior.) Behavior is defined broadly to include all observable actions (i.e., affective, motoric, verbal, and nonverbal). RMICS — and, by extension, the more parsimonious RMICS2 — has excellent content, discriminative, convergent, concurrent, and predictive validity (Heyman, 2004). Observers code both speaker and listener behavior in 5-second intervals and assign one of the seven codes to each unit; if two or more codes are present during a unit, a theoretically derived hierarchy (i.e., negative codes, then positive codes, then neutral codes) dictates which code to retain.

In addition to frequencies of RMICS2 behaviors, we calculated Yule’s Q for lag sequential analysis (Bakeman & Quera, 2011), measuring the likelihood (controlling for chance) that a

²RMICS2 hostility codes comprise these RMICS codes: psychological abuse, hostility, distress-maintaining attributions, hostility, withdrawal. RMICS2 positivity codes comprise these RMICS codes: self-disclosure, acceptance, relationship-enhancing attributions, humor.

particular behavior by one partner will immediately follow a particular behavior by the other (e.g., male:hostility→female:hostility).

Fifteen trained coders scored the videos; 25% were rated by two coders blind to which videos were selected for measuring agreement. Across the 873 study videos, interrater agreement was high, with average $G = .82$. (Because of the highly imbalanced cells, Cohen's kappa is extremely biased and G , a kappa variant, is the preferred statistic [Xu & Lorber, 2014]). G is interpreted like kappa: .40–.59 “fair,” .60–.74 “good,” and $> .75$ “excellent” (Cicchetti, 1994). G s were as follows: Hostility-High = 1.00; Hostility-Low = 0.85; Constructive Problem Discussion = 0.73; Positivity-Low = 0.89; Positivity-High = 1.00; Dysphoric Affect = 1.00. Because high-intensity codes were infrequent, analyses combined low- and high-hostility and low- and high-positivity. (See Table 2 for M s, SD s, and standardized coefficients.)

Typicality of Laboratory Behavior (Foster et al., 1997): Participants rate an in-lab conversation's external validity (comparing it similar conversations at home) on an 8-item scale. Responses ranged on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (much less than usual) to 5 (much more than usual). Both positive and negative behaviors are assessed. Responses were recoded (from -2 to $+2$) and centered so that 0 = “usual;” negative scores indicate less than at-home behavior, and positive numbers indicate more than at-home behavior. Negative items were reverse scored and summed with the positive items to create an overall typicality score. Internal consistency was good across both conversations ($\alpha = 0.70$ for men; $\alpha = 0.78$ for women).

Data Analysis

We first performed a validity check (via descriptive statistics and one-sample t -tests) to test if individuals rated their partners' behavior as typical for conversations of that type (i.e., best and typical). We then tested whether the best vs. typical manipulation worked (evoked more positive and less hostile behavior in the best, compared with typical, conversation). Finally, we tested the main study hypotheses via a series of generalized linear mixed models in SPSS (which allow for both fixed and random effects in the model), examining each element of the conflict triad (frequency of negativity and positivity and the strength of the negative reciprocity sequence) as a function of (a) main effects for conversation (best versus typical), IPV extent, relationship satisfaction, and (b) all 2-way and 3-way interactions. A series of follow-up sensitivity analyses added gender and its related interactions. After examining the models, all non-significant higher-level interactions including gender were dropped, resulting in the final reported models.

Results

Validity Check: Typicality of Conversations

Men and women reported that their partners' behavior was fairly characteristic of at-home conversations, with “0” indicating usual behavior (typical conversation men: $M = 0.12$ [$SD = 0.39$], women: $M = 0.15$ [$SD = 0.49$]; “at your best” conversation men: $M = 0.21$ [$SD = 0.40$], women: $M = 0.24$ [$SD = 0.40$]). One sample t -tests confirmed that both men

and women reported their partners' lab behaviors as slightly more positive/less negative compared with similar conversations at home (typical conversations men: $t(291) = 5.66, p < .001$, women: $t(291) = 5.39, p < .001$; "at your best" conversations men: $t(290) = 8.99, p < .001$, women: $t(290) = 10.64, p < .001$). Examination of regions of significance revealed that partners used significantly less positivity in typical versus "at your best" conversations when satisfaction was higher than -4.01 (less than $\frac{1}{2}$ SD below the mean; $B = 1.18, SE = 0.60, p = .05$).

Manipulation Check (Best vs. Typical)

The inhibition manipulation (best vs. typical) was successful. As shown in Table 3, even when controlling for satisfaction, IPV-extent, and interactions, there was a main effect of conversation type (best vs. typical) in associations with the conflict triad (hostility frequency, positivity frequency, and negative reciprocity) such that "at your best" conversations evoked lower levels of conflict triad behaviors.

Hypotheses_{1.1.1–1.2.3}: Main Effects of Satisfaction and IPV-Extent

We hypothesized that satisfaction and IPV-extent would account for unique variance in the conflict triad. As shown in Table 3, the hypothesized main effect for satisfaction was confirmed for all three conflict triad outcomes. The hypothesized main effect for IPV-extent was confirmed for the two hostility outcomes (hostility frequency and negative reciprocity). Examination of regions of significance revealed significant associations between lower relationship satisfaction and higher negative reciprocity when IPV-extent was lower than 6.81 (a value above the mean; $B = -0.01, SE = 0.00, p = .05$). There were significant associations between higher IPV-extent and greater negative reciprocity when satisfaction was greater than -4.49 (approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ SD below the mean; $B = 0.02, SE = 0.01, p = .05$). In addition, there was a main effect for gender regarding hostility frequency. Women emitted more hostility than men during conversations of women's top two areas of desired change. Because there were significant interactions (see below), the interpretation of these main effects should be tempered.

Hypotheses_{2.1.1–2.2.3}: Satisfaction x Conversation; IPV-Extent x Conversation

As shown in Table 3, of the six hypothesized two-way interactions, only satisfaction \times conversation regarding positive frequency was significant (Figure 1).

We used Preacher et al.'s (2006) methods and website to decompose the 2-way interaction (Figure 1). Consistent with our hypothesis, traditional tests of simple effects revealed significantly more positivity in "at your best" versus typical conversations for individuals reporting high ($+1$ SD , 10.85) or mean (0) levels of relationship satisfaction, $B = 2.79, SE = 0.58, p < .001$ and $B = 1.61, SE = 0.51, p = .002$, respectively. However, there was not a significant difference in positivity between conversations for partners reporting low (-1 SD , -10.85) levels of relationship satisfaction, $B = 0.44, SE = 0.83, p = .60$.

Hypotheses_{3.1.1–3.1.3}: Satisfaction \times IPV-Extent \times Conversation

As shown in Table 3, satisfaction \times IPV-extent \times conversation was not significant for any conflict triad outcome. This may be because the hypothesized relation was contained

in three other significant moderation effects: (a) satisfaction \times IPV-extent (for negative reciprocity only; Figure 2), (b) satisfaction \times conversation \times gender (for hostility only); and (c) satisfaction \times IPV-extent \times conversation \times gender (for hostility only; Figure 3).

Decomposing the satisfaction \times IPV-extent effect on negative reciprocity revealed significant associations between lower relationship satisfaction and higher negative reciprocity for couples reporting low (-1 *SD*; 2.32) or mean (5.29) levels of IPV-extent, $B = -0.01$, $SE = 0.00$, $p = .000$ and $B = -0.01$, $SE = 0.00$, $p = .002$, respectively. There was not a significant ($+1$ *SD*; 8.26), $B = -0.00$, $SE = 0.00$, $p = .483$. There were significant associations between higher IPV-extent and greater negative reciprocity in couples with partners reporting mean (0) or high ($+1$ *SD*; 10.85) levels of relationship satisfaction, $B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .004$ and $B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .000$, respectively. There was not a significant association between higher IPV-extent and greater negative reciprocity among couples with partners reporting low (-1 *SD*; -10.85) levels of relationship satisfaction, $B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .553$.

To decompose the 4-way interaction, we ran separate models of men's and women's hostility and separately probed the 3-way interactions (conversation \times satisfaction \times IPV-extent) using Preacher et al.'s (2006) methods and website. We calculated (a) traditional tests of simple effects at given values of moderators and (b) regions of significance using the Johnson-Neyman technique — the entire range of values of a moderator at which simple effects are significantly different from zero (i.e., the range of satisfaction scores at which there was a significant difference between conversations among couples reporting low, average, and high IPV-extent).

We first examined whether there were significant differences between typical and “at your best” conversations by examining simple slopes at low, average, and high values of IPV (i.e., -1 *SD* [2.32], mean [5.29], $+1$ *SD* [8.26]) and relationship satisfaction (i.e., -1 *SD* [-10.85], mean [0], and $+1$ *SD* [10.85]). Results of these traditional tests of simple slopes generally supported our hypothesis. Women in couples reporting low IPV-extent did not use hostility at different rates between conversations when their relationship satisfaction was low ($B = -2.28$, $SE = 1.90$, $p = .229$); however, when they reported mean ($B = -3.85$, $SE = 1.16$, $p = .001$) or high ($B = -5.43$, $SE = 1.27$, $p = .000$) relationship satisfaction, they used significantly more hostility in typical versus “at your best” conversations. Men in couples reporting low IPV-extent used significantly more hostility in typical versus “at your best” conversations across levels of satisfaction ($B = -4.93$, $SE = 1.68$, $p = .004$, $B = -3.60$, $SE = 0.96$, $p = .000$, and $B = -2.27$, $SE = 1.03$, $p = .028$ at low, mean, and high levels of satisfaction).

Partners in couples reporting mean IPV-extent used more hostility in typical versus “at your best” conversations across levels of satisfaction (among women: $B = -3.85$, $SE = 1.13$, $p = .001$, $B = -4.49$, $SE = 0.84$, $p = .000$, and $B = -3.13$, $SE = 1.17$, $p = .000$ at low, mean, and high levels of relationship satisfaction; among men: $B = -3.36$, $SE = 1.02$, $p = .001$, $B = -3.31$, $SE = 0.67$, $p = .000$, and $B = -3.25$, $SE = 0.98$, $p = .001$).

In couples reporting high IPV-extent, men did not use differing rates of hostility in the conversations when their relationship satisfaction was low ($B = -1.79$, $SE = 1.09$, $p = 0.101$) but used significantly more hostility in typical versus “at your best” conversations when their relationship satisfaction was at the mean ($B = -3.01$, $SE = 0.93$, $p = .001$) or high ($B = -4.23$, $SE = 1.65$, $p = .011$). Women in couples with high IPV-extent used more hostility in typical versus “at your best” conversations across levels of satisfaction ($B = -5.43$, $SE = 1.16$, $p = .000$; $B = -3.13$, $SE = 1.23$, $p = .000$; $B = -4.83$, $SE = 1.96$, $p = .014$ at low, mean, and high satisfaction levels).

Examination of regions of significance revealed that men and women in couples reporting low IPV-extent used significantly more hostility in typical, compared with “at your best,” conversations when their centered relationship satisfaction score was 11.94 or lower for men ($B = -2.14$, $SE = 1.09$, $p = .05$) and -6.06 or higher for women ($B = -2.97$, $SE = 1.51$, $p = .05$). Men and women in couples reporting mean IPV-extent behaved significantly more hostilely in typical, compared with “at your best,” conversations across the full range of satisfaction. Finally, couples with high IPV used more hostility in typical, compared with “at your best,” conversations when satisfaction was -9.25 or higher in men ($B = -1.97$, $SE = 1.00$, $p = .05$) and 15.96 or lower in women ($B = -4.69$, $SE = 2.38$, $p = .05$).

Discussion

For decades, the idea that relationship problems are due to “communication skills deficits” has proliferated in professional and popular circles. Large swaths of (a) relationship education and therapy and (b) IPV-couple treatment explicitly teach communication skills to remedy these “deficits” (e.g., Benson et al., 2012; Halford et al., 2008; Love et al., 2020). However, when researchers have looked for communication skills deficits, they have been elusive, such that one set of researchers concluded that observed behaviors are due more to “ill will than poor skill” (Burlinson & Denton, 1997, p. 897). In this study, we revisited this forgotten area of research to focus on the skill of inhibition (Finkel, 2008), evoked by asking couples to discuss issues “at their best” and typically. The manipulation worked; couples were able to significantly, but modestly, behave better on the conflict triad during the “at your best,” conversation compared with the typical conversation. In other words, as theorized by Finkel (2014), many couples can use their inhibition skills to improve the conflict triad somewhat.

Inhibition Is Influenced By a Complicated Interplay of Dissatisfaction, IPV, and Gender

“Ill will more than poor skill” implies malevolent intentions in the use of inhibition skills more with a stranger than with a partner. Yet, Burlinson and Denton (1997, p. 897) concluded that their “results demonstrate that the relationship between communication skills and marital satisfaction is far from simple.” Interpersonal behavior intricacies are the basis for Finkel’s (2014) Perfect Storm Theory, which posited that inhibition capacities can be overwhelmed when high levels of risk factors (e.g., dissatisfaction, IPV-extent) meet strong instigation. Indeed, our results were complex and dependent on the conflict triad outcome examined.

Hostility—For frequency of hostility, there was a satisfaction \times IPV-extent \times best/typical conversation \times gender interaction. For couples with average IPV levels, men and women inhibited hostility (i.e., were less hostile in best, versus typical, conversations) by a consistent amount across the satisfaction and IPV-extent spectrum. For women in high-IPV relationships, inhibition was consistent and moderate across the range of satisfaction. The only large inhibition display was for women with the lowest risk (i.e., happy women in low-IPV relationships). For men, inhibition was lowest for those with both risk factors (i.e., low satisfaction and high IPV-extent) — exactly what Finkel’s (2014) model would predict regarding impellance factors.

Positivity—Happy couples nearly doubled their positivity in the best, compared with typical, condition despite their considerably higher mean. This seems to reveal a key “skill” of happy couples — their inhibition repertoire includes the capacity to not only dampen negativity but also increase positivity.

Negative Reciprocity—There was no inhibition effect for negative reciprocity, only an impellance (i.e., risk factor) effect, with dissatisfaction and IPV-extent demonstrating both unique and interactive influences on negative reciprocity. Couples with high IPV-extent showed higher levels of negative reciprocity regardless of satisfaction level. In contrast, couples with low IPV-extent had tremendous variability regarding how likely they were to reciprocate hostility. In Finkel’s (2014) model, the first hostile behavior can be thought of as proximal instigation (as opposed to the more general instigation of discussing a topic known to be conflictual). These results show that proximal instigation plus high impellance (either dissatisfaction or IPV-extent) overwhelms conscious inhibition, resulting in a greater likelihood of a hostile response.

Summary—We found partial support that inhibition is a skill that impacts observed behavior during couple conflict. Yet, the results are richer and more complicated than a simple one-sentence summary can convey. It was easier for most couples to act “at your best” by inhibiting hostility than by increasing positivity; almost all individuals displayed less hostility during the “at your best,” versus the typical, conversation. Only happy couples were able to increase their level of positive behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure, acceptance, humor) during conflicts. Two sets of individuals were equally hostile, despite their partners acting less so: (a) unhappy men in high-IPV couples (i.e., men with both affective and behavioral risk) and (b) unhappy women in low-IPV couples (i.e., women with affective risk). Finally, individuals with risk from either dissatisfaction or IPV-extent were likely to reciprocate hostility when instigated by their partners. Note that the communication samples were elicited in a calm, quiet laboratory setting. In real life, inhibition is degraded by stress, competition for attention (e.g., parenting), and alcohol or drug use (Finkel, 2014). Without these factors in play, the laboratory “at your best” samples likely did sample inhibition skills truly at their maximal levels.

Intervention Implications

We were interested in the context-dependent skill of inhibition in large part because of the intervention implications. If couples have communication skills they do not use, lighter-

touch behavioral interventions (e.g., couple-themed movies with discussion, Rogge et al., 2013; Marriage Check-Up, Cordova et al., 2014) would be indicated, and education-oriented interventions (Halford et al., 2008) would not be indicated because we would be teaching couples skills they already possess and can consciously activate. Similarly, non-behavioral, evidence-based approaches (e.g., those that focus on acceptance [Christensen & Doss, 2017], cognition [Epstein & Baucom, 2002], emotion [Greenberg & Goldman, 2019], and insight [Snyder & Wills, 1980]) might increase the likelihood of using latent skills. However, as earlier research has shown, possessing individual communication skills does not necessarily translate into using dyadic communication skills. Established dyads develop entrenched patterns and homeostatic mechanisms, making individual attempts at change exceedingly difficult. Precisely as predicted by Perfect Storm Theory (Finkel, 2014), this study showed that (a) most couples possess inhibition skills to reduce negative behavior during conflicts, and (b) for couples with higher affective and behavioral risk (i.e., lower satisfaction, more extensive IPV), this is not nearly enough to bring them in line with non-problematic couples. Interestingly, the happier the couple, the more latent skills they seem to possess to boost their warm and supportive behaviors during conflict. This may be an area of particular interest for both prevention and treatment interventions.

Thus, three intervention implications are most salient. First, it may be that happy couples have given up one of their secrets: They have a high capacity to increase their levels of positivity during conflicts when they are at their best. As relationships degrade, partners go through a cascade of affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes (Gottman, 1994) that may dry up the reservoir of goodwill, making elicitation of positivity during conflict exceedingly difficult. This leads to the second implication: As with most development, there are likely sensitive periods (e.g., Gabard-Durnam & McLaughlin, 2020) for relationships in which dyadic behavior processes are consciously malleable by the partners. In this study of established couples, the more unhappy the individual, the less likely inhibition of hostility and elicitation of positivity occurred during “at your best” conflicts. Thus, skill education during early relationship development, before hostile responses are overlearned, may be the best time to increase the ability to boost warm responses and roll with, rather than respond to, instigation. This is a hypothesis that would have to be tested empirically. Third, both dissatisfaction and IPV-extent impact couple behavior, and both should be routinely assessed by therapists.

Strengths and Limitations

This study had some notable strengths. First, the sample was drawn from a representative sampling frame using random-digit dialing. As documented in Slep et al., 2006, the sample’s demographics were reasonably close to census figures for the county, an approximately one- to two-hour drive from New York City; however, the county is less racially/ethnically diverse than the U.S. as a whole. Second, participants rated their in-lab conversations as highly similar to their best and typical conflicts at home. These ratings bolster inferences about the external validity of the observed conflicts. Likewise, the observed behavioral findings implied internal validity of the inhibition manipulation. Finally, by measuring both satisfaction and couple-level IPV-extent as continuous variables, we were able to investigate the unique, additive, and interactive impacts of these key constructs on observed behavior.

Several limitations are of note. First, we measured communication during home-like, analog observations; we did not measure skills via laboratory tasks, and thus our results lack the granularity of the subskills studied by Burleson and Denton (1997). Second, our study was cross-sectional. We cannot determine whether behavioral differences produce dissatisfaction and IPV, whether dissatisfaction and IPV produce behavioral differences, or whether third variables (e.g., personality traits; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010) produce both. Third, our couples were almost exclusively in Johnson's (2010) Situational Couple Violence group. Our results likely would not be the same for couples in Johnson's Intimate Terrorism group and should not be generalized to such couples. Fourth, the conversations' order was not counterbalanced; using the "best" conversation as a warm-up was both more logical and more likely to evoke "at your best" behavior than a discussion following a typical conflict. Furthermore, inhibition is a limited resource that can be exhausted and takes time to restore (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016). Thus, we believe that order effects, if anything, work in favor of the intended manipulation; however, one could argue that the only way to eliminate the competing hypothesis that our results are due to simple order effects would be to repeat this study counterbalancing the conversations. Fifth, we controlled for the gender of conversation-initiator by having women bring up their two top areas of change because women in mixed-gender couples desire more change and are more likely to initiate such conversations at home (e.g., Heyman et al., 2009). Because the gender of the initiator can influence couple behavior (e.g., Heavey et al., 1995), a useful replication and extension of this work would be to gather best and typical conversations initiated by both men and women. Finally, the data collection was completed in 2003 and replication, while always needed (Tackett et al., 2019), would be especially useful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, inhibition skills may be a fruitful yet underexplored area in understanding couple behavior and intervention needs at different points in relationship development. Our theory-based hypotheses were primarily supported, indicating that couples' communication behaviors are multi-determined and influenced by instigation, impellance (e.g., satisfaction, IPV-extent), inhibition, and gender.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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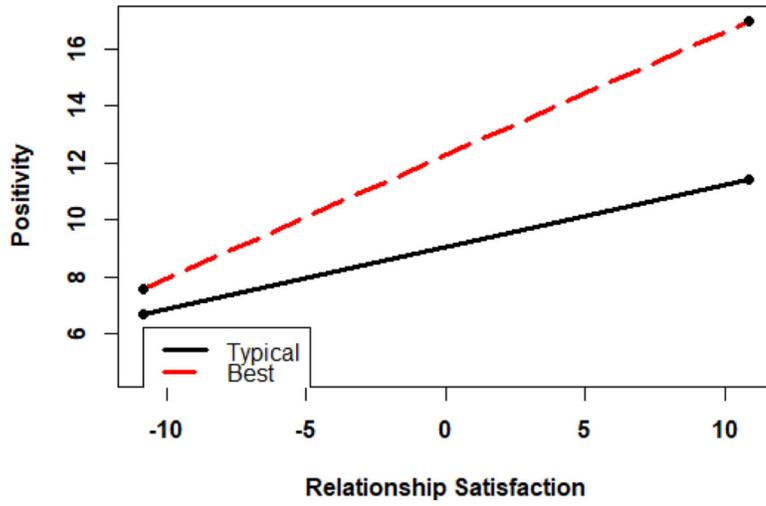


Figure 1. Relationship Satisfaction × Conversation Type Association with Frequency of Positive Behavior

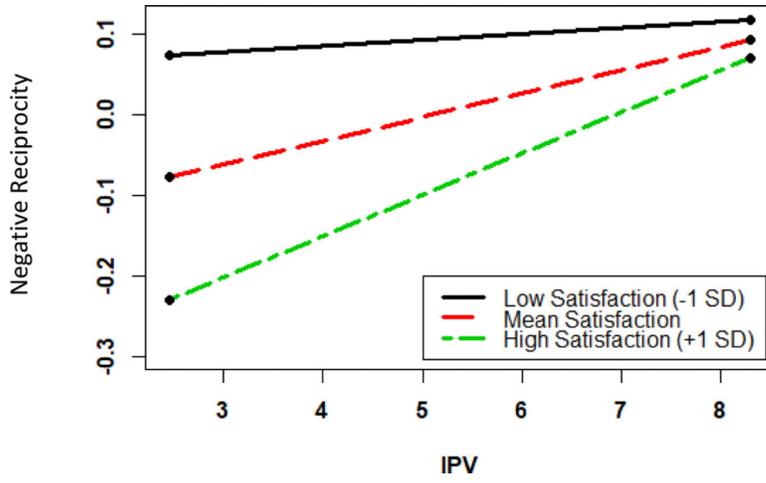


Figure 2. Relationship Satisfaction \times Intimate Partner Violence-Extent) Relation with Negative Reciprocity

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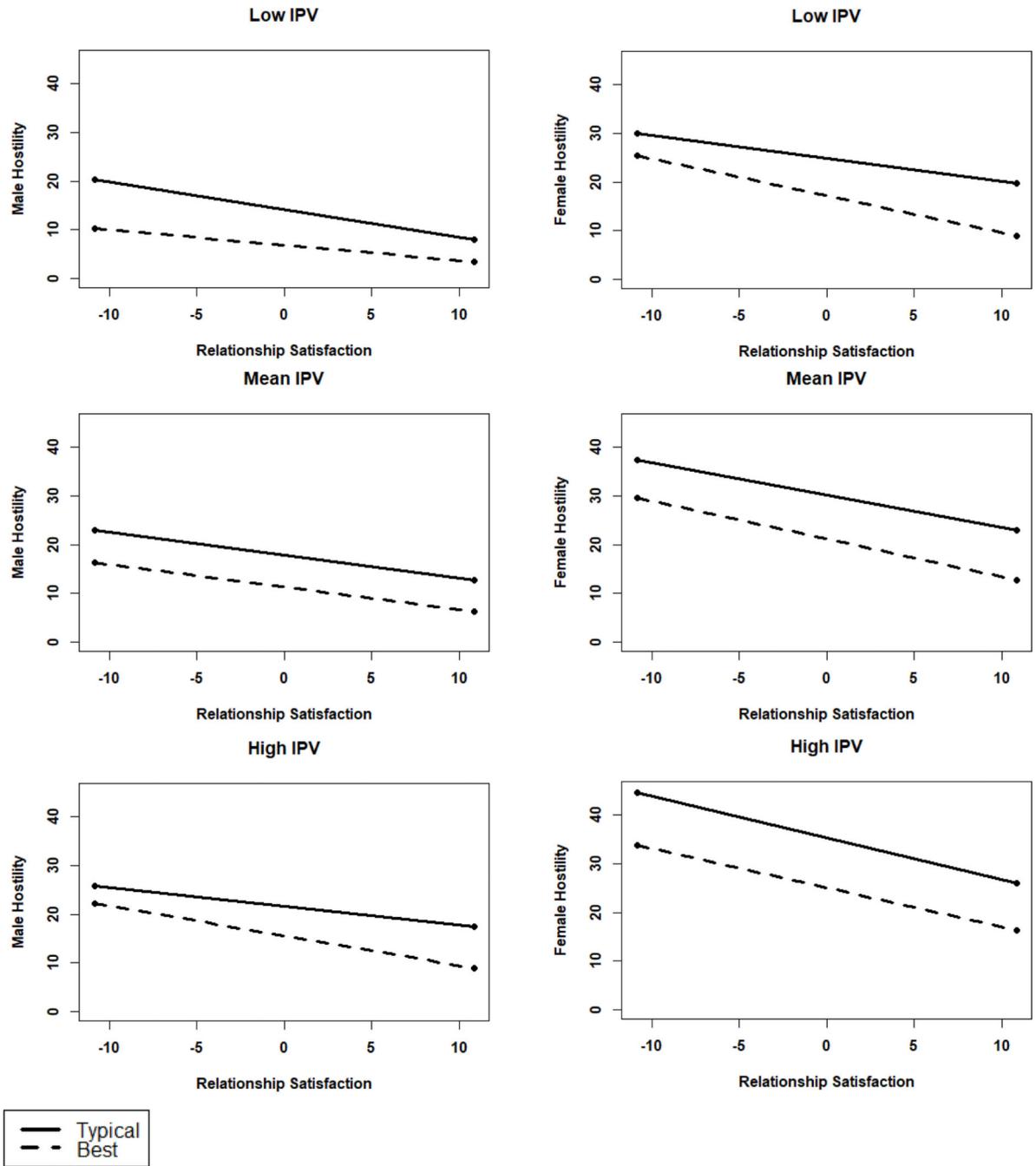


Figure 3. Conversation \times Satisfaction \times IPV-Extent for Men's and Women's Hostility

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Variable	Men			Women		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%
Age	42.40	10.76	-	40.55	10.07	-
Years of Education	14.24	2.51	-	14.42	2.37	-
Race/Ethnicity						
Black or African American	-	-	6.8	-	-	6.8
Asian	-	-	1.7	-	-	1.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	-	-	2.1	-	-	0.0
Hispanic or Latino/a (of any race)	-	-	5.5	-	-	4.8
White (Non-Hispanic or Latino/a)	-	-	79.7	-	-	84.2
Multiracial	-	-	4.1	-	-	3.1
Relationship Satisfaction	31.41	9.95	-	30.07	11.67	-
“At Your Best” Conversation						
Combined Hostility Codes	11.52	17.51	-	21.52	22.87	-
Neutral (Constructive Problem Discussion)	63.46	21.85	-	57.35	21.43	-
Combined Positive Codes	10.69	10.74	-	11.58	10.32	-
Typical Conversation						
Combined Hostility Codes	17.10	19.61	-	31.37	27.39	-
Neutral (Constructive Problem Discussion)	60.57	21.72	-	54.23	22.10	-
Combined Positive Codes	8.29	7.57	-	8.56	8.14	-

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Table 2

Extent of Men’s and Women’s Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Male-to-Female IPV (Score)	Female-to-Male IPV (Score)												
	No IPV (0)	Psychological IPV					Physical IPV						
		Mild (1)	Severe (2)	Mild (3)	Severe (4)	Injury (5)	Total	Mild (1)	Severe (2)	Mild (3)	Severe (4)	Injury (5)	Total
No IPV (0)	4 (0)	4 (1)	0 (2)	0 (3)	0 (4)	0 (5)	8	4 (1)	0 (2)	0 (3)	0 (4)	0 (5)	8
Mild psychological IPV (1)	2 (1)	71 (2)	9 (3)	8 (4)	3 (5)	1 (6)	94	71 (2)	9 (3)	8 (4)	3 (5)	1 (6)	94
Severe psychological IPV (2)	0 (2)	15 (3)	15 (4)	4 (5)	3 (6)	3 (7)	40	15 (3)	15 (4)	4 (5)	3 (6)	3 (7)	40
Mild Physical IPV (3)	0 (3)	5 (4)	6 (5)	43 (6)	11 (7)	8 (8)	73	5 (4)	6 (5)	43 (6)	11 (7)	8 (8)	73
Severe Physical IPV (4)	0 (4)	2 (5)	0 (6)	3 (7)	8 (8)	2 (9)	15	2 (5)	0 (6)	3 (7)	8 (8)	2 (9)	15
Injury (5)	0 (5)	0 (6)	0 (7)	7 (8)	8 (9)	46 (10)	61	0 (6)	0 (7)	7 (8)	8 (9)	46 (10)	61
Total	6	97	30	65	33	60	291	97	30	65	33	60	291

Note. Cells contain *n* per cell (score per cell). Shaded cells indicate matching levels of IPV from men and women. Mild psychological IPV (score =1) = at least one of the following: insulted or sworn at; shouted or yelled; and done something to spite partner. Severe psychological IPV (score =2) = at least one of the following: called partner fat or ugly; destroyed something belonging to partner; accused partner of being a lousy lover; and threatened to hit or throw something. Mild physical IPV (score =3) = at least one of the following: threw an object that could hurt; twisted arm or hair; pushed or shoved, grabbed, slapped. Severe physical or sexual IPV (score =4) = at least one of the following: beat up; burned or scalded on purpose; kicked; slammed against a wall; choked; punched or hit with an object that could hurt; used a knife or gun; used force to make your partner have sex. IPV injury (score =5) at least one of the following: broken a bone or passed out from being hit on the head by your partner during a fight; and gone, or needed to (but didn't) go, to the doctor because of a fight with your partner.

Table 3

Final Models: Frequency of Hostility, Positivity, and Likelihood of Negative Reciprocity

Variable	Hostility Frequency ^c				Positivity Frequency ^c				Negative Reciprocity ^c			
	B	SE	P	SC	B	SE	P	SC	B	SE	P	SC
Intercept	11.96	1.72	.000	***	10.76	0.79	.000	***	-0.14	0.06	.025	*
Hypotheses _{1,1,1-1,2,3} — Main Effects												
Conversation (Best/Typical)	-3.64	1.09	.001	**	1.56	0.50	.002	**	-0.17	0.06	.002	**
Satisfaction ^a	-0.47	0.15	.002	**	0.32	0.07	.000	***	-0.02	0.01	.000	***
IPV-extent ^a	1.52	0.28	.000	***	-0.24	0.13	.065		0.03	0.01	.005	**
Gender Sensitivity Test												
Gender ^b	-4.85	1.30	.000	***	-0.21	-0.40	0.21	.056	-0.04	-0.02	0.02	.336
Impellance Interaction												
Satisfaction × IPV-extent	-0.02	0.02	.387		-0.02	0.01	.064		0.00	0.00	.009	**
Hypotheses _{2,1,1-2,2,3} — 2-way Inhibition x Impellance												
Satisfaction × Conversation	0.02	0.18	.831		0.09	0.05	.044	*	0.10	0.01	.699	0.03
IPV-extent × Conversation	-0.54	0.18	.763		-0.14	-0.06	.472		-0.04	0.02	.058	0.15
Follow-up 2-way gender sensitivity analyses												
Conversation × Gender	-0.17	1.09	.877		-	-	-		-	-	-	-
Satisfaction × Gender	0.08	0.12	.535		-	-	-		-	-	-	-
IPV-extent × Gender	-0.14	0.21	.513		-	-	-		-	-	-	-
Hypotheses _{3,1,1-3,1,3} — 3-way Inhibition x Impellance												
Satisfaction × IPV-extent × Conversation	-0.01	0.02	.613		-0.03	-0.01	0.01	.220	-0.07	-0.00	0.00	.822
Follow-up 3&4-way gender sensitivity analyses												
Satisfaction × Conversation × Gender	0.21	0.10	.041	*	-	-	-		-	-	-	-
IPV-extent × Conversation × Gender	0.15	0.18	.412		-	-	-		-	-	-	-
Satisfaction × IPV-extent × Gender	0.01	0.02	.752		-	-	-		-	-	-	-
Satisfaction × IPV-extent × Conversation × Gender	-0.03	0.02	.039	*	-	-	-		-	-	-	-

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Note. IPV = Intimate partner violence, B = unstandardized regression coefficient, SE = standard error, SC = standardized regression coefficient (calculated as unstandardized coefficient \times SD of predictor / SD of outcome)

z Satisfaction and IPV-extent $r = -.44$

b Negative B indicates higher frequency of female's behavior and stronger female \rightarrow male sequence

c Intercorrelation of outcomes: hostility-positivity $\rightarrow r = -.37$; hostility-negative reciprocity $\rightarrow r = .21$; positivity-negative reciprocity $\rightarrow r = -.15$.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$