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Self-determination theory and intimate partner violence (IPV): Assessment of relationship causality orientations as predictors of IPV perpetration



Camilla S. Øverup^{a,*}, Benjamin W. Hadden^b, C. Raymond Knee^c, Lindsey M. Rodriguez^d

^a Fairleigh Dickinson University, United States

^b Purdue University, United States

^c University of Houston, United States

^d University of South Florida – St. Petersburg, United States

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ABSTRACT

Much research examines potential antecedents of intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetration. The current manuscript suggests that motivation orientations, as conceptualized by self-determination theory, may be a useful framework for understanding why some people engage in reactive IPV perpetration. Studies 1a (N = 572) and 1b (N = 265) developed, based on self-determination theory, the Relationship Causality Orientation Scale (RCOS), assessing autonomous, controlled, and impersonal motivation orientations toward romantic relationships. Studies 2 (N = 324) and 3 (N = 274) examined associations between the RCOS and different operationalizations of IPV. In Study 2, results showed that autonomous orientation predicted lower, and controlled orientation predicted higher, likelihood of IPV perpetration. Study 3 experimentally primed partner transgression and employed a voodoo doll task. Results showed that autonomous orientation predicted less IPV perpetration, and inserting fewer pins into the voodoo doll, while controlled orientation predicted more IPV perpetration and inserting more pins into the voodoo doll.

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1. Introduction

IPV occurs at relatively high rates, with approximately one in three couples experiencing violence within their intimate relationship in the past 12 months (e.g., Straus, 2008; White & Koss, 1991). IPV is particularly common among young adults and college-age individuals, with studies reporting that rates of IPV are highest for individuals between the ages of 15 and 25 (Boden, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2012; O'Leary, 1999; Straus, 2004). There are a myriad of potential antecedents to IPV perpetration, with oft-cited reasons including self-defense, poor emotion-regulation, retaliation for past abuse, the need for dominance and control, and provocation by the partner (Caldwell, Swan, Allen, Sullivan, & Snow, 2009; Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1997; Stuart, Moore, Gordon, Ramsey, & Kahler, 2006).

While self-determination theory (SDT) has often been applied to the promotion of desirable behavior, it has been used less often to study undesirable behavior. SDT is a theory of self-regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and additional understanding of the causes

of IPV could emerge from research on motivation and its effect on IPV perpetration. As motivation orientations reflect interpersonal styles of reaction to social situations, these may predispose people to engage in undesirable behavior as much as bolster against it. That is, it may be that perpetrators of IPV evince causal motivation orientations that are different from non-perpetrators. As such, the goal of this research was to examine how self-determination theory's (Deci & Ryan, 1985a, 1985b, 2000, 2008) conceptualization of motivation orientations predicts engagement in IPV. Specifically, we propose that relationship-specific motivation orientations may predict the likelihood and frequency of IPV perpetration. In the current research, we first developed the Relationship Causality Orientation Scale (RCOS), which assesses autonomous, controlled, and impersonal motivation orientations toward romantic relationships. We then examined associations between the RCOS and multiple operationalizations of IPV perpetration.

1.1. Overview of intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence have been defined in a multitude of ways, with much work focusing on the different types of IPV (e.g., physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual; see Breiding,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: coverup@fdu.edu (C.S. Øverup).

Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015 for Center for Disease Control definitions, and Department of Justice: Domestic Violence, 2016, for their definitions). While useful, a broader categorization, such as the proactive-reactive typology, may be more descriptive and may add refinement to research seeking to understand the antecedents of IPV (Chase, O'Leary, & Heyman, 2001; Dodge, 1991). According to this typology, proactive aggression is often pre-meditated, methodical, and goal-oriented, whereas reactive aggression is a response to perceived threats or provocations in the context of high emotional tension and minimal cognitive processing. Thus, the latter type of aggression is more impulsive in nature, and is highly situationally dependent (Dodge, 1991).

This type of aggression seems particularly relevant to social psychological theoretical frameworks of understanding aggression and IPV. Specifically, both the social interactionist perspective to aggression and I³ theory consider the situational context for aggression. According to the social interactionist perspective (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), aggression (or coercive actions) stem in part from situational and interpersonal factors; that is, it is important to consider the behavior of others in the situation, as well as the interpersonal dynamics between the different parties present. Aggression may occur when a person feels attacked, or provoked, by another, serving as an instigator. In such situations, aggression is reactive, occurring as an emotional response to the perceived provocation. Moreover, the social interactionist perspective also acknowledges that individuals bring with them specific characteristics, such as attributional style, values, preferences, and motivations, which may increase the likelihood of an aggressive response (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994).

I³ theory provides a related, but distinct, framework. According to I³ theory (Slotter & Finkel, 2011), whether aggression occurs is a function of instigating, impelling, and inhibiting factors that are present in situations. Instigating factors are aversive situational events that act as triggers, such as perceptions of provocation or rejection by another. Impelling factors are dispositional factors that predispose a person to react aggressively (particularly when faced with an instigator). Inhibiting factors are dispositional or situational factors that inhibit aggressive reactions when instigating and impelling factors are present. I³ thus focuses primarily on a reactive conceptualization of aggression, largely describing aggression as a function of some perceived instigation.

These two frameworks share several features. For one, they focus on aggression that arises from instigation, such as perceived provocation. The resultant aggression is likely impulsive, emotionally laden, and reactive, and serves the goal of lashing out or retaliating against the perceived instigator. These theories also take into account dispositional factors that predispose or inhibit an individual from engaging in aggression. In the current manuscript, we focus on the reactive conceptualization of IPV; that is, IPV as an emotionally laden response that occurs in response to some sense of threat or provocation. The current research seeks to build on these useful theoretical perspectives by introducing a motivational framework, specifically focusing on self-determination theory's conceptualization of motivation orientations. SDT is, at its core, a theory of self-regulation that describes motivation orientations that shape responses toward various interpersonal situations. Thus, SDT may provide an interesting new framework from which to better understand reactive IPV.

1.2. Overview of self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 2000, 2008) distinguishes motivations for individuals' behaviors along a continuum from those that are relatively unmotivated (amotivated) to those that are motivated by pressures, compulsions, and outside influences (controlled), to those that are motivated by self-

awareness, choice, and personal endorsement (autonomous). Causality orientations (i.e., autonomy, controlled, and impersonal) are thought to broadly influence the regulation of behavior, and the three orientations vary in the degree to which they reflect self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). *Autonomous orientation* involves regulating behavior according to one's interests and self-endorsed values. Individuals with greater autonomous orientation tend to value honest interactions; they are able to be present in the moment, and reflect rather than react to stimuli (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Knee, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2014). *Controlled orientation* reflects a tendency to become ego-involved in one's daily experiences and to regulate behavior according to external and internalized controls, pressures, expectations, and demands. People with greater controlled motivation orientation tend to react more defensively in interpersonal situations (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996), and may experience a relatively heightened and stable state of threat-perception, due to ego-involvement. *Impersonal orientation* involves a general sense of amotivation, a lack of intention, and feeling despondent and ineffective. People with greater impersonal orientation tend to follow precedents (e.g., do what others want), because they believe that their actions will not lead to new desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985a).

General causality orientations have been studied in relation to several interpersonal processes, including interpersonal defensiveness, explanations for social offenses, empathy and perspective-taking, as well as coping strategies and observed behavior during romantic relationship conflict (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, & Neighbors, 2002). More relevant to the current work, research has linked these different ways of being motivated to ways that conflict is approached, perceived, and negotiated in close relationships (e.g., Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990; Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). From an individual difference perspective, SDT operationalizes motivation as causality orientations, which are relatively stable individual differences in how one orients toward the social environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). They are called "causality" orientations because they refer to the perceived locus of causality for one's behavior. Each person is thought to possess some level of each orientation to varying degrees.

1.3. IPV perpetration and self-determination theory

Prior research and theorizing (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hove, Parkhill, Neighbors, McConchie, & Fossos, 2010) suggests that autonomous orientation toward one's relationship may serve as a protective factor whereas controlled motivation may be a risk factor for reactive IPV perpetration. Given that motivation orientations dictate people's reactions to social situations, they may also predict the likelihood that people will engage in reactive forms of IPV. As autonomous orientation encourages open interactions, in which people reflect rather than react, such individuals may be less likely to respond to social situations by lashing out and/or engaging in reactive intimate partner violence. Conversely, controlled orientation reflects a perpetual heightened state of threat-perceptions, to which people of controlled motivation often respond defensively, and such individuals may be more likely to lash out and to engage in reactive intimate partner violence. With respect to impersonal orientation, it is unclear how it would relate to reactive IPV perpetration. It may be that people with greater impersonal motivation may not be as likely to engage in reactive IPV because of the feelings of despondence that are associated with this motivation orientation. However, due to the lack of emotion regulation also associated with the orientation, people with greater impersonal orientation may engage in reactive IPV, as a result of being unable to manage emotional responses.

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