

## Prevalence of psychological and physical intimate partner aggression in Madrid (Spain): A dyadic analysis

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### Abstract

**Background:** The goal of the present study is to analyze the prevalence of bidirectional psychological and physical aggression in intimate partner relationships using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2), and to determine the influence of the variables age and relationship duration. **Method:** The participants were 3,578 heterosexual couples from the Region of Madrid. **Results:** Bidirectional aggression was the most frequent pattern in the dyadic types of aggression examined; we analyzed the prevalences of mutual psychological (46%) and physical aggression (4%), reciprocal psychological (41%) and physical aggression (3%), and bidirectional psychological (80%) and physical aggression (25%). The variables age and relationship duration were significant predictors of bidirectional physical and psychological aggression. Younger couples and couples with less than a one-year relationship duration assaulted each other the most. **Conclusions:** These data provide an objective view of bidirectional aggression in Spanish community samples and serve as a reference point for prevention and intervention programs and forensic reports.

**Keywords:** Prevalence, intimate partner aggression, unidirectional, mutual, bidirectional.

### Resumen

**Prevalencia de agresión psicológica y física en las relaciones íntimas de pareja en Madrid (España): un análisis diádico. Antecedentes:** el presente estudio tiene por objetivo analizar las prevalencias de agresión bidireccional psicológica y física en las relaciones íntimas de pareja mediante la Escala de Tácticas para el Conflicto (CTS-2) y determinar la influencia de las variables edad y tiempo de relación. **Método:** los participantes fueron 3.578 parejas heterosexuales pertenecientes a la Comunidad de Madrid. **Resultados:** la agresión bidireccional fue el patrón de agresión más frecuente en los tipos diádicos de agresión examinados, siendo analizadas las prevalencias de agresión mutua psicológica (46%) y física (4%), recíproca psicológica (41%) y física (3%) y la bidireccional psicológica (80%) y física (25%). Las variables edad y tiempo de relación fueron predictores significativos de la agresión bidireccional física y psicológica, siendo las parejas más jóvenes y las que llevan menos años de relación las que más agreden. **Conclusiones:** estos datos ofrecen una imagen objetiva sobre la agresión bidireccional en parejas españolas y sirven como punto de referencia para desarrollar programas de prevención, intervención e informes periciales.

**Palabras clave:** prevalencia, agresión en la pareja, unidireccional, mutua, bidireccional.

The use of aggressive tactics in intimate relationships to resolve relationship conflicts has become a critical target of research in the social sciences in recent years, as is evident from the large number of epidemiological studies and scientific publications that have used The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), considering physical aggression as a phenomenon of a dyadic or bidirectional nature (Archer, 2000; Capaldi & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Kimmel, 2002; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Selwyn, & Rohling, 2012).

Domestic violence was not a unitary phenomenon, and different types of partner violence were apparent in different contexts, samples, and methodologies (Johnson, 2011). The research in this area argued that it is quite apparent that both men and

women use physically aggressive tactics during disagreements, a critical dimension of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Capaldi & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012). According to Johnson and Leone (2005), IPV is a heterogeneous phenomenon because some types of IPV have greater gender symmetry (i.e., situational couple violence) than did others (i.e., coercive controlling violence).

Large-scale surveys research, using community or national samples, reports gender symmetry in the initiation and perpetration by men and women of IPV (for a review, see Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, & Fiebert, 2012; Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012). This type of IPV (situational couple violence) is not based on relationship dynamics of coercion and control, is less severe, and mostly arises from conflicts and arguments between the partners. In contrast, in samples obtained primarily from women's shelters, court mandated programs, police reports, and emergency rooms are more likely to report coercive controlling violence. This type of violence is asymmetric and perpetrated largely by men against their partners; it is characterized by power and control and more often results in injuries to women (Johnson, 2011). According to Kelly and Johnson (2008), situational couple violence is generally

more common than coercive controlling violence and, therefore, dominates the study of violence in large survey samples.

Consequently, recent research highlights the need to consider not only the perpetration and victimization rates both in men and women to analyze certain contextual factors, such as gender and age, but also the types of aggression that occur in dyads, with the aim of improving the effectiveness of treatment and prevention programs (Capaldi & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012).

Regarding heterosexual couples, several studies characterize unidirectional violence as involving: (a) a male perpetrator and a female victim (male-to-female partner violence or MFPV) or (b) a female perpetrator and a male victim (female-to-male partner violence or FMPV). Unidirectional violence occurs when only one of the couple members is a perpetrator and the other is a victim (José & O'Leary, 2009; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; McKinney & Caetano, 2010). When both of these two patterns are present (MFPV and FMPV), we can further define the situation as mutual, reciprocal, or bidirectional violence, terms that have been used with increasing frequency in studies in which both members of a couple report being perpetrators and victims (Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Field, 2005; Caetano, Vaeth, & Ramisetty-Mikler, 2008; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Melander, Noel, & Tyler, 2010).

According to Straus and Douglas (2004), the evaluation of the two partners by the CTS scale allows the estimation of the behavior of both partners (one of the most important contextual variables) and it permits determining the mutuality of partner violence, and creating "Dyadic Partners Types" (Male-Only, Female-Only, and Both violent). *Mutual violence* occurs when both partners report being perpetrators, and several studies have found that the "Both-Violent" is the most frequently occurring type (Straus, 2012). Several studies use the term *bidirectional violence*. For the purposes of the present study, the authors retain the terminology used by the researchers cited.

Bidirectional violence occurs when either partner reports both MFPV and FMPV (for a review, see Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012); in other words, when either partner reports being perpetrator and/or victim. Several studies have divided bidirectional violence into three mutually exclusive categories: (a) perpetrators only (b) victims only, and (c) perpetrators and victims (Caetano et al., 2008; Melander et al., 2010). Finally, reciprocal violence occurs when MFPV and FMPV are both present: both partners report being perpetrators and victims (McKinney & Caetano, 2010).

Research carried out with samples of university students has found evidence of mutual (Straus, 2004; Straus & Ramírez, 2007), reciprocal (Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007), and bidirectional physical aggression (Straus, 2008). In addition, evidence of mutual (Anderson, 2002), reciprocal (Caetano et al., 2008; Kar & O'Leary 2010), and bidirectional physical aggression (Archer, 2000; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012) has been found in larger samples and community samples both of married and cohabiting adult heterosexual couples.

The present study has several objectives: (a) to estimate the prevalence of physical and psychological aggression as assessed with the CTS-2, (b) to analyze dyadic types of aggression, and (c) to analyze the roles played by age and the duration of the relationship in bidirectional physical and psychological aggression in a sample of 3,578 heterosexual couples from the Region of Madrid (Spain).

## Method

### Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 3,578 adult heterosexual couples, aged between 18 and 80 years, from the Region of Madrid. All participants provided the following sociodemographic data: age, sex, civil status, nationality, partner's sex.

As a function of the goals of the study, the inclusion criteria were being over 18 years of age and being in a heterosexual couple relationship, either currently or in the past 12 months.

The majority (64.5%) of the participants was married; 27% were single with a partner, but not cohabitating, 6.6% were common-law couples, and 1.9% was widowed, separated, or divorced and living with a partner. Men's mean age was 41.26 years ( $SD = 13.60$ ) and women's mean age was 40.20 ( $SD = 13.42$ ). The average relationship duration was 16.09 years ( $SD = 13.13$ ). Of the sample, 97% were Spanish, and 3% were of other nationalities. Concerning occupation, 43.2% were employees, 14.7% were civil servants, 11.4% were self-employed or autonomous workers, 8% were businessmen, 20.4% were unemployed, and 2.3% were students.

### Instruments and variables

*Sociodemographic Questionnaire.* Diverse items were included to assess participants' characteristics in the following sociodemographic and personal variables: age, sex, civil status, nationality, professional activity, and current partner's sex and age.

*CTS-2. Revised Conflict Tactics Scale* (Straus et al., 1996). We used the Spanish version of the CTS2 by Graña, Andreu, Peña, and Rodríguez (2013). It is a self-report questionnaire with 39 duplicate items, that is, 39 questions as the perpetrator and 39 questions as the victim (78 items in total), on which participants rate the degree to which each member of the couple performs specific acts of physical, psychological, and sexual violence against the other partner, in addition to their use of justifications and negotiations to solve their conflicts.

The respondent of the CTS-2 scale should indicate how often he/she has carried out the acts mentioned in each item and how often his/her partner has carried them out. The response format ranges from 1 (once in the past year) to 6 (*more than 20 times in the past year*); 7 means *never in the past year but it used to occur before* and 0 means *it has never occurred*. For each item, participants indicate how frequently the incident has occurred in the past year. The main scores of the scale are:

*Prevalence:* these are dichotomic scores reflecting whether a participant reports the presence of a behavior defined in the scale in the past year. It is calculated by transforming responses 1-6 to 1, and responses 7 and 0 to 0. The item scores are not added, so the prevalence for each subscale will be 1 or 0 (Straus et al., 1996).

*Frequency:* Straus et al. (1996) propose a system for converting raw responses (0-7) to frequency scores. Their system leaves responses 0, 1, and 2 unchanged.

Midpoint values are imposed on the responses that fall under the frequency labels with the following ranges: Response

3 (3-5 times) is scored as 4, Response 4 (6-10 times) is scored as 8, Response 5 (11-20 times) is scored as 15, Response 6 (more than 20 times) is scored as 25, and Response 7 (*not this year, but it happened in the past*) is scored as 0. The method of substituting with the mid-points of each category suggested by Straus et al. (1996) was not used for the frequency scores because it exaggerates the bias inherent in the distribution of aggression variables, thereby violating the assumption of normality underlying the statistical significance tests.

**Dyadic types of aggression.** *Unidirectional aggression:* was considered present when male to female or female to male physical or psychological aggression was reported by one member of the dyad. *Mutual aggression:* was considered present when both members are considered perpetrators in the dyad. *Bidirectional aggression* is specified when either member of the dyad is considered perpetrator and/or victim. A three-level variable was constructed, and each variable contains cases that are mutually exclusive categories: (a) Perpetrator only, (b) Victim only, and (c) Perpetrator and Victim. When both members of the dyad are perpetrators and victims, this is known as *reciprocal aggression*, a special case of bidirectional aggression. *No violence:* Neither of the members reported violence in the dyad.

The CTS-2 scale shows good psychometric properties for the Spanish adult population (Graña et al., 2013). Cronbach's alphas on the total scale were .84 and .83, for perpetration and victimization, respectively. Furthermore, the alpha values for the remaining scales were: Negotiation ( $\alpha = .76$  and  $\alpha = .75$ , for perpetration and victimization, respectively), Psychological Aggression ( $\alpha = .72$  and  $\alpha = .73$ ), Physical Aggression ( $\alpha = .79$  and  $\alpha = .80$ ), Sexual Aggression ( $\alpha = .62$  and  $\alpha = .63$ ), and Injuries ( $\alpha = .75$  and  $\alpha = .69$ ).

### Procedure

The study used a quota sampling method to recruit a community sample of married or cohabitating couples from the Region of Madrid. In order to obtain a representative sample of the active population of the diverse urban areas, the research was conducted with research assistants who were selected from 300 candidates from the Department of Clinical Psychology of the Complutense University of Madrid, who wished to obtain research credits. We took as reference for the distribution of the assistant researchers the population as a function of census of the Region of Madrid (Table 1).

Year	Capital	North	Eastern	South	West	Not Metropolitan
2008	55	4	6	19	5	11
2009	81	6	12	27	8	16
2010	65	5	10	22	6	12
2011	48	4	7	17	4	10
2012	70	6	10	23	7	14

Note: Source: Population Census. Provisional data. National Institute of Statistics. Review of population projections for the Community of Madrid 1996-2011

The research assistants were informed of the general characteristics of the study and that the general goal was to analyze different aspects of daily cohabitation of intimate couple relationships regarding the way they negotiate and resolve conflicts. The purpose of this research was explained to the participants and, as the questionnaire was anonymous, the consent form was introduced in the first part of the protocol, and participants were told that they could give their consent by completing the questionnaire and sending it anonymously and independently of their couple to a PO Box.

The procedure was as follows: (a) each research assistant had to collect a quota of 8 couples from the assigned census area, 1/3 of whom could be acquaintances and the rest unknown; (b) the couples were selected taking into account the following age range: 18-29; 30-50; +50; and (c) after obtaining the study quota, the research assistant had to give the code of each couple member to the director of the project (e.g., 1-a and 1-b up to 8-a and 8-b) and the phone number or email address of each couple.

Table 2 shows the number of research assistants, initial protocols, the rate of return, the rejection rate (the protocols were rejected because they had faulty data, had been completed randomly, or had low response consistency), and the total number of participants for each year. The level of confidence was 95%, and the maximum sampling error was 1.64 for the entire sample.

The missing data were replaced through the Expectation–Maximization (EM) algorithm (SPSS, version 19.0). The prevalence statistics reported in the present study are based on valid cases (i.e., missing data were not replaced prior to computing this statistic, and as no differences were obtained then, they were replaced with imputed values).

### Data analysis

Analyses were performed with the statistical package SPSS 19. The chi-square test was used to estimate the relationships between victimization and perpetration of aggression and gender, as well as to analyze specific acts of aggression (using the total sample of participants as a reference). To verify the role played by age and the duration of the relationship in bidirectional aggression, a binary logistic regression analysis (using the Enter method) was conducted.

Year	Number of research assistants	Initial questionnaires	Return rate (%)	Rejected (%)	Total sample
2008	100	1,600	1,216 (76)	36 (3)	1,180 (590 couples)
2009	150	2,400	1,971 (82.1)	59 (3)	1,912 (956 couples)
2010	120	1,920	1,486 (77.4)	74 (5)	1,412 (706 couples)
2011	90	1,440	1,142 (79.3)	80 (7)	1,062 (531 couples)
2012	130	2,080	1,656 (79.6)	66 (4)	1,590 (795 couples)

Results

Prevalence of aggression

Psychological aggression presented a higher degree of prevalence than physical aggression in the case of minor acts (Table 3). Analysis of the prevalence rates obtained revealed significant differences in minor (62.0% vs. 59.4 %;  $\chi^2 (1, N = 7.156) = 4.74, p < .05$ ) and total (63.2% vs. 60.1%;  $\chi^2 (1, N = 7.156) = 6.89, p < .001$ ) psychological aggression scales in the case of females. The absence of significant differences in perpetration and victimization in the physical aggression and injury scales, as well as in the rest of the psychological aggression scales, provides an initial idea of the bidirectional nature of psychological and physical partner aggression.

Table 4 displays the specific acts of psychological aggression in men and women that were significant for both perpetrators, as well as the response percentages.

Dyadic types of intimate partner aggression

Psychological aggression presented a higher prevalence than physical aggression for the dyadic types of aggression considered, especially for bidirectional aggression (79%). Whereas approximately 90% of the couples reported no physical assault, 4% of the couples reported *male to female* physical aggression, and 4.5% reported *female to male* physical aggression. In 4% of

the couples, both men and women reported being perpetrators of physical assault (mutual), whereas approximately 19% reported being “perpetrators only” and 19% reported being “victims only”. The prevalence of reciprocal aggression was 3%, and the overall prevalence of bidirectional aggression was approximately 24%. Furthermore, couples most frequently reported a “minor” severity level of aggression. Figure 1 shows the dyadic types of aggression.

Bidirectional aggression, age and duration of relationship

With regard to the duration of the relationship and bidirectional physical aggression, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = 5.354, p = .069$ ) indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the observed and predicted classifications, reflecting successful adjustment of the model. The analyses performed indicate that the couples with a shorter relationship duration exerted more bidirectional physical aggression ( $b = -0.374, p = .00$ ). The regression model provided a correct estimate in 76% of the cases ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 104.664, p < .01$ ), of which 100% of the total explained percentage corresponds to true negatives.

Regarding bidirectional psychological aggression, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test ( $\chi^2_{(2)} = 3.504, p = .173$ ) indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the observed and predicted classifications, reflecting successful adjustment of the model. The analyses performed show that the younger couples exert more bidirectional psychological aggression ( $b = -0.286, p = .00$ ). The regression model provided a correct estimate in 79% of the cases ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 63.779, p < .01$ ), of which 100% of the total percentage corresponds to true negatives.

With regard to age and bidirectional physical aggression, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.744, p = .187$ ) indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the observed and predicted classifications, reflecting successful adjustment of the model. The analyses performed show that the younger couples exert more bidirectional physical aggression ( $b = -0.794, p = .00$ ). The regression model provided a correct estimate in 77% of the cases ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 135.950, p < .01$ ), of which 100% of the total percentage corresponds to true negatives.

Regarding bidirectional psychological aggression, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.138, p = .711$ ) indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the observed and predicted classifications, and reflecting successful adjustment of the model. The analyses performed show that the younger couples exert more bidirectional psychological aggression ( $b = -0.657, p$

*Table 3*  
Statistical prevalence based on the CTS-2 (N = 3,578 couples)

	PERPETRATORS Prevalence (%)		VICTIMS Prevalence (%)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Psychological aggression	60.1	63.2***	58.5	59.2
Minor	59.4	62.0*	57.4	58.1
Severe	16.8	18.4	17.3	16.7
Physical aggression	10.9	11.9	11.3	11.8
Minor	10.2	11.0	9.9	9.8
Severe	2.8	3.4	4.0	4.3
Injuries	1.9	1.6	1.6	1.9
Minor	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.7
Severe	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.4

*Note:* CTS-2 = Revised Conflict Tactics Scale  
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Table 4*  
Prevalence of significant items on psychological aggression

Psychological aggression (Items)	Men (%)	Women (%)
5. I insulted or swore at my partner	35.4	39.3***
35. I shouted or yelled at my partner	45.7	48.9***
49. I stomped out of the room or house or yard during a disagreement	26.4	29.3***
67. I did something to spite my partner	27.6	29.7*
69. I threatened to hit or throw something at my partner	2.5	3.8***

*Note:* CTS-2 = Revised Conflict Tactics Scale  
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

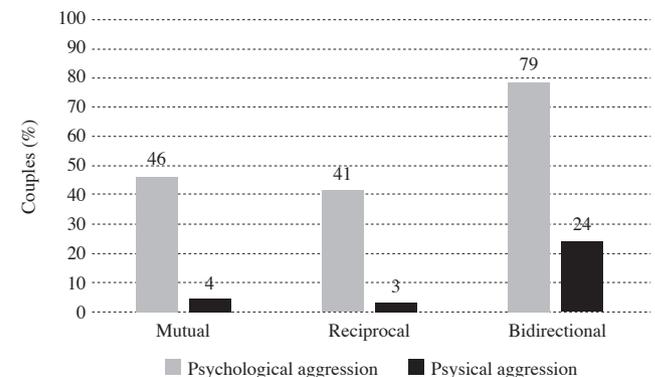


Figure 1. Dyadic types of partner aggression

= .00). The regression model provided a correct estimate in 77% of the cases ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 97.523, p < .01$ ), of which 100% of the total percentage corresponds to true negatives.

### Discussion

The present study analyzed psychological and physical aggression in heterosexual couples, and this is the first study that estimates the prevalences of dyadic types of aggression in a Spanish community sample.

Bidirectional aggression is a complex phenomenon that can be operationalized in various ways. Our data suggest that it is possible to describe a general profile of bidirectional aggression in the sense that not only did men and women both report being mostly perpetrators only and victims only, but also being both perpetrators and/or victims. The percentage of bidirectional aggression in the present study is as follows: (a) psychological aggression represents approximately 80% and, (b) physical aggression represents approximately 25% (couples most frequently reported a "minor" severity level of aggression).

These results corroborate the observations made in previous research on the dyadic or bidirectional nature of physical partner aggression (Archer, 2000; Capaldi & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Kimmel, 2002; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012).

Results of this study confirm the findings observed by Langhinrichsen-Rohling, et al. (2012), who found that bidirectional violence was the most common IPV pattern in all types of samples. This study used the CTS-2 scale, and bidirectional aggression was determined by the co-occurrence of reporting perpetration and/or victimization in the couple (dyad). However, according to the authors, bidirectional violence can occur on different days and can involve different types of acts by perpetrators, and the initiation of violence may vary between partners and, consequently, the presence of bidirectional violence is not necessarily gender symmetrical.

In the present study, rates of *female to male* perpetrated physical aggression was slightly higher (4.5%) than rates of *male to female* (4%). In small community samples, Desmarais et al. (2012) found rates of male perpetration ranging from 4% to 45% and rates of female perpetration ranging from 5.7% to 48%.

Couples who reported mutual aggression were included in this study because their prevalence differs from that of those who report being perpetrators only and victims only (Caetano et al., 2008). The percentage of reciprocal aggression observed in the present study is lower in comparison with that observed in other studies, probably due to methodological aspects, such as the size

of the sample, the age of the couples, or the conceptualization of reciprocal aggression, among others (Caetano et al., 2008; Kar & O'Leary, 2010).

Results of this study confirmed the findings of previous studies showing a high prevalence of psychological aggression in couples. These results are consistent with research finding high prevalences in perpetration and victimization of psychological aggression in married couples who cohabit (Caetano et al., 2008; O'Leary & Williams, 2006; Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010; Taft et al., 2006).

All these results support the complexity of addressing the study of physical and psychological aggression and the need to continue researching this kind of aggression. IPV is a multidimensional phenomenon, and there may be diverse predictors of aggressive behavior at the individual or couple level. Diverse studies have identified age and duration of cohabitation as a predictors of physical and psychological partner aggression. However, our results do not allow us to establish definite conclusions about the role of age and relation duration in bidirectional physical and psychological aggression, although they do have significant influence on bidirectional aggression.

In general, this investigation has revealed the bidirectionality of psychological and physical partner aggression, which, according to Johnson (2011), corresponds to situational violence, which predominates in this type of samples.

These results contradict the general tendency of the mass media in countries like Spain, which consider that partner aggression is predominantly male. Studies like these contribute to providing objective data to determine the current situation of psychological and physical aggression in intimate partner relationships and are an important reference point to counteract erroneous beliefs and to address a therapeutic intervention or to prepare a forensic psychological report more objectively.

Finally, it is unknown whether similar findings would be significant with other racial groups in which the cultural dynamics might be different. However, it must be noted that these participants had been in their relationships for long periods of time (e.g., 50% had been involved for a 16.09 years) and represent an age group in which individuals are married.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. The sample represents the greater Madrid area, and as such, it cannot be considered a sample that is representative of the country of Spain. Finally, the validity and accuracy of the classification of the dyadic types of aggression depend on the exactness of the couples' reports; thus, the CTS2 has to be administered to both members of the couple.

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