

# Emotion Regulation and Intimate Partner Violence in Newlyweds

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Is the inability to regulate negative emotions a risk factor for intimate partner violence (IPV)? To address this question, the authors asked 72 newlywed couples to report their levels of negative affect every day for 7 days and examined whether variability in those reports was associated with the IPV self-reported to have been perpetrated over the previous year. Although main effects of variability in both husbands' and wives' negative affect did not reach statistical significance, variability in husbands' negative affect significantly interacted with wives' reports of IPV to account for husbands' IPV, even after overall levels of husbands' negative affect, marital satisfaction, and chronic stress were controlled. Specifically, whereas variability in negative affect was unrelated to IPV among husbands with wives who reported no IPV, such variability was positively associated with the IPV perpetrated by husbands with wives who also reported having perpetrated IPV during the previous year. Although preliminary, these results support theories suggesting that the ability to regulate negative emotions may help intimates avoid perpetrating IPV, particularly when faced with a partner's IPV perpetration.

*Keywords:* intimate partner violence, emotion regulation, mood, newlyweds, aggression

Do self-regulatory processes play a role in the perpetration of intimate partner violence (IPV)? Recent theoretical work suggests they may. Finkel (2007) proposed that self-regulation helps determine whether partners are able to avoid acting on the aggressive impulses that may sometimes arise over the course of an intimate relationship. As Finkel (2007, p. 195) put it, "such processes are clearly relevant in the circumstances preceding acts of IPV—and they may dictate to a large extent whether violent impulses are manifested in violent behaviors rather than being restrained."

In line with Finkel (2007), more general theories of aggression suggest that nonaggressive responding may require regulating *negative affect*. Berkowitz's (1990) cognitive neoassociationistic model of aggression, for example, posits that negative emotional reactions to aversive experiences are a central driving force in aggressive responding and that such reactions must be regulated or avoided if aggression is to be avoided. As Berkowitz put it, "we sometimes . . . hold back and do not display the hostility or aggression we are inclined to show because of the operation of a self-regulatory mechanism" (p. 501).

The ability to regulate negative emotions may similarly help minimize IPV perpetration (cf. Chase, O'Leary, & Heyman, 2001). Consistent with this possibility, the inability to regulate negative emotions is a defining feature of numerous dispositional factors already known to predict IPV, such as borderline

personality disorder (e.g., Koenigsberg et al., 2002), impulsivity (e.g., d'Acremont & Van der Linden, 2007), neuroticism (e.g., Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998), and attachment anxiety (e.g., Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007; for studies linking these dispositional qualities to IPV see, e.g., Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008; Henderson, Bartholomew, Trinke, & Kwong, 2005; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). Perhaps intimates characterized by these dispositional risk factors are more likely to engage in IPV because they are unable to regulate their negative emotions.

## Overview of the Current Study

The goal of the current study was to examine the role of emotion regulation in IPV perpetration. In the absence of an accepted measurement of emotion regulation (see Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004), we chose to operationalize emotion regulation as the *variability in negative affect* observed over a 7-day diary. Although variability in negative affect may not clearly distinguish between low emotional reactivity and the active regulation of negative affect, Hoeksma, Oosterlaan, and Schipper (2004) recently provided evidence demonstrating that such variability is a reliable and valid predictor of response inhibition, one criterion of emotion regulation (Barkley, 1997). We also chose to examine these issues within a sample of newlywed couples. Although newlyweds may not be representative of new relationships or more established marriages, the fact that recently married couples perpetrate high levels of IPV (e.g., Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008) and experience high levels of stress (Cherlin, 1992) makes the role of emotion regulation in IPV perpetration particularly important for newlyweds. Finally, given that levels of marital quality and levels of stress may lead to spurious correlations between variability in negative affect and relationship violence, due to the variance shared among those variables, we controlled for marital quality and stress in all primary analyses.

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## Method

### Participants

Participants were drawn from a sample of 72 newlywed couples married for less than 6 months ( $M = 3.2$  months,  $SD = 1.6$ ) who were recruited through both marriage license application and fliers to participate in a broader study of marital development. All couples met the following eligibility criteria: (a) Both partners were in their first marriage, (b) the couple had been married less than 6 months, (c) each partner was at least 18 years of age, (d) each partner spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires), and (e) the couple had no immediate plans to move away from the area.

On average, husbands were 24.9 years old ( $SD = 4.4$ ) and had completed 14.2 years ( $SD = 2.5$ ) of education. Seventy-four percent were employed full time, and 11% were full-time students. The median income group membership reported by husbands was \$15,001 to \$20,000. Wives averaged 23.5 years ( $SD = 3.8$ ) of age and had completed 14.7 years ( $SD = 2.2$ ) of education. Forty-nine percent were employed full time, and 26% were full-time students. The median income group membership reported by wives was \$15,001 to \$20,000. The majority of these couples were Caucasian and Christian. For additional details regarding this sample, see McNulty and Fisher (2008).

### Procedure

All couples were mailed a packet of questionnaires to complete at home and bring with them to a scheduled appointment. This packet included a consent form approved by the local Institutional Review Board, self-report measures of IPV, chronic stress, and marital satisfaction, as well as a letter instructing couples to complete all questionnaires independently of one another. Couples were paid \$60 for participating in this phase of the broader study.

At the end of their appointment, each spouse was provided with seven stamped, addressed envelopes. Each envelope contained a one-page questionnaire that included items designed to assess spouses' feelings of negative affect. Couples were instructed to complete one form each day independently of one another and paid an additional \$25 dollars for completing all 14 diaries, or \$1.50 per diary if they failed to return all pages.

### Materials

**Variability in negative affect.** To assess negative affect, we selected and revised items from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) that we believed would best capture the negative emotions that may (a) vary day to day among newlyweds and (b) be important to regulate to avoid IPV. Thus, spouses completed a diary every day for 7 days on which they were asked to report the extent to which they felt anxious, tense, relaxed (reversed), and irritated that day on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Responses to these four items each day were summed to form an index of daily

negative affect. Coefficient alphas indicated adequate internal consistency each day (husbands' alphas ranged from .66 on Day 6 to .74 on Day 4, with a mean alpha across days of .69; wives' alphas ranged from .64 on Day 7 to .79 on Day 4, with a mean across days of .72). Following Hoeksma et al. (2004), we operationalized emotion regulation as variability in each spouse's negative affect across the daily reports by calculating the standard deviation of those reports. Because variability in affect may be correlated with overall levels of affect, we also calculated the mean level of spouses' daily reports of negative affect and controlled for that variable in all primary analyses.

**Interpersonal violence.** We assessed IPV by asking participants to report how frequently they had engaged in the eight aggressive behaviors from the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979)—threw something at spouse; pushed, grabbed, or shoved spouse; slapped spouse; kicked, bit, or hit spouse with a fist; hit or tried to hit spouse with something; beat up spouse; threatened to use a knife or gun; used a knife or gun—over the past year on a 4-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*more than twice*). All analyses were conducted using a log transformed sum of all items. However, for descriptive purposes, we also identified partners who had engaged in what we refer to as *moderate aggression*, the first three CTS items listed above (what Straus, 1979, referred to as *mild aggression*), and *severe aggression*, the last five items listed above.

**Marital satisfaction.** We assessed marital satisfaction through the Quality Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983). The QMI is a six-item scale asking spouses to report the extent to which they agree or disagree with general statements about their marriage (e.g., "We have a good marriage"). Scores on the QMI range from 6 to 45, with higher scores reflecting more positive satisfaction with the relationship. Internal consistency of this measure was high (husbands' coefficient alpha was .93; wives' coefficient alpha was .94).

**Chronic stress.** We assessed chronic stress by asking spouses to report the extent to which 11 domains of their lives (parenthood, living conditions, finances, school, work, homemaking, unemployment, health, partner's health, own family, and partner's family) had been stressful over the past 6 months on an 11-point scale where 1 = *not at all stressful* and 11 = *extremely stressful*. Given that all 11 domains did not apply to all spouses (e.g., parenthood, unemployment), the mean of the responses to domains that did apply was used in all analyses.

## Results

### Compliance, Descriptive Statistics, and Preliminary Analyses

Of the 72 husbands and wives, 61 (85%) husbands and 62 (86%) wives returned at least three completed diaries and were thus included in the current analyses. Spouses included versus excluded from the analyses did not differ on any variables examined here. Of the husbands and wives in the final sample, 53 (87%) husbands and 52 (84%) wives returned all seven assessments.

Of the 61 husbands, 10 (16%) reported having perpetrated IPV over the past year, all of which was moderate. Of the 61 wives, 17 (27%) reported having perpetrated IPV

over the past year. All 17 wives reported perpetrating moderate violence; 11 of the 17 wives reported perpetrating severe violence. In total, 21 (36%) couples reported having experienced at least one act of IPV over the past year. These incidence rates are in line with other reports of violence among newlyweds (Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008).

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 1. Mean marital satisfaction scores revealed, not surprisingly, that these newlyweds were relatively satisfied at the outset of their marriages. Likewise, these newlyweds experienced relatively low levels of chronic stress and demonstrated relatively low levels of negative affect. It is important to note, however, that spouses varied substantially day to day in those levels of negative affect, with some spouses varying substantially more than others. Wives' negative affect varied marginally more than husbands' negative affect,  $t(60) = 1.96, p = .05$ . Finally, mean levels of husbands' and wives' reports of IPV were relatively low, on average, although standard deviations revealed substantial between-subjects variability in those reports, as would be expected based on the incidence rates reported above.

As indicated by the correlations reported in Table 1, mean levels of negative affect were positively associated with variability in negative affect for both husbands and wives, supporting the a priori decision to control mean levels of negative affect in the analyses. Also, stress was marginally associated with variability in negative affect for husbands and significantly associated with mean levels of negative affect for wives, supporting our a priori decision to control for stress in the analyses. Finally, marital satisfaction was marginally negatively associated with IPV among husbands and significantly negatively associated with IPV among wives, supporting the decision to control that variable as well.

The primary aim of the current study was to examine whether variability in negative affect was associated with the tendency to perpetrate IPV. To address this issue, we conducted separate regressions for husbands and wives in which log 10 transformed CTS scores were regressed onto the standard deviation of each spouse's daily reports of negative affect, mean levels of negative affect, own marital satisfaction, own chronic stress, and partner IPV. Furthermore, because the failure to regulate negative emotions may be particularly likely to lead to IPV in the face of a partner's IPV, a term representing the interaction between own variability in negative affect and partner IPV was added to the model.

Partner IPV was significantly associated with own IPV for both husbands,  $B = 0.17, SE = 0.05, t(54) = 3.24, p < .01, r = .40$ , and wives,  $B = 0.95, SE = 0.25, t(55) = 3.87, p < .001, r = .46$ . Controlling for that, and controlling for mean negative affect, marital satisfaction, and stress, although the main effects of variability in negative affect did not reach significance for either husbands,  $B = 0.03, SE = 0.02, t(54) = 1.56, p = .13, r = .21$ , or wives,  $B = -0.04, SE = 0.03, t(55) = -1.34, p > .10, r = .18$ , the interaction between variability in husbands' negative affect and wives' IPV did reach significance,  $B = 0.15, SE = 0.05, t(54) = 3.20, p < .01, r = .40$ . Follow-up simple slope analyses revealed that variability in negative affect was positively associated with own IPV perpetration among husbands with wives reporting levels of IPV over the previous year that were 1 standard deviation above the mean,  $B = 0.08, SE = 0.02, t(54) = 3.60, p < .01, r = .45$ , but unrelated to IPV perpetration among husbands with wives who reported engaging in no IPV over the previous year,  $B = -0.00, SE = 0.02, t(54) = -0.00, p > .50, r = .00$ . Mean levels of negative affect were not significantly associated with IPV among either husbands,  $B = 0.00, SE = 0.01, t(54) = 0.44, p > .50, r = .06$ , or wives,  $B = 0.03, SE = 0.02, t(55) = 1.44, p > .10, r = .19$ , as was the interaction between wives' variability in negative affect and husbands' IPV,  $B = -0.29, SE = 0.21, t(55) = -1.38, p > .10, r = .18$ . In total, the models accounted for 41% of the variance in husbands' reports of the IPV they perpetrated over the past year and 35% of the variance in wives' reports of the IPV they perpetrated over the past year.

## Discussion

The current study tested the hypothesis that variability in negative affect is associated with IPV perpetration. Although variability in the negative affect reported by husbands and wives over a 7-day diary did not exert main effects on IPV perpetration, variability in husbands' negative affect interacted with wives' reports of IPV perpetration to account for husbands' reports of IPV perpetration. Specifically, variability in husbands' negative affect was unrelated to the IPV reported by husbands with wives who reported perpetrating no IPV over the previous year, but variability in husbands' negative affect was positively associated with the IPV reported by husbands with wives who themselves reported having perpetrated IPV over the previ-

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Marital satisfaction	<b>.41**</b>	-.46**	-.26*	-.07	-.32*
2. Chronic stress	-.28*	<b>.31*</b>	.41**	.16	.34**
3. Negative affect	-.14	.25†	<b>.33**</b>	.49***	.28*
4. Variability in negative affect	-.22†	.20	.48**	<b>.30*</b>	.04
5. Intimate partner violence	-.22†	.04	.09	.33*	<b>.45**</b>
Husbands' <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	41.13 (4.92)	3.58 (1.49)	8.90 (2.63)	2.19 (1.06)	0.25 (0.67)
Wives' <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	41.92 (4.54)	3.59 (1.21)	9.18 (2.60)	2.51 (1.31)	1.10 (2.24)

Note. Husbands' correlations appear below the diagonal, wives' correlations appear above the diagonal, and correlations between husbands and wives appear on the diagonal in bold.

†  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



ous year. To the extent that husbands' negative affect varied over the course of the diary because of their failure to regulate those emotions, rather than low emotional reactivity, these findings provide necessary support for theories of the importance of self-regulation to IPV perpetration (e.g., Finkel, 2007). Specifically, the current findings suggest that the ability to regulate negative emotions may be one factor that helps intimates refrain from IPV, particularly intimates in relationships with an aggressive partner.

Several strengths of this research are worth noting, some of which enhance our confidence in these findings. First, as far as we are aware, this is the first empirical investigation of the effects of emotion regulation on IPV, and thus the results reported here are novel. Second, this study examined the effects of emotion regulation on IPV in a sample where IPV is relatively common and thus important to understand (Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008). Third, rather than asking participants to report the variability of their negative emotions, we increased the validity of our measurement by directly assessing that variability across a 7-day diary, controlling for spouses' mean levels of negative affect. Finally, we controlled for a number of potential confounds (i.e., marital satisfaction, stress) in our analyses, enhancing confidence in the associations that emerged.

Despite these strengths, several qualities of this research qualify the results reported here until they can be replicated and extended. First, these findings are correlational and thus subject to alternative interpretations. For instance, although we controlled for two potential extraneous sources of variability in negative affect and IPV (i.e., marital satisfaction and stress), other factors not measured and controlled here may have accounted for the association we observed between variability in negative affect and IPV. Second, although variability in negative affect was significantly associated with IPV perpetration among husbands, it remains unclear which negative affects may be more or less important to regulate. Future research may benefit by addressing this issue. Third, given that we assessed IPV through self-report, it remains possible that husbands' negative affect influenced their reports of IPV, rather than their actual levels of IPV. Furthermore, although we asked couples to complete their diaries independent of one another, there is no way to guarantee that they did so. Finally, given that the first few years of a marriage are a unique period during which rates of common couple violence tend to be relatively high (e.g., Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008), future research may benefit by examining whether variability in negative affect explains IPV in other relationships, or by examining IPV in newlyweds perpetrated across shorter intervals to more clearly identify specific times during the transition to marriage that may be particularly vulnerable to variability in negative affect.

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