

Relationship of Personality Dimensions and Aggression in Romantic Relationship Among Youth

Manoj K. Sharma, Mohan Raju

ABSTRACT


Background: Aggression in romantic relationships is a continuing factor for breakups, physical assault, kidnapping, rape and even murder. It is also associated with adjustment difficulties including peer rejection, depression and maladaptive personality features. The present study aims to explore the personality correlates of aggression in romantic relationship. **Materials and Methods:** The sample consisted of 110 male and female participants in the age range of 18-32 years. The Socio-demographic schedule, General Health Questionnaire Relationship Satisfaction Scale NEO Five Factor Inventory, The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale and Checklist for Psychological Aggression were administered. **Results:** Personality characteristics like openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness were negatively correlated with all forms of aggression. Men and women had significant differences with respect to aggression in romantic relationships. The relationship satisfaction has negative association with neuroticism. **Conclusions:** It has implications in understanding pattern of aggression in romantic relationships and thus may help in developing intervention programs for the same.

Key words: Aggression, personality, romantic relationship

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships plays an important role in the development of many critical tasks of adolescence and young adulthood. It can foster interpersonal competence and lay the foundation for intimate adult relationships.^[1] Healthy dating experiences are associated positive adjustment and elevated self-esteem^[2] whereas aggressive dating experiences are associated with negative outcomes such as internalizing and externalizing behaviors.^[3,4] One quarter to over one-half of dating relationships and significant others continued in these relationships despite the abuse.^[5]

Aggression in romantic relationship is a continuing factor for breakups, physical assault, kidnapping, acid throwing, rape and even murder. Relational aggression also includes flirting with others to make a romantic partner jealous, threatening to breakup with a partner if the partner will not comply, or giving a partner the silent treatment when angry predisposed at risk for adjustment difficulties including peer rejection, depression and maladaptive personality features.^[6-8] College students who had relational aggression within their romantic relationships were found to be less trusting of their current or most recent partner, frustrated, jealous, and clingy in their romantic relationships.^[9] Approximately 10% of American high-school students experienced physical aggression from a dating partner over a 12-month period^[10] They also experienced mood symptoms.^[11] They also developed psychological and relationship problems in later adulthood.^[12] The individuals who reported perpetrating relational aggression in their romantic relationships believed that aggression was most acceptable (social-cognitive risk), whereas individuals

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Department of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Address for correspondence: Dr. Manoj K. Sharma

Department of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS, Bangalore, Karnataka, India. E-mail: mks712000@yahoo.co.in

who reported experiencing relational aggression (as victims) were more likely to indicate that their self-worth was contingent on relationships and that romantic relationships were very important to them.^[13] Studies have also documented the gender differences in the experience and expression of relational aggression. Females reported higher levels of perpetration, whereas males reported higher levels of victimization. Gender was found to moderate the association between anxiety and reactive relational aggression, males with high anxiety showed higher levels of reactive relational aggression than males with low anxiety. Socially based negative cognitive errors also mediated the association between reactive relational aggression and anxiety.^[14] In men, higher physical aggression was associated with lower agreeableness and lower extraversion. In women, higher physical aggression was associated with higher conscientiousness, more depression, lower Bar-On EQI Stress Management and higher adaptability. Relational aggression was associated with lower agreeableness and a lower Bar-On EQI overall score for both men and women. In men, higher relational aggression was additionally associated with more Neuroticism. In women, higher relational aggression was also associated with lower Conscientiousness, and lower Bar-On EQI Interpersonal factor scores.^[15] Highly avoidant individuals were more likely to engage in hostile relational conflict with their partners and feel significantly less satisfaction from their adult romantic relationships than their nonavoidant counterparts. Avoidance and hostility have influence on relationship satisfaction levels rather than anxiety and validation^[16] Media has highlighted many such cases in the capital of India and other metro cities. Males experienced more relational aggression in romantic relationships. Males reported more loneliness, whereas females experienced more depression.^[17]

Variety of adverse psychological consequences often accrue from experiencing relational aggression, with anxiety and trauma symptoms from experiencing physical relationship aggression. Recent years have seen an upsurge in the frequency of relational aggression in India. The present work explored the influence of personality and relationship satisfaction in aggression among romantic partners.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Aim

To study the personality correlates of aggression in romantic relationships among youth.

Objectives

- i. To explore the relationship of aggression with the following

- a. Neuroticism, b. Extraversion, c. Openness, d. Agreeableness and e. Conscientiousness
- ii. To study the gender differences in aggression in romantic relationships
- iii. To find the relationship satisfaction with aggression and personality characteristics in romantic relationships.

Sample

The sample consisted of 110 male and female participants. (Male=56, Female=54) in the age range of 18-32 years. Participants meeting the inclusion (Participant in a mutually consenting heterosexual relationship) and exclusion criteria (married person and presence of psychiatric distress) were taken into the study. Convenience sampling was used as a method of data collection.

TOOLS 1. Socio-demographic Schedule (SDS) (developed for the study), 2. Checklist for Psychological Aggression (CPA) (developed for the study), 3. NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO FFI) (Costa and McCrae, 1992), 4. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman, 1996), 5. Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RAS) (Hendrick, S.S, 1988).

SDS

The schedule was developed by the investigator to obtain information about sociodemographic characteristics of participants. The tool had a section on information relevant to the current relationship of the participant which included current relationship status, duration of current relationship, sexual activeness in current relationship and disclosure of current relationship.

CPA

The checklist was developed by the investigator to obtain information about different verbal and nonverbal aggressive behaviors reported in romantic relationships. The psychological aggression scale in CTS2 had the least internal consistency of all scales as the items were selected to increase the diversity of content of the scale rather than to increase the internal consistency reliability. CPA tried to assess aggression, majorly on two dimensions – active and passive. These two subsumed direct and indirect aggressive behaviors, commonly reported in the context of relationships.

NEO FFI

The tool has face validity as checked by experts in the are NEO FFI:^[18] A concise measure of the five major dimensions of personality. It consists of 60 items. It is derived from the form S of NEO – Personality Inventory – Revised. It is brief and comprehensive. It consists of five 12 item scales that measure each domain

of a normal adult personality. The NEO FFI scales show correlations of 0.75 to 0.89 with the NEO – PI validimax factors. Internal consistency values range from 0.74 to 0.89.

CTS 2

A revised measure of psychological and physical attacks on a partner in a marital, cohabiting or dating relationship; and also use of negotiation. The theoretical basis of CTS is conflict theory which assumes that conflict is an inevitable part of all human association, whereas violence as a tactic to deal with conflict is not. CTS has been used successfully in at least 20 countries, including India^[19] (Kumagai and Straus, 1983). The authors reported an internal consistency range from 0.79 to 0.95. Construct and discriminant validities were established.^[20]

RAS

A generic measure of relationship satisfaction. It consists of seven items with a five point Likert rating scale of low to high satisfaction, with items 4 and 7 reverse scored. Higher scores indicated higher relationship satisfaction. The mean interitem correlation for the original sample was 0.49. Hendrick reported a standardized alpha 0.87 and an unstandardized alpha 0.87. The scale has good test-retest reliability. The constructive and predictive validities ranged from 0.49 to 0.79.^[21]

Procedure

Majority of the participants were contacted in their respective undergraduate or postgraduate colleges or workplaces. Seven colleges were contacted out of which four permitted data collection. In the two colleges that granted permission, the investigator announced the research content to the students, explaining how important romantic relationships are in the stage of young adulthood and how there existed multiple problems in relationships. They were also explained the importance of the study and how it will contribute to our scientific knowledge about romantic relationships. After taking written informed consent, individuals were administered the questionnaires (Socio Demographic Schedule, Relationship Assessment Scale, NEO Five Factor Inventory, Conflict Tactics Scale 2 and Checklist for Psychological Aggression) in person.

The investigator clarified participants' doubts regarding certain items and provided standard meanings in case of difficulty in comprehending the meaning of certain items.

Analysis of data

Incomplete response sheets were excluded from analysis. The responses were coded for computer analysis. Using

the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, parametric and nonparametric tests were used. ANOVA was computed for sociodemographic variables. Correlation analysis was carried out to examine the association between personality characteristics, relationship satisfaction and aggression.

RESULTS

25.5% (28) were in the age range of 18-22 years; 14.5% (16) in the age range of 23-27 years; the majority of 60% (66) in the age range of 28-32 years. It included 56 males (50.9%) and 54 females (49.1%). There were 24 (21.8%) undergraduates, 69 (62.7%) post graduates and 17 (15.5%) into professional courses.

Relationship profile

Fifty-two (47.3%) participants reported being in a 'dating' (dating one or more than one person) relationship and 58 (52.7%) reported being in a 'committed' (which included committed, engaged and cohabiting) relationship. Seventy-one (64.5%), reported being in the current relationship for more than 1 year; 24 (21.8%) were in the relationship from 6-12 months and 15 (13.6%) reported being in a relationship for less than 6 months. In the entire sample, 86 (78.18%) participants reported being sexually active in their current relationship. Of these, 34 (31.1%) engaged in penetrative sexual practices and 43 (39.1%) were into nonpenetrative sexual activities like kissing, fondling, etc., 21.8% participants did not report any sexual activeness in their relationship. Disclosure of the current relationship also significantly varied in the group, with 48 (43.6%) participants reportedly having disclosed their relationship status to their friends, 29 (26.4%) had disclosed to their family; and 22 (20%) were open to everybody. Eleven participants (10%) had not disclosed their current relationship status to anybody. In the entire group, 31 (28.2%) reported using a psychotropic drug (alcohol, cannabis, etc.,) and 79 (71.8%) did not use any psychotropic drug.

There was significant difference between male and female respondents with respect to sexual aggression ($F=7.11$, $P<0.01$ level), i.e., male respondents reported more aggression ($M=2.53$, $SD=3.62$) than female respondents ($M=1.11$, $SD=1.53$). Significant difference was also found between genders for the scale on physical injury ($F=5.72$, $P<0.01$ level).

Males reported more physical injury ($M=1.32$, $SD=2.93$) than females ($M=0.33$, $SD=0.77$).

There were significant differences between aggression and sexual activeness. Significant difference was found

for the negotiation skill among those who were sexually active and those who were not sexually active in the current relationship ($F=5.40, P<0.01$). Those who did not engage in any sexual activities in their relationship reported better negotiation skills ($M=8.16, SD=3.27$) compared to those who engaged in sexual activities. Among those who were sexually active in the relationship, difference was seen between those who engaged in penetrative ($M=10.30, SD=2.54$) and those who engaged in nonpenetrative sexual activities ($M=10.06, SD=2.44$). Sexual aggression was found to be significantly different between those who engaged in penetrative and those who engaged in nonpenetrative sexual activities ($F=12.92, P<0.01$). Individuals who engaged in penetrative sexual activities reported more sexual aggression ($M=3.34, SD=3.39$) than those who engaged in nonpenetrative sexual activities ($M=1.20, SD=2.36$). In the domain of psychological aggression, passive aggression (procrastination, irritability, stubbornness and hostile attitude) was found to be significantly different between those who were sexually active and those who were not ($F=5.68, P<0.01$). Those who engaged in penetrative sexual activities reported more passive aggression ($M=6.09, SD=4.46$) than those engaged in nonpenetrative sexual activities ($M=3.81, SD=3.69$) and those who were not sexually active in their current relationship ($M=3.04, SD=3.51$) at 0.05 and 0.01 level of significance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Personality is known to play an important role in determining the likelihood of engaging in an aggressive act in an interpersonal context. Negative emotionality is relatively detrimental to romantic relationships. Most of the participants were from nuclear families indicating the current pattern of Indian families. 78.18% participants reported being sexually active in their current relationship. 31.1% engaged in penetrative sexual practices and 43 (39.1%) were into nonpenetrative sexual activities like kissing, fondling etc., in the last six to twelve months. Those who did not engage in any sexual activities in their relationship reported better negotiation skills ($M=8.16, SD=3.27$) compared to those who engaged in sexual activities. Thirty-four percent had sexual intercourse in the previous 3 months and 39% did not use any protection during the sexual act.^[22] Youth are particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in relationships that include dating violence and risky sexual activity.^[23] Violent victimization was more likely to occur in romantic relationships that included sexual intercourse: 37% of the respondents reporting sexual relationships experienced at least one form of verbal or physical violence victimization, compared with

19% of those reporting relationships with no sexual intercourse.^[24]

Trends in the current study also presence of physical aggression among men, like pushing, grabbing or kicking the partner. Sexual aggression was found to be significantly different between those who engaged in penetrative and those who engaged in nonpenetrative sexual activities. ($F=12.92, P<0.01$). Individuals who engaged in penetrative sexual activities reported more sexual aggression than those who engaged in nonpenetrative sexual activities. Those who engaged in penetrative sexual activities reported more passive aggression (procrastination, irritability, stubbornness and hostile attitude) than those engaged in nonpenetrative sexual activities and those who were not sexually active in their current relationship ($M=6.09, SD=4.46$). Males reported more physical injury ($M=1.32, SD=2.93$) than females ($M=0.33, SD=0.77$). Men reported more physical aggression in romantic relationships.^[15,25] The justification for gender differences can also be considered on the basis of culture. India's social system is patriarchal and females are socialized to be subordinate and believe that males have a right to control them.^[26] Recent literature on urban, upward mobile women aka alpha females state that women also show same amounts of aggression in relational contexts. Women reported that they attacked their partners while under the influence of emotional states of intense anger, men said they did so in response to aggression received. A high percentage of casual daters reported more difficulties in their relationships than involved daters.^[27] Significant difference was found between aggression and disclosure of one's current relationship. Those who were open to their families about their relationship status reported less aggression in all its styles. Individuals have unique support needs and preferences for the amount of support they receive from their networks. Therefore those who were open about their relationship to everybody reported more aggression than those who were open to their families alone.^[28]

Personality factor 'agreeableness' was mildly correlated with negotiation skills [Table 1]. The personality factor 'openness' was mildly negatively correlated with all types of aggression. The factor 'agreeableness' was also negative correlated with psychological aggression and mildly negatively correlated with physical aggression, sexual aggression, passive verbal aggression and physical injury. The factor 'conscientiousness' was found to be negatively correlated with psychological aggression and verbal passive aggression Table 2. Personality factor 'neuroticism' showed negative correlation with relationship satisfaction. The personality factor 'agreeableness', conscientiousness was mildly correlated with relationship satisfaction. Neuroticism has negative correlation with relationship

satisfaction. Psychological, physical, physical injury, verbal passive and verbal active sexual form of aggression were found to be mildly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction [Table 3]. Neuroticism is the strongest personality correlate of relationship satisfaction.^[29] Negative personality traits such as neuroticism are associated with decreased satisfaction from a relationship.^[30] (Karney and Bradbury, 1997). Neurotic partners rated their relationship as more costly and as diverging more from their idealistic standards.^[31] Conscientiousness and agreeableness were associated with satisfaction in dating couples.^[32] Higher physical aggression was associated with lower agreeableness and lower extraversion in men.^[15] Relational aggression was associated with lower agreeableness for both men and women. Lower levels of agreeableness were associated with higher levels of trait aggressivity.^[33] Participants who had experienced psychological aggression or were

physically assaulted reported a lower level of relationship satisfaction than those who did not experience psychological aggression or were physically assaulted respectively.^[34]

Sample consisted only of urban, college educated or working men and women, therefore the representation of the sample is limited. Information regarding any previous romantic relationship would have given additional information about aggression in current relationship.

The present study highlighted the prevalence and different forms of aggression in romantic relationships in youth. Personality characteristics like, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness were positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and negatively correlated with aggression in romantic relationships. Significant proportion are in sexual activities, there is

Table 1: Relationship between relationship satisfaction and personality characteristics

| Correlation | RAS |
|-------------------|---------|
| Neuroticism | -0.28** |
| Extraversion | 0.15 |
| Openness | 0.06 |
| Agreeableness | 0.31** |
| Conscientiousness | 0.24* |

In the group, personality factor 'neuroticism' showed negative correlation with relationship satisfaction ($P < 0.01$ level**). The personality factor 'agreeableness' was mildly correlated with relationship satisfaction ($P < 0.01$ level**). There was a mild correlation between personality factor, 'conscientiousness' and relationship satisfaction ($P < 0.05$ level). RAS – Relationship satisfaction scale

Table 2: Relationship between personality characteristics and aggression styles

| | Conflict tactics scale-negotiation scale item | Conflict tactics scale-psychological aggression | Conflict tactics scale-physical aggression | Conflict tactics scale-sexual aggression | Conflict tactics scale-physical injury | Checklist for psychological aggression-verbal active | Checklist for psychological aggression-verbal passive |
|-------------------|---|---|--|--|--|--|---|
| Neuroticism | -0.03 | 0.05 | 0.03 | 0.13 | 0.03 | 0.16 | 0.11 |
| Extraversion | 0.12 | 0.11 | 0.07 | 0.01 | -0.03 | -0.03 | -0.07 |
| Openness | 0.07 | -0.20* | -0.21* | -0.19* | -0.22* | -0.23* | -0.29** |
| Agreeableness | 0.21* | -0.19* | -0.28** | -0.27** | -0.26** | -0.11 | -0.29** |
| Conscientiousness | -0.02 | -0.19* | -0.18 | -0.14 | -0.13 | -0.20 | -0.27** |

In the group the personality factor 'agreeableness' was mildly correlated with negotiation skills ($P < 0.05$ level*). The personality factor 'openness' was mildly negatively correlated with all types of aggression ($P < 0.05$ level*). The factor 'agreeableness' was also negative correlated with psychological aggression ($P < 0.05$ level*) and mildly negatively correlated with physical aggression, sexual aggression, passive verbal aggression and physical injury ($P < 0.01$ level). The factor 'conscientiousness' was found to be negatively correlated with psychological aggression ($P < 0.05$ level*) and verbal passive aggression ($P < 0.01$ level**)

Table 3: Relationship between aggression styles and relationship satisfaction

| | RAS |
|---|---------|
| Conflict tactics scale-negotiation scale item | 0.060 |
| Conflict tactics scale-psychological aggression | -0.26** |
| Conflict tactics scale-physical aggression | -0.34** |
| Conflict tactics scale-sexual aggression | -0.23* |
| Conflict tactics scale-physical injury | -0.31** |
| Checklist for psychological aggression-verbal active | -0.30** |
| Checklist for psychological aggression-verbal passive | -0.28** |

RAS – Relationship satisfaction scale; Relationship satisfaction was found to be negatively correlated with all styles of aggression on CTS-2. The types of aggression like, psychological, physical, physical injury, verbal passive and verbal active were found to be mildly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction ($P < 0.01$ level**). Sexual aggression was found to be mildly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction ($P < 0.05$ level)

a need to educated regarding safer sexual behavior, use of emergency contraceptive and anger management. A further exploration of these variables may be significant in designing interventions for youth at an early stage.

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