The amount of research on aggression in interpersonal relationships has significantly increased over the years. According to Dr. Stephen Franzoi, aggression is defined as, “any form of behavior that is intended to harm or injure some person, oneself or an object” (Franzoi, 2005, p.488). In terms of this definition, aggression can be both physical and verbal. Physical aggression, therefore, may include pushing, hitting, slapping, or any other methods used to physically harm another individual. Verbal aggression, in contrast, may include name-calling, threats, or verbal gestures than cause emotional or psychological harm to another. The use of both physical and verbal aggression in intimate or romantic relationships has become a problem in modern society. Current studies have investigated the growing epidemic of aggression, specifically aggression targeted against women. For example, research has found that between 7 and 20% of women in primary health care settings are receiving treatment for violence and aggression from intimate partners (Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000).

Of course, not all interpersonal conflict leads to aggression. However, once aggression enters a relationship, aggressive behaviors tend to remain stable over time. Studies have found that acts of psychological harm, often accomplished through verbal aggression, are predictors of future physical aggression (Murphy & O’Leary, 1989). If severe physical aggression is established between partners, evidence indicates that this aggressive cycle will continue with a greater chance that sexual coercion may occur (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000). With such striking evidence at hand, it is imperative that these aggressive behaviors and tendencies are studied and identified in individuals. Such research is necessary to establish programs that can be developed to combat these behaviors and stabilize healthy relationships between romantic partners.

Society often assumes that aggression is more common among men in interpersonal relationships. In a
recent meta-analysis of gender differences in aggression, Archer (2000) explains that society has created two dominant viewpoints that researchers use when studying aggression in romantic relationships. On one hand, some believe that aggression is equally inflicted by both partners, which is contrasted by those who believe that women are more often the victim (Archer, 2000). Those who believe that aggression is more often inflicted by men may believe in the common societal generalization that men are more dominant and violent whereas women, on the other hand, are more passive and unthreatening. Although various studies have supported each viewpoint, Archer explains that it is important to keep in mind the theoretical basis of each study. For example, studies from researchers such as Claes and Rosenthal (1990), who studied the aggressive behaviors of male perpetrators, may approach the issue from the “female victim” standpoint. In this sense, research analyzing female victims will tend to lead to the conclusion that men are in fact more aggressive than women (Archer, 2000). In contrast, studies that investigate conflict models and aggression on behalf of both men and women may not conclude that men are significantly more aggressive than women. Archer’s (2000) meta-analysis studied many models of aggression and found, in fact, that men are not always more aggressive than women, which is contrary to popular assumption.

In fact, several studies have indicated that women engage in physical aggression in romantic relationships (Katz, Kuffel, & Coblentz, 2002). There are disagreements as to whether both male-initiated violence and female-initiated violence are equally prevalent or equally harmful in a relationship. Katz et al. (2002) found that men in relationships experience more moderate violence than do women. An example of moderate violence would be throwing something at a partner, rather than physically slapping or hitting him/her. This study, along with others, also found evidence that aggression between partners may be reciprocal (Archer, 2000). In other words, if one partner acts in an aggressive nature, both partners may be more likely to use aggression in conflict resolution. One previous study found that the longer a man is in a committed relationship, the more likely he is to use violence. Consequently, women may be likely to engage in violence in terms of self-defense (Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987). Similarly, a recent study by Schumacher and Leonard (2005) found that the presence of both verbal and physical aggression in committed relationships and marriages is a predictor of future aggression on the part of the aggressor, as well as retaliatory aggression on the part of the victim (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005). More specifically, physical aggression by the husband was a predictor of future aggression by the wife, but not vice-versa. This again suggests that a great deal of female aggression may be self-defensive in nature. However, the use of verbal aggression by both husband and wife predicted future use of verbal aggression in both partners.

Previous studies have analyzed the differences in satisfaction levels between men and women in romantic relationships. Katz et al. (2002) found that when aggression was present, women were more dissatisfied in relationships than are men. However, there were no significant differences in dissatisfaction levels when status and length of the relationships were analyzed. That is, when aggression existed in a relationship, women in committed relationships were just as dissatisfied as women in casual dating relationships (Katz et al.). Men, however, tend to be more satisfied than women in committed relationships (Katz et al.). This increased relationship satisfaction among men may be related to gender socialization. Studies have found empirical evidence that link patriarchal gender socialization and aggressive behaviors in relationships. For example, men who are socialized to believe that men are the dominant gender are more likely to use aggression and sexual coercion in relationships (Hill & Fischer, 2001). As a study by Gelles (1983) supports, men tend to use coercive sexual aggression in terms of maintaining control of a relationship. Typically, men feel they are socially powerful and may therefore use aggression as a method of demonstrating power in interpersonal relationships. Consistent with evidence that aggression is repetitive once it enters a relationship, a study by Ryan (1995) found that men who use verbal aggression tend to eventually engage in sexual aggression as well.

Although men engage in more sexually coercive aggression, women were more likely to engage in aggressive behaviors when solving everyday conflict with a partner (Hogben & Waterman, 2000). Yet, there is a notable difference between the coercion styles of men and women. Men, while being more sexually coercive, are more likely to use drugs or alcohol, thus making their partner unable to resist coercive methods in trying to resist sexual activity. Women, on the other hand, rely on methods that are significantly less physically coercive while trying to reach conflict resolution (O’Sullivan, Byers & Finkelman, 1998). Such methods may include verbal threats, manipulation by sulking, and persistent arguing.

In a meta-analysis of aggression between partners, Archer (2000) found that when measures of aggression were based on specific acts, women were more likely to use physical aggression towards their partners than men. For example, the Conflict Tactics Scale asks
respondents to indicate the frequency of specific acts, such as: swearing, stomping out of a room, kicking, pushing or choking a partner, etc. However, when aggression was defined in terms of the visible consequences, such as bruises, men were more likely than women to use physical aggression (Archer, 2000). The results of Archer’s study may be due to the fact that men are usually bigger than women and therefore more likely to create visible images of this aggression in terms of marks, bruises, or cuts. It is important to note, however, that the effect sizes were small for each of the results found in Archer’s study, which illustrates the need for further investigation in this area.

It is evident that any type of aggression is dangerous in a relationship. Aggression creates a harmful cycle—once aggression has entered a relationship, it is likely to return in different forms, such as sexual coercion. This study will aim to review the conflict tactics used by individuals in a relationship in terms of verbal and physical aggression. Furthermore, verbal and physical aggression will be analyzed in terms of how they are both used in methods of sexual coercion. Based on evidence from past studies, we hypothesize that men, compared to women, will engage in more physical aggression in both conflict tactics and sexual coercion. Secondly, we hypothesize that women, in comparison to men, will engage in more verbal aggression in both conflict tactics and sexual coercion. Also, with respect to relationship status, we hypothesize that those couples involved in committed relationships or marriage will illustrate a higher level of aggressive conflict tactics and sexual coercion than couples of lower commitment.

Method

Participants
There were 423 participants in this study: 276 (65.2%) were women and 147 (34.8%) were men ranging from the ages of 17 to 43 (M = 19.63). Of the participants, 363 (85%) were White, 14 (3.3%) Hispanic, 13 (3.1%) Asian American, and 12 (2%) African-American. In terms of relationship status, 24 (5.6%) were married, 168 (39.4%) dating exclusively, 87 (20.4%) dating casually, and 140 (32.9%) single.

Measures
Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). Straus (1979) developed this scale in order to measure different conflict tactics used by couples. In his studies, Straus reported a reliability of .79–.80 for verbal aggression and .82–.83 for physical (violent) aggression. The scale was divided into four subsets—reason in conflict resolution, hostile refusal to communicate, verbal abuse, and violence. However, given the goal of our study to examine verbal and physical aggression, the scale was divided into verbal (e.g., did or said something to spite my partner) and physical (e.g., threw something at my partner) aggression tactics. The answer scale distinguished responses by the number of times a participant had engaged in those acts in the past twelve months (0 = Never to 6 = More than 20 times). Means were computed for each of the subscales.

Sexual Experiences Survey (SES). Experience using both verbal and physical sexual coercion in a relationship was measured with the SES (Koss & Oros, 1982). The authors of this study suggested that acts of sexual aggression fell on a continuum ranging from verbal threats (e.g., obtained sexual intercourse with a person who didn’t want to, by saying things you didn’t really mean) to physical assault (e.g., used physical force to engage someone in kissing). Items on the survey ranged from asking whether a partner misinterpreted the degree of wanted sexual intimacy to asking whether or not one had been held down by an individual when refusing to consent to sex. Subscales for verbal and physical aggression were computed with sums of the endorsed items.

Demographics. The demographic survey included items on gender, age, relationship status (single, dating casually, dating exclusively, or married) and ethnicity.

Procedure
The data obtained for this study were previously collected as part of a larger study on relationships (Oswald & Russell, 2006). Participants were recruited from university introductory psychology subject pools at a private Midwestern university and a small Eastern college. Participants completed the conflict tactics scale, sexual experience survey, and demographics as part of a larger study on relationships (see Oswald and Russell). All surveys were presented in random order. Surveys were kept anonymous as identifying participant information was never collected. Participants received extra credit for their participation in the study. Following completion of the surveys, participants were debriefed about the study goals and were provided with contact numbers for resources if they wanted to talk to a professional about their own relationship experiences.

Results
Using SPSS, independent t tests and analyses of variance were computed to test the hypotheses. The results of these tests are presented in Tables 1 and 2. For the hypothesis regarding gender effects and sexual aggression (that men score higher on the physical portion of the SES aggressor version while women
score higher on the verbal portion), an independent \(t\) test was performed. There was in fact a significant difference between men and women in terms of verbal aggression \(t(396) = 2.14, p < .05\). Men were found to score higher on the verbal portion \((M = .80, SD = .92)\) than women \((M = .62, SD = .74)\). However, there was not a significant gender difference on the physical aggression portion of the SES.

Independent \(t\) tests were performed to test the hypothesis that women would score higher on the use of verbal conflict tactics, while men would score higher on the use of physical conflict tactics. A marginally significant difference did exist between men and women \(t(389) = -1.54, p = .13\), such that women scored higher on the use of verbal conflict tactics \((M = 1.48, SD = 1.05)\) than men \((M = 1.31, SD = 1.04)\). Consistent with our hypothesis, a significant gender difference was found in terms of physical conflict tactics, \(t(387) = -3.27, p < .05\). However, contrary to our own hypothesis, women scored higher on the use of physical conflict tactics \((M = .14, SD = .38)\) than men \((M = .03, SD = .11)\).

Analyses of variance were performed to examine physical and verbal conflict tactics in the context of relationship status. An ANOVA for the verbal scores met significant difference, \(F(3, 383) = 4.99, p < .05\). A post hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed a difference between those who were married and those who were dating exclusively and between those who were married and those who were single. Married individuals scored highest \((M = 1.26, SD = 1.63)\), followed by those dating exclusively \((M = .65, SD = .70)\) and single individuals \((M = .56, SD = .69)\). An ANOVA for physical scores did not meet significance, \(F(3, 390) = 1.05, p > .05\).

### Discussion

Results of this study indicate that stereotypical views of relationships may in fact be a myth. That is, contrary to our hypothesis, this study indicates that women may be more physically aggressive than men in terms of resolving conflicts. However, both men and women are equally likely to be verbally aggressive toward one another. Of course, there are a variety of factors that may explain why we found such interesting results. After comparing our data with past research, it is evident that further study and investigation is needed on this topic in order to make any conclusions. For example, the surveys used, especially the Conflict Tactics Scale, should be investigated in terms of how

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Men ( n = 147 )</th>
<th>Women ( n = 276 )</th>
<th>( t )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Mean Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SES Verbal</td>
<td>.80 (.92)</td>
<td>.62 (.74)</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01 to .35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES Phys.</td>
<td>.01 (.19)</td>
<td>.01 (.09)</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT Verbal</td>
<td>1.31 (1.04)</td>
<td>1.48 (1.05)</td>
<td>-1.54</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT Phys.</td>
<td>.03 (.11)</td>
<td>.14 (.38)</td>
<td>-3.27</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04 to .18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard Deviations are in parentheses. Sample sizes of men and women vary slightly for each analysis due to missing data.
valid it is in analyzing the conflict tactics of women. In his recent meta-analysis, Archer (2000) mentions that the Conflict Tactics Scale has yielded higher levels of physical aggression in women because women may be responding in self-defense. Therefore, if women are claiming to be physically aggressive, but in a form of self-defense, it cannot accurately be concluded that women are more physically aggressive than men. Similarly, evidence from Stets and Pirog-Good (1987) suggests that when a woman receives threats from her partner, she may engage in physical aggression in order to protect herself from perceived oncoming threats. It is also important to keep the “social desirability” factor in mind. It is possible that men did not respond accurately on the Conflict Tactics Scale because they did not want to be seen as abusers. That is, they did not want to admit to being physically aggressive with their partners because it is perceived as socially unacceptable. Therefore, it is important to analyze responses in terms of both social desirability and the use of physical aggression used as self-defense.

Although women illustrated higher levels of physical aggression as a conflict tactic in this study, men illustrated higher levels of physical aggression than did women during sexual experiences. As several past research studies have illustrated, men are more likely to use physical behaviors in sexual coercion than are women. Historically, the United States has been a patriarchal society. However, in recent decades, women have made incredible strides in terms of status on a variety of levels. Therefore, it is possible that men feel they must live up to history’s societal standards of dominance and honor by engaging in aggression to maintain the standard of the “ideal” man (Ryan, 1995).

Similar to our results regarding conflict tactics, this study found that both men and women are equally likely to use verbal aggression in sexually coercive situations. Such results may be due to the fact that once aggression enters a relationship, it is more likely to be reciprocated from both individuals (Archer, 2000). It is also important to note that while there is evidence of physical aggression in this study, the means for verbal aggression are higher than those of physical aggression. For example, the mean for men using verbal aggression on the Conflict Tactics Scale was 1.31, and their mean for using physical aggression was only .03. Therefore, this study suggests that college students may be more verbally aggressive, rather than physically aggressive, in terms of conflict tactics and sexual coercion. While it may be the fortunate case that our sample is not engaging in a high frequency of aggressive or sexually coercive acts, these low numbers suggest that our sample may have underreported. Future research involving the number of times an individual is a victim rather than the aggressor may lead to more accurate results of both physical and verbal aggression in relationships.

This study hypothesized that couples involved in committed relationships or marriage will display a higher level of aggressive conflict tactics and sexual coercion. In fact, there was a significant difference in verbal aggression on the Sexual Experiences Survey between married individuals and individuals dating exclusively. There was also a difference between married individuals and single individuals. Married individuals engaged in the highest level of verbal sexual aggression, followed by individuals dating exclusively, and single individuals. There was also a significant difference on the Conflict Tactics Scale between individuals dating exclusively and single individuals. Those dating exclusively used more verbal conflict tactics than those who were single. These results suggest that as the commitment levels of a relationship increase, so too does the use of verbal aggression. However, it is
important to keep in mind that the relatively low number of married participants was a limitation in terms of equal distribution of responses. Different results may have been gathered if the groups were more equally distributed as far as relationship status.

This study finds no significant differences in the use of physical sexual aggression based on relationship status. However, there is a significant difference between individuals dating exclusively and single individuals on the use of physical conflict tactics. Those who are dating exclusively were more likely to use physical conflict tactics than single individuals. Such results are similar to those found by Katz et al. (2002) and illustrate that the more committed a person is in a relationship, the more likely he/she is to use or be victim to aggression. Overall, research suggests that individuals in exclusive relationships engage in more verbal and physical conflict tactics. There is also a higher level of sexual aggression in these committed individuals than in single individuals, which is again consistent with research from Katz et al.

A possible explanation for these higher levels of aggression in more committed relationships may be the level of comfort individuals have established with one another. Individuals who are involved in serious relationships are not as worried about how they come across to the other person and may therefore be more likely to engage in aggression. Furthermore, those who are in more committed relationships see each other more often and there exists, therefore, more opportunity for conflict situations to arise. Individuals who are single may only occasionally date casually and will not always be able to establish a comfort level that may lead to physical and verbal aggression, which research from Katz et al. suggests.

There are several limitations to this research. Our sample included college students in heterosexual relationships. Future studies should use a more representative sample consisting of a variety of ages and relationship statuses, including more married couples. Future studies should also aim to have ethnically diverse samples. Also, due to this study’s goal, we focused on verbal and physical aggression in relationships. Thus, only verbal and physical subscales were identified on each of the surveys used. As research from Russell and Oswald (2001, 2002) has found, the use of only certain portions of this scale did not affect its reliability or validity. However, different results may be obtained by using entire scales, or different scales that have more than one category in defining conflict and sexual experiences between individuals. For example, the first statement on the Sexual Experiences Survey reads, “Misinterpreted the level of sexual inti-
macy a date desired.” In terms of our study, this was identified as a verbally aggressive act. However, it is possible to categorize this as “miscommunication” between partners. While breaking this scale down into subsets may be seen as a limitation to our study, it is important to realize that there are a variety of types of aggression. For example, aggression may be considered verbal, but also emotional or psychological in the same instance. Further studies should investigate breaking aggression down into further categories that can help to clearly define aggression from a variety of angles.

Future research should also focus on gender differences in the use of conflict tactics in terms of the relationship status. For example, our study illustrates that individuals in committed relationships are more likely to use verbal aggression. However, there is no difference in terms of gender differences. Understanding these possible gender differences can lead professionals to the creation of different strategies, or the improvement of existing strategies, which may help couples achieve conflict resolution. Past research has also indicated that both physical and verbal aggression in a committed relationship can be predictors of future aggression and retaliatory aggression on part of the victim (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005). Therefore, further research on gender differences can lead to the creation of programs that can help couples eliminate current aggression problems and reduce the likelihood that aggression will arise in the future.

Although future research is imperative in gaining a better understanding of social interactions, results from this study indicate that typical stereotypes in society are not always true. For example, women may be as likely, or in some cases more likely, to use physical aggression. Such results illustrate the importance of avoiding assumptions and addressing relationship conflict as a mutual problem. Breaking down gender stereotypes in relationships can lead to a more focused analysis of conflict and the creation of successful resolution strategies.

References


