

**He Said/She Said:  
Boyfriend, Girlfriend, and Observer Agreement in Reports of Aggression**

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## Abstract

31 currently dating adolescent couples reported on their own and their partners' use of Verbal Aggression, Physical Threats, and Physical Aggression during conflicts in the past year. Conversations of these couples were also videotaped during two 7 minutes Conflict Resolution Tasks. Instances of Verbal and Physical Aggression were coded.

- **Boyfriends:**
  - Results indicate agreement between boyfriends and girlfriends about boyfriends' use of all forms of aggression.
  - Self- and partner-reports of boyfriend aggression were associated with observed Verbal Aggression.
- **Girlfriends:**
  - With one exception, there was no association between boyfriend and girlfriend reports of girlfriend Verbal Aggression, Physical Threats, or use of Physical Aggression.
  - Similarly, neither self- nor partner reports of girlfriend aggression were associated with observed Verbal or Physical aggression.

Alternative explanations of the lack of consensus between boyfriends, girlfriends, and Observers about girls' use of Verbal and Physical aggression are discussed.

## Introduction

Although both members of a dating couple share the same relationship, their experience of that relationship may be markedly different. The sources of such differences are complex, including bias against reporting socially disapproved activities such as verbal and physical aggression (e.g., Archer, 1999) as well as differences in how different individuals interpret the same behavior (e.g. Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

Understanding the sources of difference in how romantic partners perceive their relationship is important for at least three reasons:

- Differences in self and partner perception may lead to disagreements and relationship dissolution.
- Because most acts of aggression occur in private settings, estimates of the prevalence of aggression in romantic relationships are based upon self- and partner reports. Understanding reporter differences in prevalence will facilitate assessments of these estimates.
- Because of the difficulty in recruiting adolescent dating couples, most research on romantic relationships relies on single source reporting of dyadic functioning. Basic research on agreement between partners and observers will aid in the interpretation of participant reports.

This paper uses dyadic data to address five questions:

- **What percentage of girls and boys use Verbal Aggression, Physical threats, and Physical Aggression during conflicts with their romantic partners?**
  - **How similar are self-, partner, and Observer reports of each type of aggression?**
- **To what extent do boyfriend and girlfriend reports agree with regards to use of aggression?**
- **To what extent do self- and partner reports of aggression agree with Observer reported aggression?**
  - **Does this differ for males and females?**

## Methods

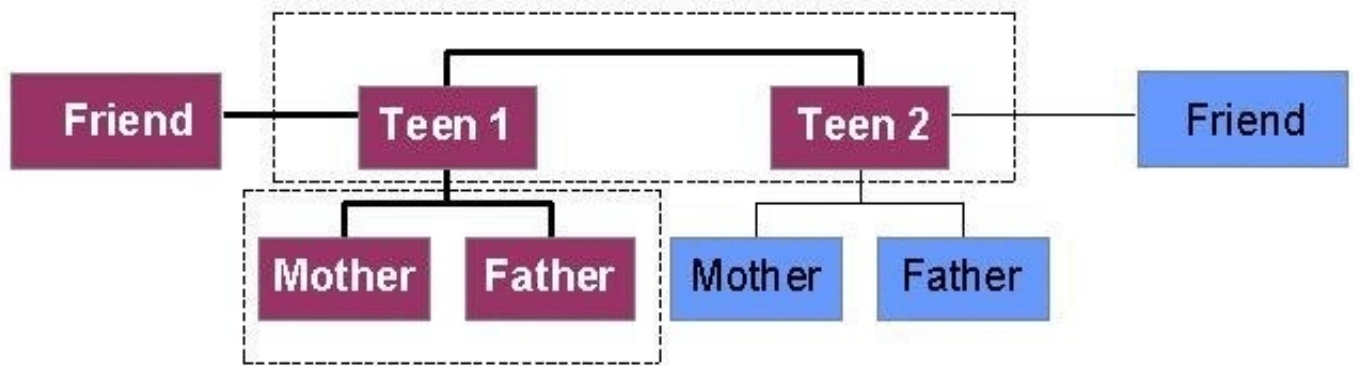
### Protocol

These data were gathered as part of *The Continuity of Close Relationships Project*, a multi-generational study of close relationships. Currently dating youth are recruited through advertisements and direct phone recruitment. After coming to the research setting, adolescents complete questionnaires describing their relationships with parents, romantic partners, and same-sex best friends, their parents' marriage, and their current adjustment. In addition, the couple participates in four videotaped conversations: two social support tasks and two conflict resolution tasks. The currently-married parents of one of the youths are then recruited into the study, provide similar information about their own relationships and well-being and participate in videotaped conversations with their spouses. A close, same-sex friend of one of the youths is also recruited into the study and completes a questionnaire reporting on their own relationships and well-being, including their relationship with the target youth.

### Sample

The sample used in this study consists of 31 currently dating adolescent couples. To be eligible to participate, at least one of the youth must be a high school junior or senior, the parents of one youth must be currently married to each other, and the couple must have been dating at least four weeks.

- **Relationship duration:** Couples had been dating between 1-30 months, median=7 months
  - Couples had known each 1-120 months, median=18 months
- **Age:** Boys: 17.6 years, Girls: 16.9 years
- **Ethnicity:** 81% European-American, 8% Ethnically mixed, 7% Asian-American, 3% Latino
- **Family Structure:** 79% currently living with biological parents



Data Source:



## Measures

**Observational Assessments of Aggression.** Each couple engaged in two Conflict Resolution Tasks, in which a partner identified a source of conflict in their relationship and the couple discussed the issue for seven minutes. The order of the partner choosing the topic was randomly assigned. After identifying the issue to be discussed, interviewers left the room and the discussion was videotaped. Interactions were coded along twelve individual and six couple dimensions.

- **Verbal Aggression.** Adolescents were coded as using verbal aggression if, at least once during they interaction, they used a verbally aggressive statement (put-down, blaming statement, or critical comment) about their partner or their partner's friends or relatives in a biting or cutting tone of voice.
- **Physical Aggression.** Adolescents were coded as using physical aggression if, at least once during the interaction, they engaged in a physically aggressive act (e.g., hitting, pinching) that was clearly not affectionate or meant as horseplay.

**Conflict in Relationship Scale.** Youth completed the *Conflict in Relationship Scale* (Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 199) in which they report on how frequently they and their partner have each engaged in 36 different behaviors during a conflict in the past year. Targeted relationships included mother, father, romantic partner, and same-sex best friends. Self-report and romantic partner reports were used to assess whether or not each individual had engaged in *Verbal Aggression*, *Physical Threats*, or *Physical Aggression* during a conflict with their romantic partner. The component behaviors are listed below. Individuals were scored as having engaged in each form of aggression if they were reported to engage in at least one conflict tactic in that category at least once.

- **Verbal aggression:**
  - Spoke in a mean or hostile tone of voice
  - Insulted this person with put downs
  - I ridiculed or made fun of this person
- **Direct or implied physical threats:**
  - I threatened to hurt this person
  - I threatened to hit this person or throw something at him/her
  - I hit, kicked, or punched something, like a wall
  - I destroyed or threatened to destroy something this person valued
  - I deliberately tried to frighten this person
- **Physical aggression**
  - I kicked, hit, or punched this person
  - I slapped this person or pulled his/her hair
  - I threw something at this person
  - I pushed, shoved, or shook this person

## Results

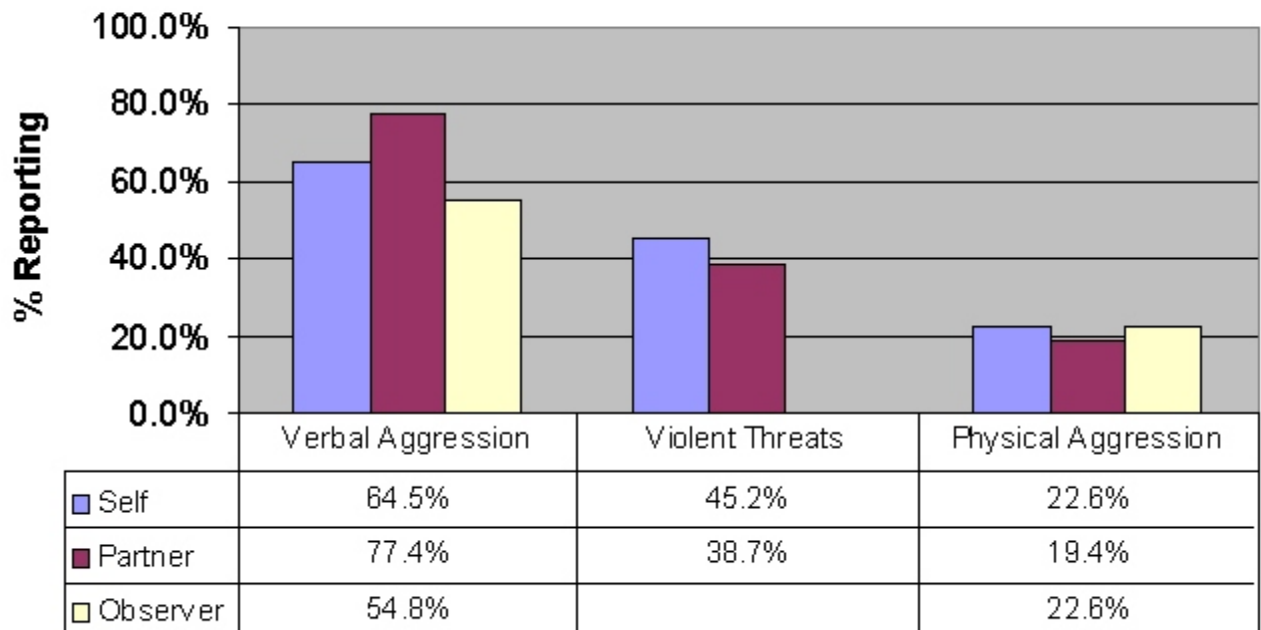
**What percentage of girls and boys use verbal aggression, physical threats, and physical aggression during conflicts with their romantic partners?**

**Does this differ by reporter?**

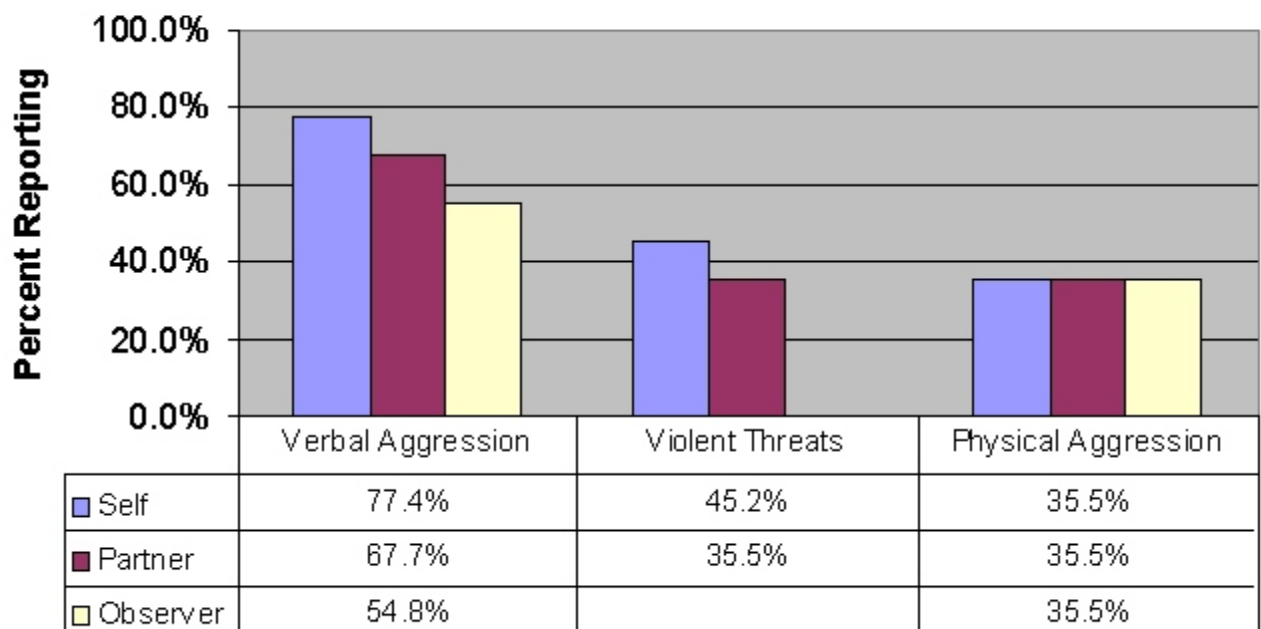
The percentage of girlfriends and boyfriends using each type of aggression were calculated separately by reporter. Results are reported in Figure 1 & 2.

- Verbal aggression is used by a higher percentage of youth than violent threats or physical aggression.
- The percentage of youth reported to use aggression differs by reporter. Observer reports of verbal aggression were less common than self- or partner reports. There is little difference in self-, partner, or Observer reports of the percentage of youth engaging in physical aggression.

### Boyfriend Aggression by Reporter



### Girlfriend Aggression by Reporter



Figures 1 & 2: Use of Aggression as reported by Self, Partner, and Observer

## **To what extent do boyfriend and girlfriend reports agree with regards to use of aggression?**

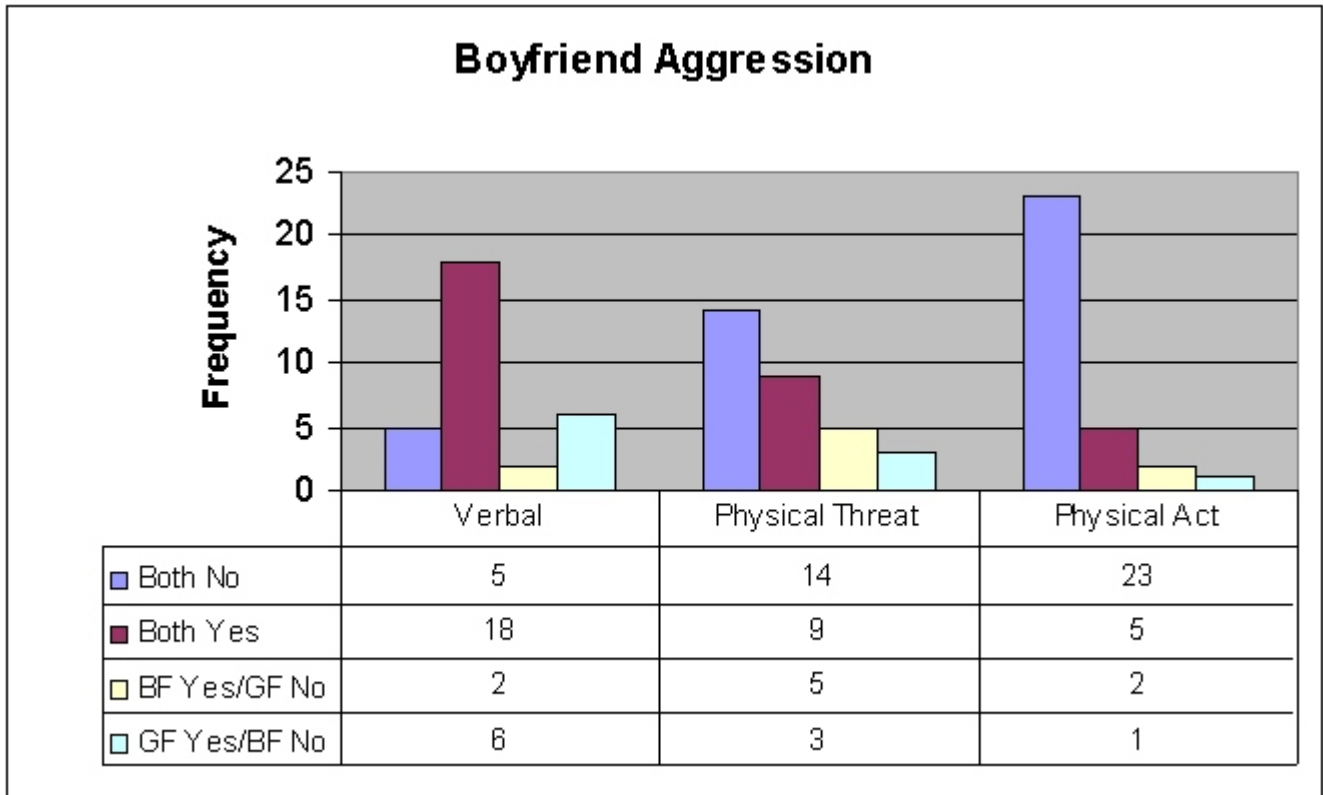
Crosstab analyses were performed to assess the extent of within-dyad agreement between self- and partner reports of boyfriends' and girlfriends' use of aggression. Results are reported in Table 1 and Figures 3 & 4.

- Boys' and girls' reports of boyfriends' use of verbal aggression, physical threats, and physical aggression generally concur:
  - 74% of couples agree about boyfriends' use of verbal aggression and physical threats during conflict. 90% of dyads agree about boyfriends' use of physical aggression. (see Figure 1).
- Boys and girls agree about girls' use of verbal aggression, but not about their use of physical threats (58%) or physical aggression (64%) (see Figure 2).
- There is no clear pattern indicating whether self- or partner reporting is higher.

**Table 1: Agreement Between Boyfriends and Girlfriends on Use of Aggressive Tactics During Conflict.**

Percentages represent the percentage of partners agreeing with self-reports of each aggression type. For example, 45.5% of the girlfriends of boys reporting they have not used verbal aggression, agree that their boyfriends do not use verbal aggression. 90.0% of the girlfriends of boys who report using verbal aggression agree that the boyfriend uses verbal aggression. N's represent number of individuals self-reporting use of that type of aggression. For example, 11 boys reported that they have not use verbal aggression in conflicts with their girlfriends and 20 report that they have.

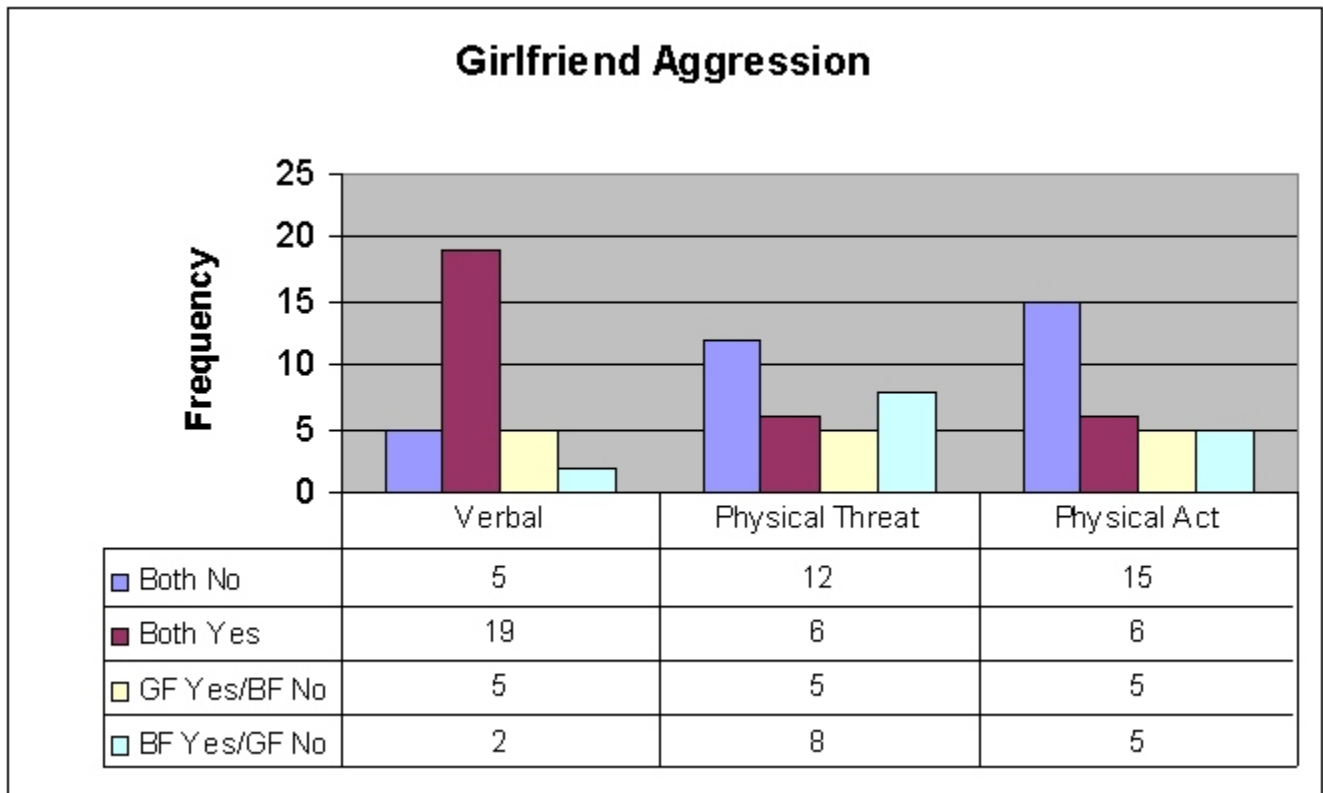
	Boyfriend Aggression			Girlfriend Aggression		
	Agree No	Agree Yes	$\chi^2$	Agree No	Agree Yes	$\chi^2$
<b>Verbal</b>	<b>45.5 (11)</b>	<b>90.0 (20)</b>	<b>5.1*</b>	<b>71.4% (7)</b>	<b>79.2% (24)</b>	<b>6.4 **</b>
<b>Physical Threat</b>	<b>82.4 (17)</b>	<b>64.3 (14)</b>	<b>7.04**</b>	<b>70.6% (17)</b>	<b>42.9% (14)</b>	<b>0.6</b>
<b>Physical Act</b>	<b>95.8 (24)</b>	<b>71.4 (7)</b>	<b>15.71***</b>	<b>75.0% (20)</b>	<b>54.5% (11)</b>	<b>2.7</b>



**Figure 3: Boyfriend Verbal Aggression, Physical Threats, and Physical Aggression: Boyfriend and Girlfriend Reports.**

I and Physical Aggression agree with boyfriend and girlfriend reports with regards to use of aggression?

Crosstab analyses were performed to assess these ex



**Figure 4: Girlfriend Verbal Aggression, Physical Threats, and Physical Aggression: Boyfriend and Girlfriend Reports**

tent to which Observers' reports of each partners' behavior was associated with adolescents' self- and partner reports of each type of aggression. Results are reported in Tables 2-5 and Figures 5-12.

### **Boyfriends:**

- Boys who reported that they use Verbal Aggression, Physical Threats, or Physical Aggression were more likely to be observed using Verbal Aggression than their peers (Table 2, Figures 5 & 6).
- When girls reported that their boyfriends use Verbal Aggression or Physical Threats, their boyfriends were more likely to be observed using Verbal Aggression than their peers (Table 3, Figures 7 & 8).
- There was no association between boys' self- or partner reported aggression and observed Physical Aggression (Tables 2 & 3).

### **Girlfriends:**

- There was no association between girlfriend self-reports or boyfriend partner reports of aggression and Observer assessments of girlfriends' Verbal or Physical Aggression (Tables 4 & 5, Figures 9-12).

**Table 2: Percentage of Observers Reporting That Boyfriends Use Verbal and Physical Aggression by Boyfriends' Self-Reports of Verbal Aggression, Threats, and Physical Aggression.**

Percentages represent the percentage of Observers reporting each type of aggression broken down by boyfriend self-report of aggression. For example, Observers reported that 27.3% of the boys who reported that they did not use verbal aggression, used verbal aggression at least once during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. Observers also reported that 70% of the boys who reported using verbal aggression used it during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. N's represent number of individuals self-reporting use of that type of aggression. For example, 11 boys reported that they had not used verbal aggression and 20 reported that they had.

<b>Boys' Self Reports</b>	<b>Observer Reported Verbal Aggression</b>		<b>Observer Reported Physical Aggression</b>	
	<b>% (N)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>% (N)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>
<b>Verbal</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>27.3% (11)</b>	<b>5.2*</b>	<b>18.2% (11)</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>70.0% (20)</b>		<b>25.0% (20)</b>	
<b>Physical Threat</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>29.4% (17)</b>	<b>9.8**</b>	<b>23.5% (17)</b>	<b>0.0</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>85.7% (14)</b>		<b>21.4% (14)</b>	
<b>Physical Act</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>41.7% (17)</b>	<b>7.4**</b>	<b>16.7% (24)</b>	<b>2.1</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>100.0% (7)</b>		<b>42.9% (7)</b>	

**Table 3: Percentage of Observers Reporting That Boyfriends Use Verbal and Physical Aggression by Girlfriends' Reports of Boyfriends' Verbal Aggression, Threats, and Physical Aggression.**

Percentages represent the percentage of observers observing each type of aggression broken down by girlfriends' report of partner aggression. For example, Observers reported that 14.3% of the boys whose girlfriends reported they did not use verbal aggression, used verbal aggression at least once during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. Observers also reported that 66.7% of the boys whose girlfriends said they used verbal aggression used it during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. N's represent number of individuals self-reporting use of that type of aggression. For example, 7 girls reported that their boyfriends have not used verbal aggression and 24 reported that they have.

<b>Girls' Partner</b>	<b>Observer Reported Verbal Aggression</b>		<b>Observer Reported Physical Aggression</b>	
	<b>% (N)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>% (N)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>
<b>Verbal</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>14.3% (7)</b>	<b>6.0**</b>	<b>0.0% (7)</b>	<b>1.0</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>66.7% (24)</b>		<b>12.5% (24)</b>	
<b>Physical Threat</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>36.8% (19)</b>	<b>6.4**</b>	<b>5.3% (19)</b>	<b>1.1</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>83.3% (12)</b>		<b>16.7% (12)</b>	
<b>Physical Act</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>48.0% (25)</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>16.0% (25)</b>	<b>3.2</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>83.3% (6)</b>		<b>50.0% (6)</b>	

**Table 4: Percentage of Observers Reporting That Girlfriends Use Verbal and Physical Aggression by Girlfriends' Self-Reports of Verbal Aggression, Threats, and Physical Aggression.**

Percentages represent the percentage of observers observing each type of aggression broken down by girlfriend self-report of aggression. For example, Observers reported that 42.9% of the girls who reported that they did not use verbal aggression, used verbal aggression at least once during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. Observers also reported that 58.3% of the girls who reported using verbal aggression used it during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. N's represent number of individuals self-reporting use of that type of aggression. For example, 7 girls reported that they have not used verbal aggression and 24 reported that they had.

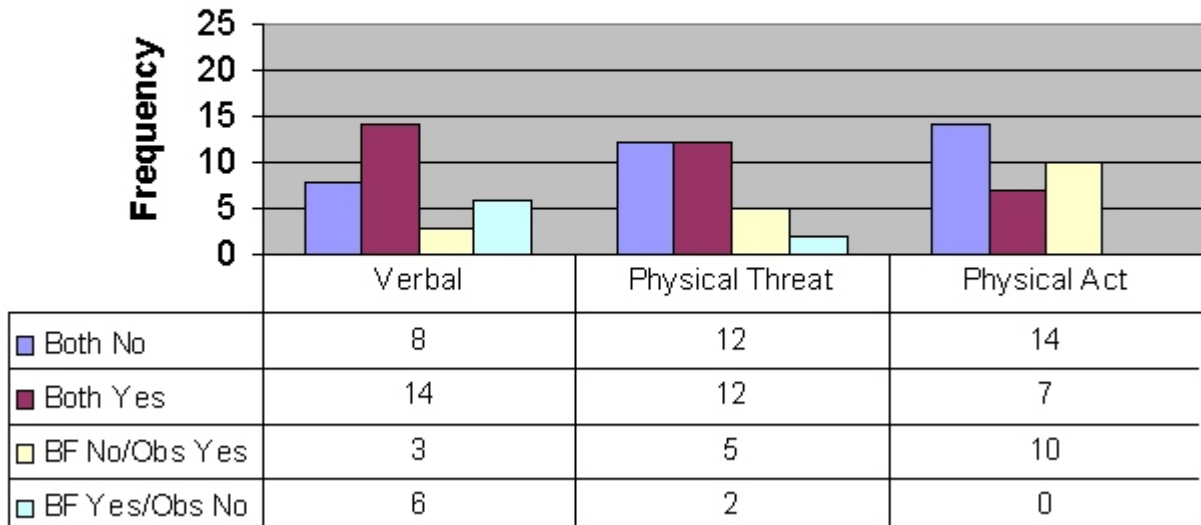
<b>Girls' Self- Reports</b>	<b>Observer Reported Verbal Aggression</b>		<b>Observer Reported Physical Aggression</b>	
	<b>% (N)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>% (N)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>
<b>Verbal</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>42.9% (7)</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>14.3% (7)</b>	<b>1.8</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>58.3% (24)</b>		<b>41.7% (24)</b>	
<b>Physical Threat</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>47.1% (17)</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>41.2% (17)</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>64.3% (14)</b>		<b>28.6% (14)</b>	
<b>Physical Act</b>				
<b>No</b>	<b>45.0% (20)</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>35.0% (20)</b>	<b>0.0</b>
<b>Yes</b>	<b>72.7% (11)</b>		<b>36.4% (11)</b>	

**Table 5: Percentage of Observers Reporting That Girlfriends Use Verbal and Physical Aggression by Boyfriends' Reports of Girlfriends' Verbal Aggression, Threats, and Physical Aggression.**

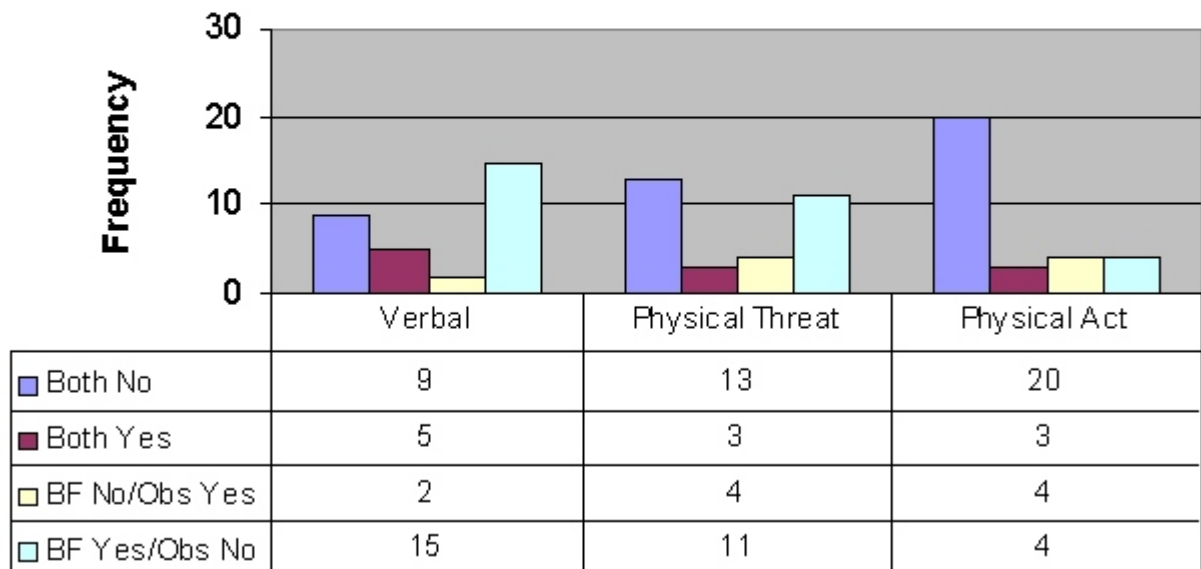
Percentages represent the percentage of observers observing each type of aggression broken down by girlfriend self-report of aggression. For example, Observers reported that 50.0% of the girls who reported that they did *not* use verbal aggression, used verbal aggression at least once during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. Observers also reported that 57.1% of the girls who reported *using* verbal aggression used it during the Conflict Resolution Tasks. N's represent number of individuals self-reporting use of that type of aggression. For example, 10 girls reported that they have not used verbal aggression and 21 reported that they had.

Boys' Partner	Observer Reported Verbal Aggression		Observer Reported Physical Aggression	
	% (N)	$\chi^2$	% (N)	$\chi^2$
Verbal				
No	50.0% (10)	0.1	20.0% (10)	1.5
Yes	57.1% (21)		42.9% (21)	
Physical Threat				
No	50.0% (20)	0.5	30.0% (20)	0.7
Yes	63.6% (11)		45.5% (11)	
Physical Act				
No	50.0% (20)	0.5	35.0% (20)	0.0
Yes	63.6% (11)		36.4% (11)	

### Boyfriends' Self-Reports of Aggression and Observed Verbal Aggression

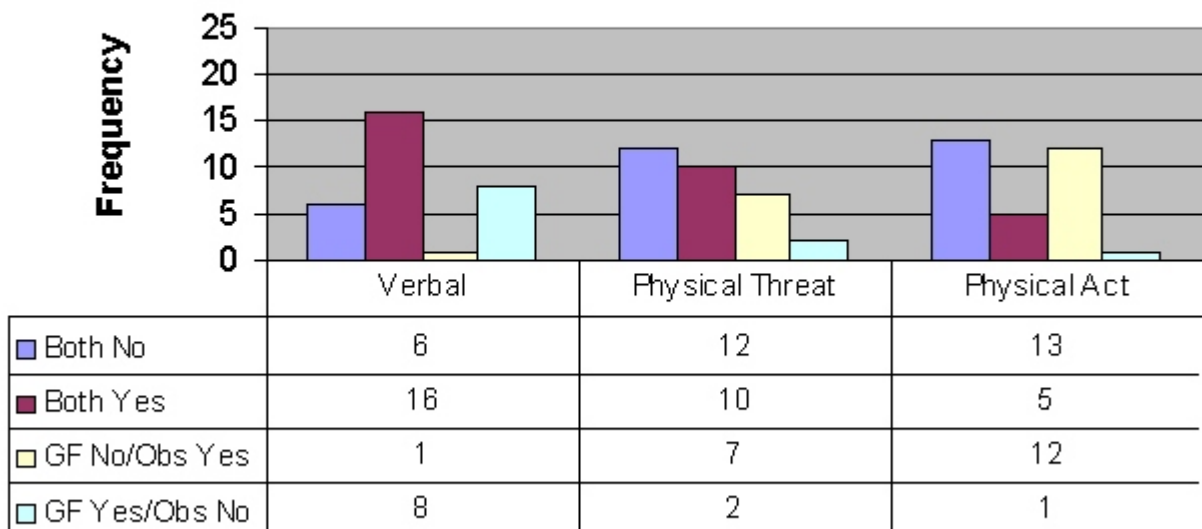


### Boyfriends' Self-Reports of Aggression and Observed Physical Aggression



Figures 5 & 6

### Girlfriends' Reports of Boyfriend Aggression and Observed Verbal Aggression



### Girlfriends' Reports of Boyfriend Aggression and Observed Physical Aggression

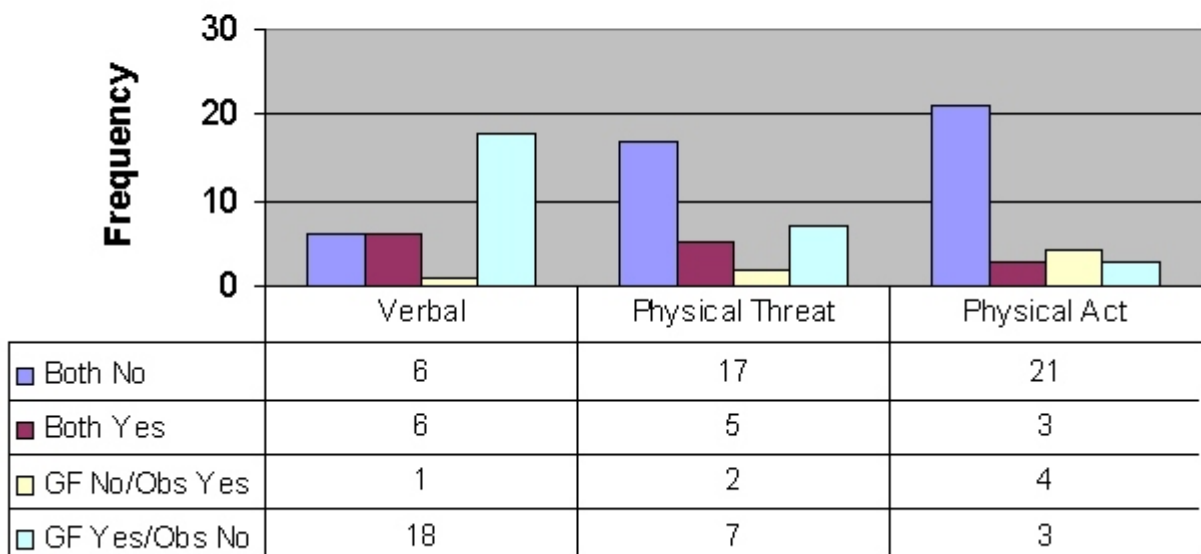
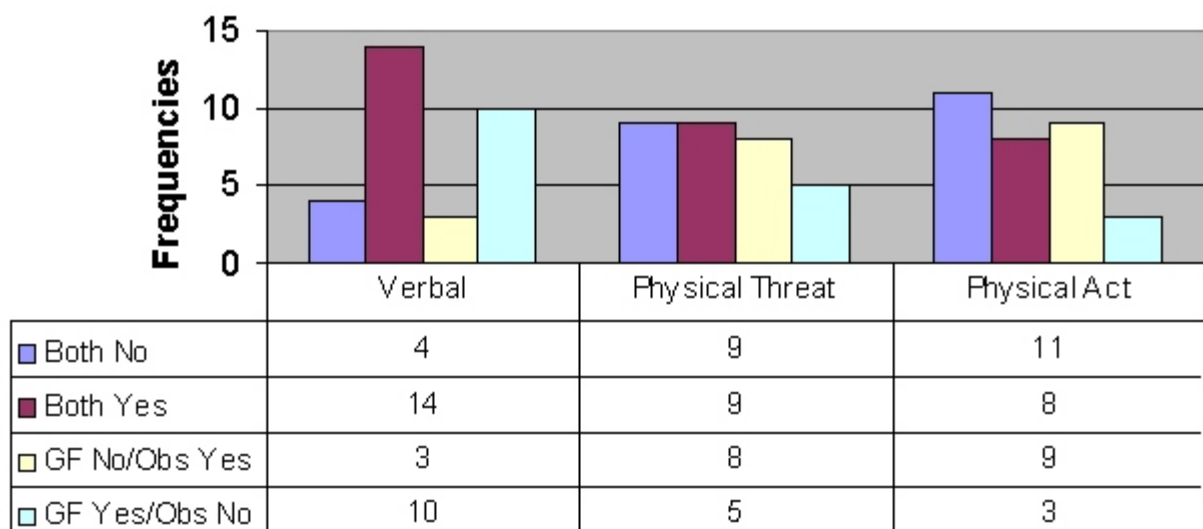


Figure 7 & 8

### Girlfriend Self-Reports of Aggression and Observed Verbal Aggression



### Girlfriend Self-Reports of Aggression and Observed Physical Aggression

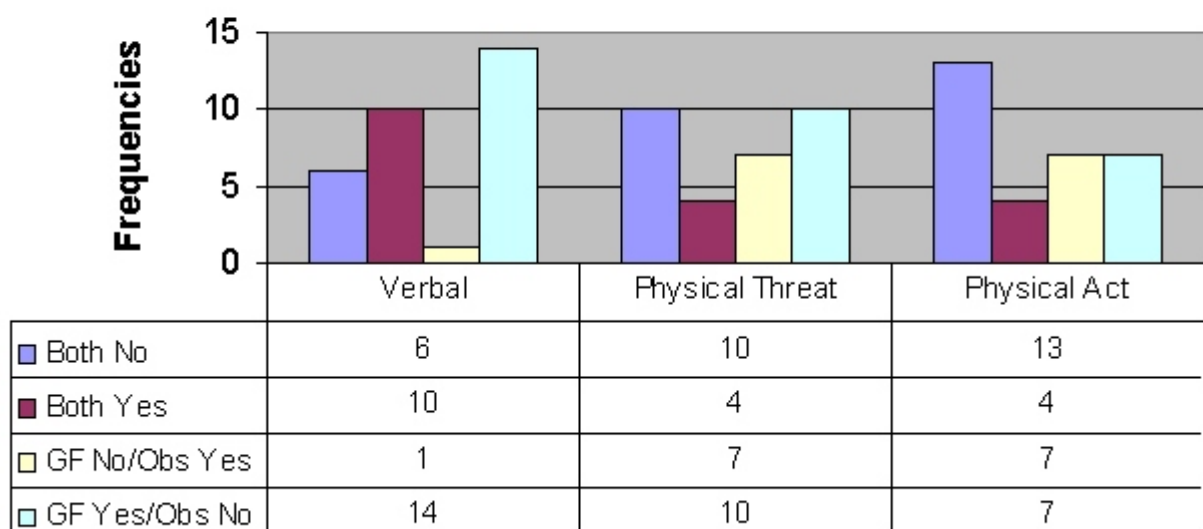
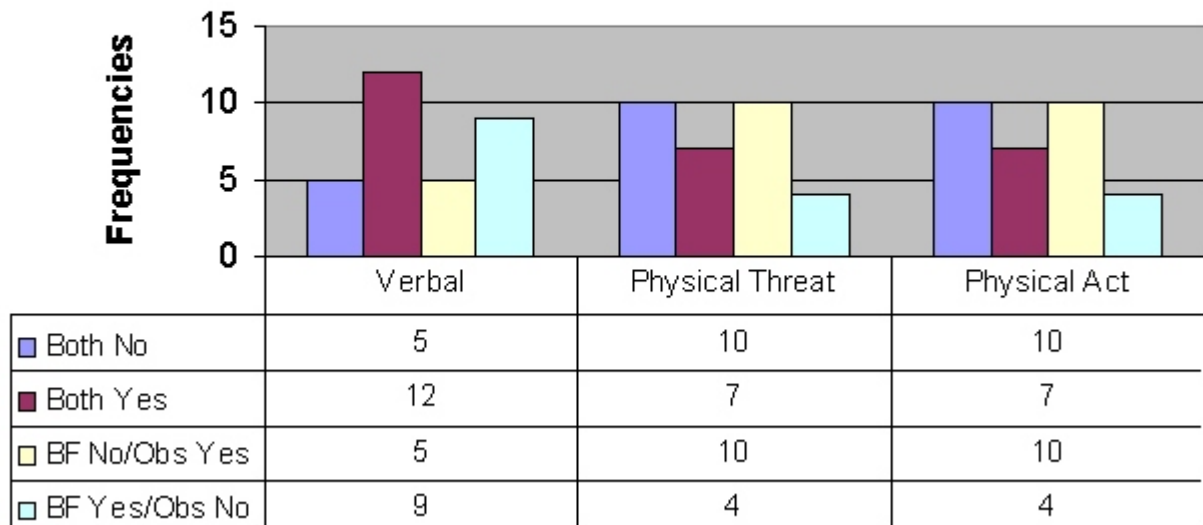


Figure 9 & 10

### Boyfriends' Reports of Girlfriend Aggression and Observed Verbal Aggression



### Boyfriends' Reports of Girlfriend Aggression and Observed Physical Aggression

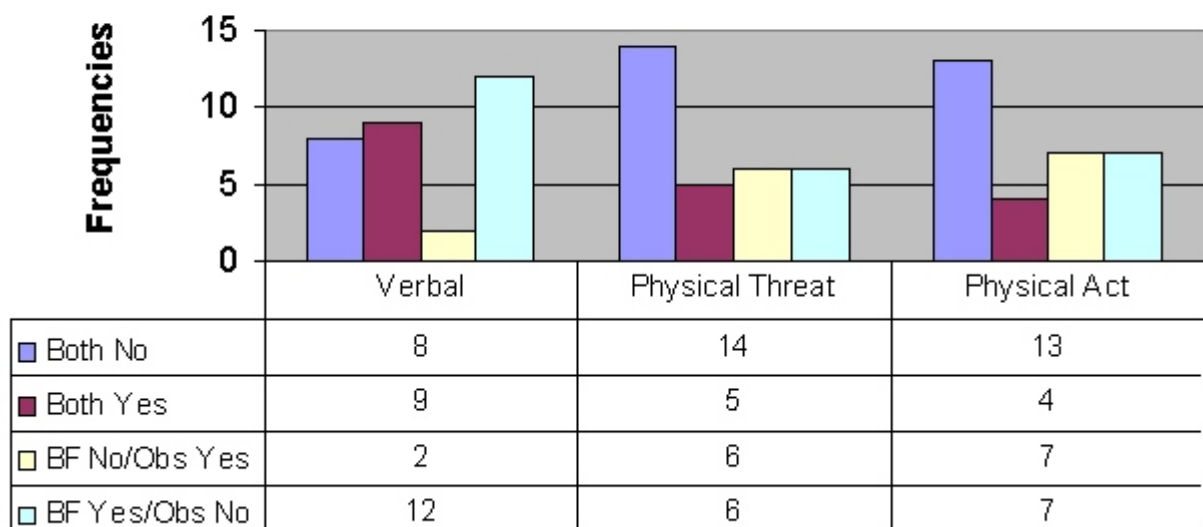


Figure 11 & 12

## Discussion

Boyfriends and girlfriends, boyfriends and Observers, and girlfriends and Observers show relatively high agreement about which boys use aggressive tactics during conflicts with their romantic partners. Despite the finding that all reporters agree that girls engage in similar or *higher* levels of aggression in conflicts with their partners, there is no consensus about *which* girls use aggressive tactics.

Future research should examine at least three different hypotheses about the source of reporter disagreement about girls' use of aggression:

- *The meaning of behavior.* Like teasing, low-level aggression can be interpreted in several ways. For example, a typical interaction observed in the laboratory was a girl repeatedly poking and hitting her partner when she was frustrated or agitated by the conversation. These acts often evoked annoyance or wincing from their boyfriends. The boys often asked their girlfriends to 'cut it out' or physically restrained their girlfriends' hands to stop their behavior, but only rarely expressed real pain. Although girls may have interpreted their own behavior as 'teasing', and thus not thought of it or reported it as 'hitting', boys may have felt differently. Observers certainly would have coded it as physical aggression.
- *Instrumental v. expressive aggression.* It is possible that low-level instrumental aggression is more likely to be interpreted as 'hitting', 'pushing', or 'slapping' than expressive aggression. In the previous interaction description, girls' acts appeared to be expressions of emotion. Boys' constraining behaviors were instrumental, in that they were designed to stop their girlfriends' behaviors. The observed aggression of boyfriends against girlfriends appeared to be similarly instrumental, in that every observed instance was evoked by physical aggression by the girlfriend and appeared to have the aim of stopping the girlfriends' aggression through threatened physical retaliation. Differences in the interpretation and reporting of instrumental and expressive aggression may contribute to low inter-reporter reliabilities.
- *Norms and stereotypes: Girls don't hit. Boys don't hit girls.* There are strong norms constraining 'good' boys from hitting girls, 'good' girls from being aggressive, and 'real' boys from being hit by their girlfriends. Unwillingness by some girls to admit that they act aggressively and some boys to admit that they are the victims of girlfriend aggression may also contribute to low inter-reporter reliabilities.