

## Gender Differences in Playful Aggression During Courtship in College Students

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The current study explored gender differences in college students' definitions and enjoyment of playful force and aggression. Ninety-six female and 55 male college students who were predominantly White (96%) and heterosexual (97%) answered questions about playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times. A content analysis showed that the current definitions were very similar to those for children's rough-and-tumble play. However, a qualitative analysis found several potential gender differences. Physically aggressive men appeared to give aggressive definitions of playful force during sex. In addition, there was some disagreement among participants as to the acceptability of playful force during sex. Finally, there may be gender differences in the assumed agency of playful force and aggression.

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**KEY WORDS:** playful aggression; courtship violence; sexual aggression; rough-and-tumble play.

Gender is an important factor in understanding relationship violence (Bograd, 1990). Gender influences college students' views of aggressive acts (e.g., Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, O'Leary, & Slep, 1999). For example, women believe acts of sexual force are more serious than men do (Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2003). Women are also less likely than men to see the use of aggression in intimate relationships as justified (e.g., Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991; Saunders, Lynch, Grayson, & Linz, 1987). In addition, there are gender differences in the perceived motives for courtship violence and its perceived effects (Follingstad et al., 1991). Furthermore, the gender of the victim also influences the interpretation of aggression (e.g., Bethke & DeJoy, 1993; Miller & Simpson, 1991).

Thus, gender has an important influence on the interpretation of relationship violence. In addition, research shows that men's misinterpretations of women's behavior can increase the possibility of date rape (Abbey, 1991; Shea, 1993). Physical ag-

gression might also result from gender differences in the interpretations of ambiguous behavior. This is likely because physical aggression is often reciprocated in kind (e.g., Clark, Beckett, Wells, & Dungee-Anderson, 1994; Stets & Henderson, 1991). One potential cause of unintentional harm could be the use of playful aggression. That is, individuals may use an aggressive act (e.g., hitting, pushing, wrestling, or restraining) in a playful manner, one that is not intended to harm their partner. However, their partner may not recognize or accept their definition of playfulness and their partner may retaliate with physical aggression.

Research has shown that young adults acknowledge engaging in playful force and aggression in their relationships (e.g., Baxter, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Ryan, 1998). Moreover, Ryan (1995, 1998) found that playful force was associated with sexual and physical aggression in dating relationships in college students. She assessed sexual aggression with the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) and physical aggression with the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979). She asked men, "Do you like to use a little 'playful force' when you have sex?" and found that their answers significantly discriminated their use of courtship violence

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(Cohen's  $d = .59$  and  $.51$  in two participant samples). Aggressors were more likely than non-aggressors to acknowledge a preference for playful force during sex (Ryan, 1995). This difference was replicated in a later study with physically and sexually aggressive college women and sexually aggressive college men (Ryan, 1998).

In addition, Gergen (1990) found that playful aggression was associated with aggression in both same-sex and other-sex relationships. She asked college students about their involvement with a list of playful and non-playful acts of aggression "either with a boy or a girlfriend, or with a close same-sex friend" (p. 384). She found relatively higher levels of playful than non-playful aggression in men and women. The most commonly mentioned playfully aggressive acts were playfully shoving, punching, throwing, slapping, and hurting during play. In addition, participants were more likely to say they playfully slapped and pinched members of the other sex, and men were more likely than women to say they playfully punched and shoved members of the same sex. Moreover, Gergen found that playful aggression was positively associated with alcohol use and going steady in young people.

Baxter (1992) found intimate play in both same-sex and other-sex relations in college students. She found that playful aggression constituted 12% of play instances described in open-ended interviews on play. She noted that it "typically involved mock fighting in the form of hitting, wrestling, or stealing activity" (p. 347). Baxter found that this was more common in other-sex romantic relationships than in same-sex friendships. She also found that playfulness in general positively correlated with relationship closeness.

Capaldi and Crosby (1997) found that much of the physical aggression observed in participant couples' videotaped problem solving tasks was playful. The term "playful" was utilized as a descriptor when physical force was not greater than the level of "firm touch." In addition, although coded as "physical," some of the observed aggression appeared to be part of a pattern of sexual intimacy. When aggression was committed by young women, it appeared to be an attention getting device to arouse the young man's interest and engage him physically.

Playful aggression in children is usually called "rough-and-tumble play." A review of nine studies on rough-and-tumble play in childhood shows the most commonly described activities are chasing, play fighting, and hitting (e.g., Boulton, 1991a,

1991b; Humphreys & Smith, 1987, 1986; Neill, 1976; Pellegrini, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1992). Wrestling, push/pulling, and grabbing are also commonly mentioned, as well as teasing, joking, pouncing, kicking, carrying, and sneaking up. In addition, rough-and-tumble play is differentiated from non-playful aggression by the presence of a "play face" (i.e., a neutral or happy facial expression) (Boulton, 1991b). Moreover, the intents of the two types of aggression are distinct. In rough-and-tumble play, socially-interactive participants tend to show more reciprocal turn-taking and engage in a greater variety of actions for a longer period of time (Boulton, 1991b).

Gender appears to influence children's motives for rough-and-tumble play. Research shows two major motives, dominance and affiliation (Smith & Boulton, 1990), although a third motive (practicing fighting skills) has also been suggested (Pellegrini, 2002). Pellegrini (2003) believes that adolescent boys may use aggressive play to show dominance, whereas adolescent girls may use playful aggression as a "low-risk form of heterosexual interaction" (p. 1531). In addition, Capaldi and Crosby (1997) suggest that young women may use aggression as a way of getting attention. Furthermore, the motives for playful aggression may also be different in popular (affiliation motives) and unpopular boys (dominance motives) (Pellegrini, 1989c) and dominance motives may increase as children get older (Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Pellegrini, 2003).

The current study explored gender differences in playful aggression. We assessed college students' enjoyment of playful force and aggression and their definitions of playful force and aggression. We also assessed physical and sexual aggression in their relationships to see if gender interacted with aggressiveness in influencing participants' playfully aggressive beliefs and behavior. It was predicted that gender and relationship aggressiveness would influence participants' definitions and enjoyment of playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 151 students (96 women, 55 men) from two liberal arts colleges responded to the questionnaire. Most were in psychology classes ( $n = 117$ ). However, a small number of participants ( $n = 34$ ) responded to the questionnaire when asked to do so by a fellow student. Participants were from a variety of

majors. The average age was 19.76, the age range was 17–33, and 88% were between 18 and 21. Most were heterosexual (97%) and White (96%). Sixty-two percent were currently dating. If they were not currently dating, they were asked to answer the questions with regard to their most recent dating experience. The average length of their relationships was 17 months (the range was from less than 1 month to more than 10 years). The majority of participants were dating their current partner from 2 months to 4 years (89%).

## Measures

Participants were asked to respond to a series of questionnaires. The first questionnaire consisted of several open-ended and Likert scale questions about playful force during sex and other playful aggression, as well as several questions that are not included in the current analyses. It began with the terms “WOMEN” or “MEN” on the top and the instructions followed:

The following is a survey which you are asked to fill out as honestly as possible. Your answers to this survey will be anonymous and confidential. Carefully read each item and respond. If you are not currently involved in a relationship please answer using the most recent relationship you were involved in. For the open-ended questions, please PRINT neatly and do not use any distinguishing marks because some of these answers may be read and coded by other psychology students.

Participants were asked “Do you like to use a little playful force when you have sex?” and “Do you enjoy playful aggression at other times?” These were answered: 1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*, 4 = *usually*, or 5 = *always*. The open-ended questions asked: “What do you consider to be ‘playful force?’” “What do you consider to be ‘playful aggression?’” “How do you know the force/aggression is playful?” and “How do you know when the force/aggression is *not* playful?” Participants were also asked to circle a yes or no response to the following question: “Are playful force and playful aggression the same thing?” And then asked, “If no, why not?”

### *The Coding Scheme*

A coding scheme was developed based on a survey of research on rough-and-tumble play and a preliminary examination of the participants’ responses. Because of considerable overlap in some re-

sponses to the questions, the same coding scheme was used for all four open-ended questions, and results for the open-ended questions were combined. The responses were coded into 42 categories, which were grouped under the general terms: physical acts (11 categories), facial and vocal expressions (9 categories), a mutual understanding (6 categories), and outcome (2 categories). There was also a missing category and a category labeled other. For the purpose of this article, categories that were mentioned by five or fewer participants were not included in the results. These categories were chasing, ripping clothes, arguments, obscenities, verbal and emotional abuse, crying, threats, a challenge, punishment or blackmail, sexual force, small sexual force, and sexual arousal (the total number of responses eliminated this way was 23). In addition, if there were multiple acts of the same type (e.g., the participant said “horseplay” and “playfully slap”), only the first act was coded.

Physical acts described a variety of behaviors: wrestling, tickling, restraining, push/pulling, aggression (e.g., roughness, non-playful hitting), small aggression (e.g., light taps, pinching), horseplay (e.g., play fight, fake punches), general acts (e.g., being physical, touching), force (e.g., forceful actions, in a forceful manner), sex acts (e.g., oral sex, sex), and positive physical acts (e.g., gentle, cuddle). Facial and vocal expressions included a mean voice, the presence or absence of objections, teasing, laughter, general verbal cues (e.g., squeals, gets quiet, talking), general nonverbal cues (e.g., body language), the face, positive emotions, and negative emotions. Mutual understanding involved whether the aggression was thought to be intentional or unintentional, whether the victim was or was not in control, a mutual agreement (e.g., both people want it, both initiate), and loving/trust. Outcomes were coded as the presence or absence of harm (e.g., pain, injury).

For the content analysis, the second author coded all of the participants’ responses. Both authors coded the four open-ended responses from the first 30 participants (206 responses) and achieved 82% agreement. The Cohen’s Kappa was .89.

### *The Qualitative Analysis*

The typed transcripts used for the content analysis also were used in a qualitative analysis; however, the participant’s gender and aggression status were noted. The first author reviewed the typed transcripts of the participants’ responses to the four open-ended

questions in the content analysis plus their response to the question "Are playful force and playful aggression the same thing? If no, why not?" Responses to the latter question were included in the qualitative analysis because they often gave some insight into the participants' thoughts concerning the distinguishing features of playful force and playful aggression.

The constant comparative method suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used. A three-stage approach was taken: careful reading of the text, coding of the data, and analysis of the textual data (Charmaz, 2003; Willig, 2003). An attempt was made to find themes that were specific to each gender/aggression group and themes that crossed the gender/aggression groupings. After the major themes emerged, specific examples were drawn from the participants' exact words (with misspellings and abbreviations intact). In these quotes, semicolons were used to denote a new line of text. Finally, an undergraduate student who did not participate in the original study was asked to review all of the textual data, and she confirmed the representativeness of the major themes in the current analysis.

### *The Aggression Measures*

The CTS (Straus, 1979) was used to assess physical aggression in relationships. (Victimization data were also collected but were not used in the current analyses.) The CTS measures a variety of responses to arguments in the past year, including eight physically aggressive acts. These acts are: threw something at; pushed, grabbed, or shoved; slapped; kicked, bit, or hit with a fist; hit or tried to hit with something; beat up; threatened with a knife or gun; and used a knife or gun. All were rated on a scale from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*).

Sexual aggression was assessed by the SES (Koss et al., 1987). In the current study, the SES also referred to acts committed in the past year with one's boyfriend or girlfriend. The SES was reworded for female participants to ask about their perpetration of sexual force with their boyfriend, for example, "Have you had sexual acts (anal or oral intercourse) with your boyfriend when he did not want to because you threatened or used some degree of physical force (twisting his arm, holding him down, etc.) to make him?" (Victimization data were also collected but they were not used in the current analyses).

Only those acts that involved the use of threats, physical force, or alcohol to gain sexual access when their partner did not want to have sex were included

as sexual aggression in the present study: sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse) with threats or force, attempted intercourse with threats or force, attempted intercourse with alcohol or drugs, sexual intercourse with alcohol or drugs, sexual intercourse with threats or force, and anal or oral intercourse with threats or force. Responses to both aggression measures were dichotomized to yield two groups of respondents for each measure, those who showed no physical (or sexual) aggression and those who showed some physical (or sexual) aggression in their relationship in the past year.

### **Procedure**

Most of the participants responded to the questionnaire in their psychology class. Some received extra credit for their participation. A small number of participants responded to the questionnaire when asked to do so by a fellow student. They were asked to do so privately, and they mailed their responses to the first author.

All of the respondents were given instructions that participation was voluntary. Complete honesty was requested, as well as conscientiousness with regard to answering all of the questions (so that some full-scale scores could be calculated). Participants were told their responses would be anonymous and confidential, so no identifying information was to be placed on the questionnaires. And, they were cautioned to print their responses to the open-ended questions, so they could not be identified by writing style. For the content analysis, the open-ended responses were typed verbatim by a secretary and coded with no information present other than an ID number. Information about gender and aggressiveness was added to these transcripts for the qualitative analysis.

### **RESULTS**

Descriptive data show the ranges, means, and standard deviations for the enjoyment of playful aggression questions, the standardized aggression measures, and the number of definitions provided by male and female participants (see Table I). Most individuals enjoyed playful force and playful aggression between 2 (*sometimes*) and 3 (*often*) on a 5-point scale. On the CTS, there was a relatively wide distribution of physical aggression. The modal aggressive response was 1 (9 individuals). However, several

**Table I.** The Ranges, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Playful and Non-playful Aggression Measures and the Number of Definitions Provided by Men and Women

|                                | Men ( <i>n</i> = 41–54) | Women ( <i>n</i> = 77–96) | Total ( <i>n</i> = 118–150) |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Enjoy playful force (1–5)      | 2.41 (1.04)             | 2.00 (.87)                | 2.16 (.96)                  |
| Enjoy playful aggression (1–5) | 2.46 (.98)              | 2.22 (.88)                | 2.31 (.93)                  |
| Physical aggression (0–48)     | 1.43 (7.13)             | 2.48 (4.40)               | 2.10 (5.54)                 |
| Sexual aggression (0–6)        | .29 (1.05)              | .10 (.42)                 | .17 (.71)                   |
| Number of definitions (0–16)   | 6.43 (2.90)             | 6.56 (2.78)               | 6.51 (2.81)                 |

individuals had scores from 2 to 19, and one person had a score of 48. In addition, most individuals who used sexual aggression used one sexually aggressive act. However, one individual acknowledged 3 and one acknowledged all 6 sexually aggressive acts.

On the aggression measures, results showed that women (42%) were more likely than men (13%) to say they used as least one physically aggressive act with their partner in the last year,  $\chi^2(1) = 11.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, men (12%) were not significantly more likely than women (6%) to say they used at least one sexually aggressive act with their partner in the last year,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.12$ ,  $p > .10$ . In addition, most men (91%) and women (84%) said they liked playful aggression at least sometimes,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.21$ ,  $p > .10$ , whereas marginally fewer women (71%) than men (86%) said they enjoyed playful force during sex at least sometimes,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.56$ ,  $p = .06$ .

There was no significant gender difference in whether individuals thought that playful force and playful aggression were the same,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.89$ ,  $p = .09$ . Most men (65%) and women (51%) said they thought they were the same thing.

### The Content Analysis

Results of the four major open-ended questions were combined for the content analysis (i.e., What do you consider to be “playful force”? What do you consider to be “playful aggression”? How do you know the force/aggression is playful? And how do you know when the force/aggression is *not* playful?). Because of the nature of the open-ended data (e.g., the large number of categories used), statistical tests were not performed (see Table II). Approximately one-half of the coded responses were physical acts. The most commonly stated physical acts were aggression (e.g., hitting, roughness, physical abuse), wrestling, restraining, horseplay, sex acts (e.g., oral sex), push/pulling, force, small aggression (e.g., light taps, pinching), positive physical acts (e.g., cuddle, kiss), and tickling. Moreover, restraining (75%), ag-

gression (55%), and sex acts (60%) were suggested more for the question on playful force during sex than for the question about playful aggression at other times (23%, 35%, and 40%, respectively). In contrast, wrestling (79%) and horseplay (71%) were suggested more for playful aggression at other times than for playful force during sex (21% each).

In addition, in determining whether an act was playfully aggressive, respondents reported that they considered intentionality, victim control, harm, negative or positive emotions, laughter, mutual agreement, objections, and facial expressions (see Table II). Finally, men and women generally used the same categories in describing playful force and aggression.

### The Qualitative Analysis

An examination of the specific language used by the participants in response to the open-ended questions revealed several potential insights into their understanding of playful force and playful aggression. The context of the participants' discourse included several assumptions on the part of the researchers. The questions assumed that participants had been in a dating relationship and that they would be able to define the terms “playful force during sex” and “playful aggression at other times.” Furthermore, because a question asked whether playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times were the same thing, participants might have assumed that this was an important issue to the researchers. In addition, the questions concerning playful force during sex could have implied that the participants had sex. Finally, the terms “WOMEN” and “MEN” at the top of the forms may have indicated to the participants that the researchers were potentially interested in gender.

The first major theme concerned whether participants tended to concentrate on “play” or on “force and aggression” in their definitions of playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times. Most participants focused on “play” in describing

**Table II.** The Percentage of Coded Open-ended Responses by Males, Females, and All Participants

|   | % of males'<br>definitions<br>( <i>N</i> = 265) | % of females'<br>definitions<br>( <i>N</i> = 531) | % of participants'<br>definitions<br>( <i>N</i> = 796) |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Physical acts (<i>n</i> = 386)</b>   |   |   |  |
| Wrestling ( <i>n</i> = 62)  | 6   | 9   | 8  |
| Tickling ( <i>n</i> = 18)   | 2   | 2   | 2  |
| Restraining ( <i>n</i> = 52)  | 9   | 5   | 6  |
| Push/pulling ( <i>n</i> = 29)   | 2   | 4   | 4  |
| Aggression ( <i>n</i> = 71)   | 10  | 8   | 9  |
| Small aggression ( <i>n</i> = 21)   | 2   | 3   | 3  |
| Horseplay ( <i>n</i> = 38)  | 3   | 5   | 5  |
| General acts ( <i>n</i> = 17)   | 3   | 2   | 2  |
| Force ( <i>n</i> = 23)  | 5   | 2   | 3  |
| Sex acts ( <i>n</i> = 35)   | 8   | 2   | 4  |
| Positive physical acts ( <i>n</i> = 20)   | 3   | 2   | 2  |
| Total percentage of physical acts   | 52  | 46  | 48   |
| <b>Facial/vocal expressions (<i>n</i> = 204)</b>  |   |   |  |
| Mean voice ( <i>n</i> = 7)  | 0   | 1   | 1  |
| Objections (or not) ( <i>n</i> = 19)  | 4   | 2   | 2  |
| Teasing ( <i>n</i> = 8)   | 1   | 1   | 1  |
| Laughter ( <i>n</i> = 36)   | 4   | 5   | 4  |
| General nonverbal ( <i>n</i> = 6)   | 0   | 1   | 1  |
| Facial expression ( <i>n</i> = 19)  | 2   | 3   | 2  |
| Positive emotions ( <i>n</i> = 37)  | 7   | 4   | 5  |
| Negative emotions ( <i>n</i> = 49)  | 7   | 6   | 6  |
| General verbal ( <i>n</i> = 23)   | 3   | 3   | 3  |
| Total percentage of facial/vocal expressions  | 28  | 24  | 26   |
| <b>Mutual understanding (<i>n</i> = 149)</b>  |   |   |  |
| Not intentional ( <i>n</i> = 50)  | 3   | 8   | 6  |
| Intentional ( <i>n</i> = 15)  | 2   | 2   | 2  |
| Victim in control ( <i>n</i> = 21)  | 3   | 2   | 3  |
| Victim not in control ( <i>n</i> = 29)  | 3   | 4   | 4  |
| Mutual agreement ( <i>n</i> = 23)   | 3   | 3   | 3  |
| Loving/trust ( <i>n</i> = 11)   | 0   | 2   | 1  |
| Total percentage of mutual understanding  | 15  | 20  | 19   |
| <b>Outcome (<i>n</i> = 57)</b>  |   |   |  |
| Lack of harm ( <i>n</i> = 34)   | 3   | 5   | 4  |
| Harm ( <i>n</i> = 23)   | 1   | 4   | 3  |
| Total percentage of outcome   | 4   | 8   | 7  |
|   | Males   | Females   | All participants                                       |
| Total number of coded definitions   | 265   | 531   | 796  |
| Missing definitions ( <i>n</i> = 36)  | 15  | 21  | 36   |
| Other ( <i>n</i> = 115) (e.g., "don't know," question restatements, and uncodeable responses) | 51  | 64  | 115  |

playful force and aggression. For example, one woman described playful aggression as "teasing verbally, lightly hitting, pushing, playing, tugging, wrestling, etc., but not ever harming the other person physically or psychologically" (P#36). Another woman described playful force as "—a little aggression and strength; —*nothing* painful or harmful in any way" and playful aggression as "—*play* wrestling, 'rough housing,' running around, 'punching' (more like nudging)" (P#52). Finally, one man described

playful force as "pushing gently on bed, hard tickling, strong hugging etc., wrestling" and playful aggression as "teasing, joking, tickling, wrestling" (P#56). As previously noted, most responses focused on "play."

In contrast, fewer participants focused on force and/or aggression. Examples of non-playful force include: "ripping off clothes, grabbing" (P#68); "grabbing, holding person down" (P#6); "spanking, pushing, throwing" (P#111); and "biting, pulling hair, piercing the body" (P#27). There were even

fewer descriptions of non-playful aggression. Two examples are “hitting, biting” (P#68) and “occasionally pushing, slapping, punching each other” (P#45). Nevertheless, some physically aggressive men tended to incorporate substantial aggression into their definitions, especially their definitions of playful force during sex. For example, physically aggressive men said that playful force was “ripping clothes off, tying up partner” (P#23); “ass spanking, hair pulling, anal play, and hand cuffs” (P#24); “rough, almost sadistic behavior toward each other” (P#84); and “shoving, hair pulling, quick forceful movements of the arms and legs, coaxed sex or petting in public” (P#141). One physically and sexually aggressive man even suggested that playful force during sex involved “ripping clothes off partner, tying arms and legs up to bed and have sex all night using the shocker. I use many sexual positions that cause harm including forced anal sex” (P#22). Two physically aggressive men also described playful aggression aggressively, one as “spanking and hair pulling, finger up ass” (P#23) and the other as “very aggressive at play-time” (P#84).

In addition, physically aggressive men appeared to have more difficulty in knowing whether or not the behavior was playful. For example, one participant said “you don’t” in response to both of these questions (P#84) and one suggested that you “do not know (it’s not playful) until other person responds negatively” (P#54). Others said they only knew it was not playful “when I receive two eyes full of fear” (P#141) or “when she is screaming and crying” (P#23). And, one physically aggressive man suggested that he knew it was not playful only when “It makes me feel bad” (P#22).

The second theme involves the discourse of rape. Although a few participants thought that playful aggression was more serious than playful force, most saw them as similar or believed that playful force was more serious. Some participants noted that playful force during sex connoted the possibility of sexual force and they suggested that this was unacceptable. This theme was more often found in women’s responses. For example, when asked to describe playful force, one woman said “I don’t feel that there is playful force” (P#8). Another suggested that “ANYTHING associated with the word force. Is NOT playful” (P#41). She later said “I view playful force as being dangerous, whereas playful aggression in my mind, at least, is joking around, something you would do with friends.” And, when asked whether playful force and aggression were the same,

one woman said “playful force may lead to sexual assault” and she knew the behavior was not playful “when there is any verbal or other indication to stop ex. NO!” (P#21).

Other respondents also saw a clear distinction between playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times. This often revealed itself in their response to the question concerning whether playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times were the same thing. Examples from several female participants include: “force is doing something you don’t want to, aggression is harmless” (P#1); “force is more violent than aggression” (P#3); “playful aggression involves simply forward or assertive behavior. Force is somewhat against my will” (P#5); “force is morso not really kidding around (intent), —playful agg [*sic*] is” (P#47); and “force is more dominating—maybe a step beyond aggression” (P#50). Two of the men agreed, saying “force is making my partner what I want” (P#77) and “force is making you do something you don’t want to—agression is more playful” (P#73).

The third theme concerns the agency of playful force and aggression. Perhaps because the open-ended questions were preceded by questions concerning the participants’ enjoyment of playful force and aggression and the last questions asked how they knew whether the behavior was or was not playful, many participants described their own personal beliefs and behavior. For example, when asked how they knew the force/aggression was playful, participants said: “We laugh and I do not get hurt” (P#123); “We’re laughing He stops when I tell him to” (P#136); “because I believe he would never hurt me—his father was an alcoholic in his early child he wouldn’t intentionally hurt someone like his father did” (P#120); and “I know because we are both consenting and enjoying ourselves. If one of us is uncomfortable we tell the other and then we stop” (P#98).

In describing how they knew the force/aggression was not playful, many participants said that the force/aggression was always playful. For example, “This question does not apply to my relationship” (P#107); “I don’t know that’s never happened” (P#20); and “I don’t... It has always been playful” (P#136).

Also embedded in these personal narratives are some assumptions about who is engaging in the playful behavior. Some suggest that they are the actors, some suggest that they are the recipients, and still others suggest that the playful behaviors are mutual. Finally, some participants shift in agency. For

example, in response to one question, they could reply as an actor and in response to another, they could reply as the recipient.

Most “actors” tended to be male. For example, when asked to define playful force during sex, men said “keeping my partner from moving without hurting her” (P#150); “Holding hands together not letting her move” (P#148); and “She does what I want her to” (P#29). One man said, “She likes me to be dominate. It turns her on to be told what to do during sex,” and later he said “It is never ‘not’ playful. I would never use force or aggression to hurt my girlfriend” (P#88).

In contrast, the vast majority of the “recipients” of playful behavior were female. For example, when asked how she knew whether the behavior was or was not playful, one female participant said she knew it was playful “if you’re letting him do it and it’s okay with you and there isn’t bodily harm being done,” and it was not playful “if he won’t stop it if you ask him to. It starts to really hurt you” (P#119). Another said she knew it was playful when “We’re laughing He stops when I tell him to” (P#136). In addition, two women described playful behavior as deceptive. One said that playful force was when “the person wants you to think he is playing, but he is really forcing you to do things you don’t want to” and playful aggression is “being aggressive in any way, while trying to give you the impression he is just playing” (P#10). Another woman gave a similar definition of playful force, as “when someone thinks that they are kidding but his acts make me uncomfortable”; however, she described playful aggression as “kidding around” (P#5). She later said that she knew the aggression was playful “if I don’t feel threatened and can stop the behavior if I feel uncomfortable.”

Some men and women gave descriptions of mutually playful behavior. For example, when asked how they knew that the behavior was playful, men

said “when you both are doing it and having fun doing it” (P#24); “the partner either giggles or returns the act— (if ‘don’t’ or ‘ow’ is said, it’s not)” (P#31); and “both people want it, enjoy it, and are having fun with it” (P#50). One woman described playful force as “\*tying each other up, but still able to get out if we wanted to” and playful aggression as “wrestling w/each other” (P#70). Similarly, another woman described playful force as “teasing, ‘fun’ aggression, control over each other” (P#46). And, when asked how she knew the force/aggression was playful, another woman said “we laugh and make sure we don’t truly hurt anyone” (P#45).

### Enjoyment of Playful Force and Aggression

To analyze the Likert scale questions, participants were grouped according to gender and whether or not they ever used physical (or sexual) aggression in their relationship in the past year. Two (gender)  $\times$  2 (physical aggression) ANOVAs were performed on the questions concerning preferences for a little playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times (see Table III). There were significant main effects for gender,  $F(1, 101) = 20.50, p < .001$ , and physical aggression,  $F(1, 101) = 15.64, p < .001$ , and a significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 101) = 7.90, p < .01$ , for the enjoyment of playful force during sex. Physically aggressive men said they liked a little playful force during sex more often than women and non-aggressive men did.

In order to make the error variances equal in the 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA on playful aggression at other times, a tenth root transformation was performed. Results showed significant main effects for gender,  $F(1, 122) = 4.88, p < .05$ , and physical aggression,  $F(1, 122) = 5.94, p < .05$ , on the enjoyment of playful aggression at other times, but the interaction was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 122) = 2.82, p = .10$ .

**Table III.** The Means (and Standard Deviations) for the Interaction between Physical Aggression and Gender on the Enjoyment of Playful Force and Playful Aggression

|   | Men                                       | Women                                    | All participants                          |
|---|---|--|---|
| Physical aggression and the enjoyment of playful force during sex |   |  |   |
| Physically aggressive   | 3.80 <sup>a</sup> (1.30) ( <i>n</i> = 5)  | 2.06 <sup>b</sup> (.96) ( <i>n</i> = 31) | 2.31 <sup>a</sup> (1.17) ( <i>n</i> = 36) |
| Not aggressive  | 2.20 <sup>b</sup> (.87) ( <i>n</i> = 35)  | 1.79 <sup>b</sup> (.73) ( <i>n</i> = 34) | 2.00 <sup>b</sup> (.82) ( <i>n</i> = 69)  |
| All participants  | 2.40 <sup>a</sup> (1.06) ( <i>n</i> = 40) | 1.92 <sup>b</sup> (.85) ( <i>n</i> = 65) |   |
| Physical aggression and the enjoyment of playful aggression       |   |  |   |
| Physically aggressive   | 3.33 (1.51) ( <i>n</i> = 6)               | 2.32 (.77) ( <i>n</i> = 34)              | 2.48 <sup>a</sup> (.96) ( <i>n</i> = 40)  |
| Not aggressive  | 2.28 (.76) ( <i>n</i> = 39)               | 2.21 (.93) ( <i>n</i> = 47)              | 2.24 <sup>b</sup> (.85) ( <i>n</i> = 86)  |
| All participants  | 2.42 <sup>a</sup> (.94) ( <i>n</i> = 45)  | 2.26 <sup>b</sup> (.86) ( <i>n</i> = 81) |   |

*Note.* Means with different superscripts are significantly different.



**Table IV.** The Means (and Standard Deviations) for the Interaction between Sexual Aggression and Gender on the Enjoyment of Playful Force and Playful Aggression

|   | Men                          | Women                       | All participants                         |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Sexual aggression and the enjoyment of playful force during sex |                              |                             |  |
| Sexually aggressive   | 3.00 (1.41) ( <i>n</i> = 4)  | 2.60 (.89) ( <i>n</i> = 5)  | 2.78 <sup>a</sup> (1.09) ( <i>n</i> = 9) |
| Not aggressive  | 2.39 (.99) ( <i>n</i> = 31)  | 1.89 (.80) ( <i>n</i> = 56) | 2.07 <sup>b</sup> (.90) ( <i>n</i> = 87) |
| All participants  | 2.46 (1.04) ( <i>n</i> = 35) | 1.95 (.82) ( <i>n</i> = 61) |  |
| Sexual aggression and the enjoyment of playful aggression       |                              |                             |  |
| Sexually aggressive   | 3.20 (1.30) ( <i>n</i> = 5)  | 2.20 (.45) ( <i>n</i> = 5)  | 2.70 (1.06) ( <i>n</i> = 10)             |
| Not aggressive  | 2.31 (.87) ( <i>n</i> = 35)  | 2.25 (.88) ( <i>n</i> = 72) | 2.27 (.88) ( <i>n</i> = 107)             |
| All participants  | 2.43 (.96) ( <i>n</i> = 40)  | 2.25 (.86) ( <i>n</i> = 77) |  |

Note. Means with different superscripts are significantly different.

However, the means in Table III suggest a tendency for physically aggressive men to say they were more likely than the other participants to enjoy playful aggression.

Two (gender)  $\times$  2 (sexual aggression) ANOVAs were also performed on the questions concerning participants' preferences for a little playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times (see Table IV). There was a significant main effect for sexual aggression on the enjoyment of playful force during sex,  $F(1, 92) = 4.34, p < .05$ , but no significant gender main effect,  $F(1, 92) = 1.99, p > .10$ , and no significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 92) = .02, p > .10$ . Sexually aggressive participants enjoyed a little playful force during sex more often than non-sexually aggressive participants. For the question about playful aggression at other times, there was a marginally significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 113) = 3.26, p = .07$ , a nonsignificant main effect for sexual aggression,  $F(1, 113) = 2.01, p > .10$ , and a nonsignificant interaction,  $F(1, 113) = 2.52, p > .10$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present study explored a gray area in relationship violence: playful force and aggression in dating relationships. Previous research showed that college students (both men and women) said they enjoyed playful force during sex and acknowledged engaging in acts that could be described as non-sexual playful aggression (e.g., Gergen, 1990; Ryan, 1998). The current study found a similar pattern of results. Participants were more likely to acknowledge enjoying a little playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times than to report having used sexual or physical aggression as assessed by the CTS and SES.

Furthermore, the content analysis showed that college students described their own playful force

and aggression in a manner that was very similar to children's rough-and-tumble play (e.g., wrestling, restraining, horseplay, laughter). In addition, it showed few gender differences. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis revealed several possible gender differences that should be explored in future research.

First, the physically aggressive men in the current study appeared to be more aggressive in their definitions of playful force during sex, and they seemed to have some difficulty distinguishing between playful and non-playful force and aggression. Moreover, physically aggressive men enjoyed playful force during sex significantly more than women and non-physically aggressive men. It is possible that their responses to the open-ended questions could have reflected these participants' disdain for the study and its topic. It is also possible that physically aggressive men enjoy playful force and aggression more than non-aggressive men and they define playful force during sex and playful aggression more aggressively than non-aggressive men do. Past research on children suggests that aggressive boys use playful aggression to disguise aggressive intentions (Pellegrini, 2002). It also suggests that some aggressive children have difficulty distinguishing between playful and non-playful aggression. The current results imply that this pattern may continue into young adulthood and into romantic relationships.

A second possible gender difference concerns the issue of playful force during sex and the discourse of rape. Can force ever be playful during sex? It appears that there may be substantial disagreement on this issue. It is interesting to note that 29% of the women and 14% of the men in the current study said that they never liked to use a little playful force during sex. Moreover, some individuals (usually women) contended that any force during sex, however playful, may lead to sexual aggression. One could infer that they believe that playful force during sex should

be prohibited. This potential gender difference in views of playful force during sex is supported by research that shows that women believe that sexual force is a more serious transgression than men do (Hilton et al., 2003).

In contrast, others found playful force during sex to be acceptable and enjoyable within certain constraints. They appear to suggest that playful force and aggression are playful only when both partners agree, when both are enjoying the behavior, and/or when the recipient of the playful force or aggression can control his or her partner's behavior. Moreover, force and aggression are playful only in the absence of negative emotions or harm. Thus, the current study reveals a potential disagreement about the use of playful force during sex and suggests that young adults may be relatively sophisticated in their analyses of the dynamics of playful force and aggression.

The third pattern found in the qualitative analysis concerned potential gender differences in the agency of playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times. It suggests that men may be more likely to be the agents of playful force and aggression and women may be more likely to be the recipients. Moreover, this could explain some of the gender differences in the enjoyment of playful force and aggression. Perhaps those who initiate playful force or aggression enjoy it more than those who receive these overtures.

There also may be gender differences in the motives for engaging in playful force and aggression. Research shows gender differences in the perceived motives for courtship violence (Follingstad et al., 1991). Men may use playful force and aggression for demonstrations of dominance and physical strength, whereas women may use playful force and aggression for affiliation (e.g., flirting, cuddling). Moreover, the interpretation of the motives for playful force and aggression may be a key to understanding individuals' responses to playful overtures. Perhaps those who believe playful force during sex should be prohibited perceive dominance motives in playful force, whereas those who believe playful force during sex is acceptable perceive affiliation motives.

Even within individuals, there may be mixed motives for engaging in playful force and aggression. An effort should be made to address both conscious and unconscious motivation in future research. Unconscious motives may be assessed by presenting individuals with different outcomes of playful force and aggression (e.g., your partner defers to you, your partner recognizes that you are stronger than them,

your partner likes you, you have intercourse, you try a new sexual act, etc.) and having them rate outcome satisfaction.

Finally, two limitations in the current study should be noted. One limitation is that it assessed aggression on the CTS and SES using the same questions for men and women. It is possible that men and women interpret these questions differently. For example, what does it mean when a woman acknowledges that she had sexual intercourse with her boyfriend when he did not want to because she gave him alcohol or drugs? She may be describing a different dynamic than a man who acknowledges doing the same thing with his girlfriend.

Another limitation may be the current population of participants. Most participants in this study were female, White, and heterosexual. Would the same definitions of playful force and aggression be found in other ethnic/racial, cultural, and sexual groups? Would there also be a relationship between playful and non-playful aggression in these groups? Moreover, the participant sample in the current study was in a very restricted age range (18–21). Courtship behaviors may be somewhat different in younger adolescents and older adults.

Nevertheless, the current findings may have practical implications for violence and rape prevention curricula. For example, a portion of programming could be devoted to instruction about the role of playful force during sex and playful aggression at other times in relationships, including both positive and negative aspects. Programs could compare participants' definitions regarding where to "draw the line" in aggressive play to establish social standards, as well as discuss the appropriateness of these behaviors. In addition, asking participants to elaborate on personal definitions of playful and non-playful aggression could be helpful in assessing their likelihood of engaging in violent or aggressive behaviors, as individuals with more violent definitions of playful force may be more likely to engage in relationship force and aggression. Finally, talking about major motives for playful force and aggression, such as dominance and affiliation, may help participants to understand their own and their partners' perceptions of playfully aggressive behavior.

In conclusion, college students showed very similar definitions of playful force and aggression to those found for children, although they also showed several potential gender differences. For example, it appeared that aggressive men had more aggressive definitions of playful force during sex. In addition,

some women viewed playful force during sex negatively, perhaps because of its possible links to sexual aggression. Moreover, gender might influence the agency of playful force and aggression such that men see themselves as agents and women see themselves as recipients of this behavior. Future research should explore the meaning and the motives for playful force and aggression, taking into account participants' gender and relationship aggressiveness. In addition, future research could explore playful force and aggression in other populations, including middle-aged and older adults, ethnic/racial minority groups, homosexual couples, and wife batterers and rapists. Finally, future research must explore the issue of when playful force and aggression becomes non-playful and the characteristics of those individuals for whom this occurs.

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