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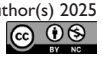

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Intimate Partner Violence and Perception of Partner Hostility During Conflict Among Young Adult Couples

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Abstract

Romantic partners can be both accurate and biased in their perception of each other's hostile behaviors. In perpetrators and victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), documented deficits in social cognition and hostile attributions could contribute to greater biases. The current study used the truth and bias model to examine accuracy and bias in perception of the partner's hostility during a conflict discussion among young adult couples, and the role of IPV perpetration and victimization in this perception. Young adult couples ($n = 178$) engaged in a video-recorded conflict discussion. Using a video-recall task, participants rated their own and their partner's hostility every 30 s of the discussion. Results of truth and bias analyses revealed that individuals accurately tracked fluctuations in their partner hostility (i.e., tracking accuracy) during the conflict discussion, but perceived their partner as more hostile when they themselves felt more hostile (i.e., projection). Regarding the role of IPV perpetration, physically violent individuals

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showed greater projection and sexually violent individuals overestimated (i.e., directional bias) their partner's hostility during the conflict discussion compared to nonviolent individuals. Regarding IPV victimization, individuals who experienced higher levels of psychological IPV overestimated their partner's hostility and showed greater tracking accuracy compared with individuals who experienced lower levels of psychological IPV. Victims of physical IPV showed greater tracking accuracy and lower projection than nonvictims. Victims of sexual IPV underestimated their partner's hostility and evidenced poorer tracking accuracy than nonvictims. These findings contribute to understand social information processing during conflict among young adult couples, according to their experience of violence.

Keywords
hostility, intimate partner violence, conflict, perception, truth and bias model

Most people who have been in a romantic relationship can recall conflictual interactions where they felt wrongly accused of being hostile by their partner. Many theoretical models of couple functioning converge on the postulate that partners interpret each other's behaviors through the lens of their respective internal representations or schemas about the self, others, and the world (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In distressed couples, maladaptive schemas are thought to further distort perceptions of the partner, especially in interpersonally stressful contexts such as conflicts (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Lebow & Snyder, 2023; Pietromonaco et al., 2004), and fuel destructive interaction patterns such as intimate partner violence (IPV; Holtzworth-Munroe, 1992; Senkans et al., 2020). Given that young adulthood is characterized by less mature conflict resolution skills and increased prevalence of IPV (Fincham & Cui, 2011; Johnson et al., 2015), understanding how young adults perceive partner hostility during conflict is essential for identifying mechanisms that may contribute to conflict escalation and IPV.

Meta-analyses show that romantic partners are, to some extent, biased in their perception of each other's hostile behaviors (e.g., anger, criticism, contempt; Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; LaBuda & Gere, 2023). It remains unclear, however, whether these biases vary based on IPV experience. Studies highlight deficits in social cognition among perpetrators and victims of IPV (Clauss & Clements, 2021; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993; Thomas & Weston, 2020), but how their perceptions unfold throughout actual conflict interactions, the context in which IPV is most likely to occur (Johnson, 2008) is understudied. Anchored in the truth and bias model and drawing from the

social information processing model of IPV (Holtzworth-Munroe, 1992), this study examines, among young adult couples, how IPV may shape moment-to-moment perceptions of partner hostility during conflict.

Accuracy and Bias in Perception of Partner Hostility

Earlier studies examining judgment of partner's hostility (e.g., anger, criticism) in couples from the general population reported mixed findings, with evidence for overestimation (Cui et al., 2005; Holtzworth-Munroe, 2000), underestimation (Smith & Peterson, 2008), and overall accuracy in perception (Cui et al., 2005; Kline Rhoades & Stocker, 2006). More recently, West and Kenny's (2011) *truth and bias model* was developed to account for the principle that perceptions can be simultaneously accurate and biased (Gagné & Lydon, 2004), and that the relative strength—as well as association between—these different forms of accuracy and bias can be modeled to capture various influences in judgment of partner characteristics or behaviors. The most studied forms of accuracy and bias include tracking accuracy, directional (or mean-level) bias, and projection (or assumed similarity; LaBuda & Gere, 2023; West & Kenny, 2011). Tracking accuracy represents the extent to which a person's perception of their partner on a given characteristic is driven by that partner's actual characteristic (e.g., perceiving high hostility when the partner reports feeling highly hostile). Directional bias refers to the tendency to either overestimate or underestimate a given characteristic in one's partner (e.g., consistently perceiving the partner as more or less hostile than they self-report). Finally, projection represents the extent to which a person projects their own characteristics in their perception of their partner (e.g., perceiving the partner as hostile when experiencing high levels of hostility themselves; West & Kenny, 2011).

A recent meta-analysis of studies examining the perception of negative interaction traits (i.e., negative emotions and hostile behaviors) within the truth and bias framework found small effect sizes ($\beta = .19$ to $\beta = .28$) for tracking accuracy and medium to large effect sizes ($\beta = .41$ to $\beta = .54$) for projection (LaBuda & Gere, 2023). Effect sizes for directional bias were nonsignificant. As expected, significant tracking accuracy indicates that individuals' perception of their partner's hostility is, to some extent, grounded in reality (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; LaBuda & Gere, 2023; West & Kenny, 2011). Evidence for projection is in line with the assumption that people use projection as a strategy when making judgments about aspects of the partner's experience (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Watson et al., 2000). Finally, the absence of directional bias suggests no general trend toward over- or underestimation of the partner's negative behaviors.

The studies included in this meta-analysis (LaBuda & Gere, 2023) varied according to the context in which perceptions were assessed, some examining perceptions retrospectively across a year (e.g., Hammond & Overall, 2013), others on a daily basis (e.g., Walsh & Neff, 2018), and only one during an actual conflict discussion (Overall et al., 2015). This in-lab study found significant tracking accuracy and projection, as well as significant directional bias, suggesting an overestimation of the partners' hostility across the conflict discussion (Overall et al., 2015). Investigating perceptions in the heat of actual conflict interactions might therefore allow for a better estimation of bias and accuracy, and is necessary to understand how these perceptions unfold, moment-to-moment, in their meaningful context (Eckhardt & Crane, 2015). In addition, personal and relational characteristics may modulate how hostility is perceived. Past violent experiences are likely to shape how future signs of potential negative interactions are tracked and perceived. Yet, despite evidence of deficits in social cognition in both perpetrators and victims (Clauss & Clements, 2021; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993; Thomas & Weston, 2020), the contribution of IPV within the truth and bias model remains unknown.

Intimate Partner Violence

Psychological IPV (e.g., yelling, insulting), physical IPV (slapping, pushing), and sexual IPV (e.g., insisting or threatening the partner to engage in sex), are experienced by 10% to 64% of young adults from the general population (An et al., 2024). Among them, situational violence (Johnson, 2008) is the most common manifestation of IPV. Generally stemming from escalating conflicts, this form of IPV is often mutual, i.e., perpetrated by both partners.

According to the social information processing model of IPV (Holtzworth-Munroe, 1992), anger is thought to undermine cognitive processes and bias perception in IPV perpetrators (e.g., hostile attributional bias). Past research, mostly focusing on male perpetration within married heterosexual couple, shows that violent husbands are more likely than nonviolent husbands to attribute hostile intentions to their wives' behaviors during couple interactions (e.g., Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997; Clements & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2008; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993; Wallach & Sela, 2008) and to present cognitive distortions in hypothetical conflict scenarios (e.g., Eckhardt et al., 1998; Eckhardt & Jamison, 2002). Recent evidence also supports hostile attributions and cognitive biases among women who perpetrate IPV (Gilbar et al., 2021) and college students in dating relationships (Eckhardt & Crane, 2015; Thomas & Weston, 2020). Despite these documented deficits in social cognition among IPV perpetrators, no study has yet

applied the truth and bias model to investigate how IPV perpetration modulates accuracy and bias in perception of partner hostility during couple conflict. Given that conflict is the context in which IPV is most likely to occur in young couples from the general population, examining accuracy and bias according to the individual's perpetration of IPV may help identify a mechanism of conflict escalation (Hammond & Overall, 2013; Holtzworth-Munroe, 1992). Drawing from past studies (e.g., Gilbar et al., 2021; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993; Thomas & Weston, 2020), IPV perpetrators are likely to track less accurately, to overestimate their partner's hostility (i.e., directional bias), and to project their own hostility on their partner to a greater extent than nonviolent individuals.

Evidence for deficits in social cognition also exists for victims of IPV. According to the scientific literature on trauma, survivors of interpersonal trauma (e.g., childhood maltreatment, sexual victimization) often present attentional bias toward threatening stimuli (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2015; Latack et al., 2017). Although evidence for a threat bias specific to IPV victimization in adulthood is scarce, a study among female college students found that IPV victims showed attentional bias toward fearful faces and reduced recognition of happy faces compared to nonvictims (Clauss & Clements, 2021). Others suggest that recognition of the perpetrator's emotions is a protective factor for IPV victims (Sherrill et al., 2016; Witte & Kendra, 2010), helping prevent further abuse by recognizing threat and removing oneself from potential violent episodes. IPV victims, compared to nonvictims, could therefore show greater accuracy in tracking fluctuations in their partner's hostility, overestimate their partner's hostility, and be more likely to assume that their partner is hostile when they are themselves feeling hostile (i.e., projection) in order to detect threat when the interaction becomes emotionally charged.

Overview of the Present Study

The goal of the current study was to examine bias and accuracy in the perception of partner hostility throughout a conflict interaction and to investigate the contribution of IPV perpetration and victimization in this perception. By examining perceptions of partner hostility during actual conflict discussions, this study moves beyond prior research that has largely relied on retrospective reports.

To examine moment-to-moment perception of partner hostility, partners engaged in an in-lab conflict discussion and, using a video-recall task, rated their own as well as their partner's hostility at repeated intervals throughout the interaction. Following West and Kenny's (2011) truth and bias model, we

expected that overall, individuals would show significant tracking accuracy, significant directional bias in the direction of overestimation, and significant projection. We also investigated whether accuracy and bias varied as a function of IPV perpetration and victimization. We expected that all forms of IPV (i.e., psychological, physical, and sexual) would modulate perception so that greater perpetration and victimization would be associated with greater directional bias (i.e., overestimation) and greater projection compared to lower levels or absence of IPV. We also expected that perpetration would be associated with poorer tracking accuracy whereas victimization would be associated with better tracking accuracy, compared to the absence of IPV. As partners who are cohabiting and/or have been in a relationship for a longer duration might know each other better, which might influence perception of partner hostility, we examined these potential covariates (Cui et al., 2005; LaBuda & Gere, 2023). In addition, as our sample included dyads that differed in terms of gender composition (i.e., same-gender, mixed-gender, gender-diverse), both partners' gender was also examined as a potential covariate.

Method

Participants

Young adult couples were recruited from the larger community through advertisement on social media between July 2021 and August 2022. Eligibility criteria included that both partners be aged between 18 and 29, in a relationship together for at least 2 months, and able to understand written and spoken French. Other eligibility criteria pertaining to the virtual session were that partners had access to a confidential space with internet connection, a computer with webcam, and an electronic device to complete online questionnaires during the virtual session. To increase gender and sexual diversity, partners of all gender identity, sexual orientations, and relationship configurations (e.g., monogamous, open, polyamorous) were recruited in this study. Participants in polyamorous relationships were asked to select one person among their partners to participate in all portions of the study. Of the 404 couples who initially showed interest in the study, 190 (47%) declined to participate and 21 (5.2%) did not meet the eligibility criteria. A total of 193 couples completed online questionnaires, but 15 couples (3.7%) withdrew before participating in the virtual session. The final analytical sample for the current study was 178 couples ($n = 356$ participants).

Participants' age ranged between 18 and 29 ($M = 23.44$, SD = 2.85) years old. Other individual sociodemographic characteristics are reported in the supplementary material (see Supplemental Table S1). Based on gender

identity, the sample included 143 (80.3%) mixed-gender dyads, 23 (12.9%) same-gender dyads, and 12 (6.7%) dyads in which at least one partner identified with a diverse gender identity (e.g., non-binary). Couples had been together for an average of 2.95 years (SD = 2.28; ranging from 2 months to 12 years). Regarding relationship status, 84 couples (47.2%) did not live together, 86 couples (48.3%) were cohabiting, and 8 couples were married (4.5%). Most couples (87.9%) had a relationship or sexual exclusivity agreement, and 12.1% had a non-exclusivity agreement for one or both partners. Only three couples (1.7%) had children.

Procedure

This study was part of a larger research project investigating communication in young adult couples. The procedure involved (a) completion of online self-report questionnaires and (b) participation in a virtual session. Consent forms were completed at the beginning of each portion of the study. Each partner was sent a personalized link to complete self-report questionnaires on the online platform *Qualtrics Research Suite.* Partners were instructed to complete their questionnaires individually, without consulting each other. Completion of the questionnaires lasted approximately 1 hr, and each partner received a CAN $10 compensation for this portion of the study. In the week following completion of the online questionnaires, both partners participated in a virtual session conducted by experimenters from the research team via the secure platform *Zoom for Healthcare*. Partners joined the virtual session from the same physical location to maximize the ecological validity of their in-person interactions. Experimenters joined the virtual session from different locations. Couples were asked to engage in various discussions (e.g., conflict discussion, positive aspects of their relationships) and to complete short surveys before and after each discussion. To complete the surveys throughout the session, partners were individually sent personalized links to *Qualtrics* through text messages. The virtual session lasted approximately 2.5 hr and each partner received a CAN $30 compensation for their participation in this portion of the study. The project was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Université de Montréal.

The current study focuses on data pertaining to the conflict discussion. First, partners were asked to individually complete a checklist of common conflictual topics (e.g., household chores division, time spent together) among young adult couples. The 27-item checklist was adapted from the *Adolescent Couples' Issues Checklist* (Welsh et al., 2001) and the *Partner Issue Checklist* (Capaldi et al., 1994). Experimenters then conducted short interviews (approximately 5 min.) with each partner separately to discuss the

most highly endorsed topics on the checklist. For these individual interviews, one of the partners was asked to go in another room for a phone call with one experimenter while the other partner remained in the Zoom session with the other experimenter. Following the interviews, experimenters reconvened in a breakout room to identify the three most conflicting themes based on the checklist and individual interviews. Partners were then asked to engage in a 10-minute interaction to discuss one or more of these topics of disagreement. Experimenters turned off their microphones and webcams and recorded the interaction using screen recording. After the conflict discussion, partners engaged in a video-recall task during which they viewed their discussion twice, once to evaluate their own hostility and once to evaluate their partner's hostility during the interaction. Hostility was assessed at every 30-s segment of the discussion. The order of the viewing (own hostility vs. partner hostility) was randomized for each couple.

Three attention-testing items were dispersed throughout the online questionnaires. Data for participants who failed two or more attention-testing items ($n = 7$; 0.02%) were considered invalid and recoded as missing. As their partner provided valid data, the participant's perpetration scores were derived from their partner's report of victimization, and they were included in the analyses. In addition to this, the proportion of missing data was 0.2% for self-rated hostility ($n = 15$ segments), 0.4% for partner-rated hostility ($n = 28$ segments), and 0.3 % for psychological IPV and sexual IPV ($n = 1$ participant). This resulted in a total of 3,548 (out of 3,560) segments of the conflict discussion included in the analyses.

Measures

Self- and Partner-Rated Hostility. Partners' hostility at each 30-second segment of the conflict discussion was assessed during the video-recall task. Participants self-rated their own hostility using the following item: "On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extend did you display hostility during that segment of the discussion?" Partner-rated hostility was assessed using the following item: "On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extend did your partner display hostility during that segment of the discussion?" Participants were given various examples of hostility (e.g., criticism, irritability, insults) to ensure their understanding of the construct and to prime participants to a wide array of hostile manifestations. Experimenters paused the video every 30 s to allow participants to provide their ratings. Partners were instructed to focus specifically on their own behavior and to ignore their partner's behavior when self-rating their hostility, and inversely, to focus only on their partner's behavior when reporting on their partner's hostility. Before the video-recall task, participants first trained

in the procedure by practicing during the first 2 minutes of a recorded date planning discussion they had as a part of the virtual session. Assessment of hostility during the conflict discussion began only when both partners were comfortable with the procedure.

Intimate Partner Violence. IPV within the current relationship was assessed using the *Revised Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS-2; Straus et al., 1996), a 78-item self-report questionnaire. For the current study, only the psychological violence (8 items), physical violence (12 items), and sexual violence subscales (7 items) were used. Each item is presented twice, to assess both perpetration and victimization, and rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*this never happened*) to 6 (*more than 20 times in the past year*), with an additional response choice (7) "*not in the past year, but it happened before*". The latter was recoded to 0 to account only for IPV that occurred during the past 12 months. For each item, the participant's perpetration score was computed by using the maximum score between (1) the participant's self-report of perpetration and (2) their partner's self-report of victimization. This multi-informant method aims to prevent underreporting of perpetration (e.g., Heyman et al., 2023). Perpetration scores for each type of violence were obtained by summing the maximum-report items on the corresponding subscale, with higher scores indicating greater IPV perpetration. Due to the highly non-normal distributions for physical (skewness = 4.20, kurtosis = 21.02) and sexual IPV (skewness = 2.99, kurtosis = 9.98) in our community-based sample, scores on these subscales were dichotomized (0 = never happened, 1 = at least one instance physical/sexual IPV). Psychological IPV (skewness = 1.39, kurtosis = 1.92) was kept continuous in the analyses and ranged from 0 to 31. Cronbach's alpha for this subscale, based on the maximum-report items, was $\alpha = .70$ in the current sample.

Statistical Analyses

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS Version 27. Given the nested structure of the data, analyses were conducted using multilevel modeling with the MIXED procedure. We tested a two-level cross-classified model in which partners were nested within couples and crossed with segments of the discussion, to account for the fact that segments were the same for both partners, with random intercepts and random slopes for all within-person main effects. As our sample included both same- and mixed-gender dyads, dyads were considered indistinguishable (Kenny et al., 2006). Each partner was randomly assigned to "partner 1" or "partner 2" and analyses estimated the parameters pooled across partners.

Accuracy and bias in the perception of the partner's hostility during the conflict discussion were examined with the truth and bias model (West & Kenny, 2011). A person's rating of their partner's hostility was used as the outcome variable. As commonly done in the truth and bias model, the partner's self-rated hostility was considered the *truth* and used as a predictor variable to examine tracking accuracy. This does not imply that the partner's self-rated hostility is inherently accurate, but rather that it serves as a benchmark against which accuracy and bias in perception are evaluated. Then, the person's self-rated hostility was used to examine projection. Following West and Kenny (2011), and to compute estimates at the within-person level, all three variables were centered by subtracting the mean of the partner's self-rating of hostility across all segments of the discussion (i.e., within-person centering). By centering all variables on the within-person mean of the *truth*, the intercept can be interpreted as the directional bias, that is, the mean-level difference between a person's perception of their partner's hostility and the partner's actual hostility. A negative intercept indicates that the person underestimates their partner's hostility whereas a positive intercept indicates that the person overestimates their partner's hostility. The coefficient for the partner's self-rated hostility represents tracking accuracy, that is, the extent to which perception of the partner's hostility accurately tracks actual fluctuations in the partner's hostility across segments of the discussion. Finally, the regression coefficient for the person's self-rating of hostility represents projection, that is, the extent to which the perception of the partner's hostility during a given segment is linked to the person's own hostility during that segment.

Next, the moderating role of each type of IPV perpetration and victimization (psychological, physical, and sexual) on bias and accuracy was examined in separate sets of analyses. We first examined the main effect of IPV on perception of the partner's hostility (i.e., directional bias). Then, interaction terms between IPV and (1) tracking accuracy and (2) projection were included. For significant interactions, simple slope tests were conducted, and interactions were plotted at different levels of IPV ($\pm$ 1 SD for psychological; presence vs. absence for physical and sexual).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

In the current sample, 79.9% ($n = 142$) of couples reported psychological IPV from one or both partners, 30.9% ($n = 55$) reported physical IPV, and 33.1% ($n = 59$) reported sexual IPV.

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1. Using aggregated scores of hostility across the discussion, positive correlations were observed between self-rated hostility and perception of partner hostility, psychological IPV perpetration and victimization, and sexual IPV perpetration and victimization. Perception of partner hostility was positively associated with all types of IPV perpetration and victimization. Positive correlations were also observed between all types of IPV perpetration and victimization, except between physical and sexual IPV perpetration, and between physical and sexual IPV victimization. Associations between perception of partner hostility and potential covariates were examined. No significant associations were found with cohabitation, $r = .08$, $p = .136$, own gender, $F(2, 353) = 0.69$, $p = .503$, and partner gender, $F(2, 353) = 0.55$, $p = .578$, but relationship length was weakly associated with perception of partner hostility, $r = .11$, $p = .042$. However, as it was no longer associated with perception of partner hostility in the main analyses and as removing it did not affect the results, no control variable was included in the final models for parsimony.

Accuracy and Bias

Main effects for the truth and bias analyses showed a non-significant intercept (i.e., directional bias; $b = 0.05$, SE = .06, $p = .407$), suggesting that on average, individuals did not under- or overestimate their partner's hostility during the discussion. Next, a significant main effect for partner self-reported hostility (i.e., tracking accuracy; $b = 0.25$, SE = .02, $p < .001$) indicated that individuals accurately tracked fluctuations in their partner's hostility throughout the discussion. That is, actual increases in the partner's hostility during a given segment of the discussion were associated with increases in the person's perception of their partner's hostility during that segment. Finally, a significant main effect of self-rated hostility (i.e., projection; $b = 0.37$, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$) suggested that increases in the person's own hostility during a given segment were associated with increases in their perception of their partner's hostility during that segment.

The Role of Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration

The moderating role of different types of IPV perpetration is reported in Table 2. Results for psychological IPV suggested no association with directional bias, and no interaction with tracking accuracy and projection. Physical IPV perpetration had no association with directional bias and no interaction with tracking accuracy but significantly interacted with self-rated hostility (i.e., projection). Simple slope tests (see Figure 1) indicated that projection

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables.

Variable	*M* (*n*)	*SD* (%)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self-rated hostility	1.01	1.11	–							
2. Perc. of partner hostility	1.05	1.27	.66***	–						
3. Psychological IPV perp.	5.49	5.87	.24***	.32***	–					
4. Physical IPV perp.	80	22.5	.04	.12*	.48***	–				
5. Sexual IPV perp.	81	22.8	.13*	.17**	.18***	.10	–			
6. Psychological IPV vict.	5.49	5.87	.23***	.39***	.84***	.44***	.25***	–		
7. Physical IPV vict.	80	22.5	.05	.16**	.44***	.52***	.13*	.48***	–	
8. Sexual IPV vict.	81	22.8	.11*	.11*	.25***	.13*	.41***	.18***	.10	–

Notes. Statistics for self-rated and perception of partner hostility are based on scores aggregated across the discussion. Perc. of partner hostility = Perception of partner hostility; Perp. = perpetration; Vict. = Victimization. Sample means and standard deviations are the same for IPV perpetration and victimization given that one partner's perpetration represents the other partner's victimization.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2. Results of Truth and Bias Analyses for Perception of Partner Hostility During the Conflict Discussion and the Effect of Psychological, Physical, and Sexual IPV ($n = 3548$ observations).

Bias and accuracy in perception of partner's hostility	IPV perpetration						IPV victimization					
	Main effects			Interaction with IPV			Main effects			Interaction with IPV		
	b	SE	*p*	*b*	SE	*p*	*b*	SE	*p*	*b*	SE	*p*
Directional bias	0.05	0.05	.363	0.05	0.06	.374	0.07	0.05	.207	0.07	0.05	.206
Tracking accuracy	0.25	0.02	<.001	0.25	0.02	<.001	0.26	0.02	<.001	0.24	0.02	<.001
Projection	0.37	0.03	<.001	0.37	0.03	<.001	0.37	0.03	<.001	0.37	0.03	<.001
Psychological IPV	0.01	0.04	.755	0.00	0.04	.951	0.20	0.04	<.001	0.27	0.04	<.001
Psychological IPV X T. Accuracy				−0.03	0.02	.101				0.08	0.02	<.001
Psychological IPV X Projection				0.03	0.02	.190				0.01	0.02	.796
Directional bias	0.02	0.06	.701	0.01	0.06	.873	0.04	0.06	.441	0.04	0.06	.471
Tracking accuracy	0.25	0.02	<.001	0.25	0.03	<.001	0.25	0.02	<.001	0.21	0.03	<.001
Projection	0.37	0.03	<.001	0.33	0.03	<.001	0.37	0.03	<.001	0.39	0.03	<.001
Physical IPV	0.11	0.07	.142	0.17	0.08	.030	0.01	0.07	.928	0.02	0.08	.794
Physical IPV X t. Accuracy				−0.02	0.04	.674				0.14	0.04	<.001
Physical IPV X Projection				0.15	0.05	<.001				−0.10	0.05	.027
Directional bias	−0.01	0.05	.893	−0.02	0.06	.787	0.10	0.06	.077	0.12	0.06	.044
Tracking accuracy	0.25	0.02	<.001	0.24	0.03	<.001	0.25	0.02	<.001	0.28	0.03	<.001
Projection	0.37	0.03	<.001	0.35	0.03	<.001	0.36	0.03	<.001	0.38	0.03	<.001
Sexual IPV	0.25	0.07	<.001	0.28	0.07	<.001	−0.15	0.07	.024	−0.22	0.07	.002
Sexual IPV X t. Accuracy				0.02	0.04	.625				−0.09	0.04	.042
Sexual IPV X Projection				0.07	0.04	.122				−0.07	0.04	.111

Note. IPV = Intimate partner violence. T. accuracy = Tracking accuracy. Psychological IPV was standardized. Physical and sexual IPV were dichotomized (0 = no violence; 1 = at least one instance of violence).

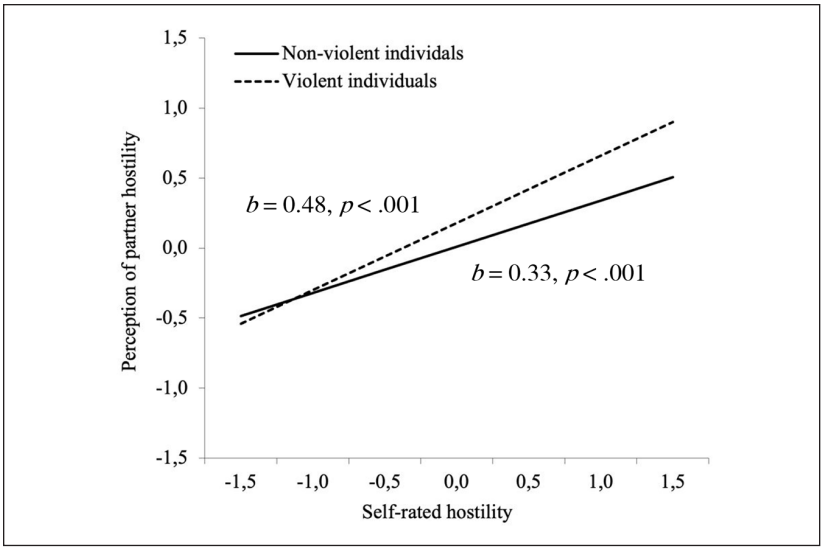

Figure 1. Simple slopes for the effect of physical intimate partner violence perpetration on projection.

was greater among individuals who reported physical IPV perpetration than among those who did not. Finally, results regarding sexual IPV suggested a significant association between perpetration and directional bias, indicating that individuals who reported sexual IPV perpetration overestimated their partner's hostility across the entire discussion. No interaction was found between sexual IPV and tracking accuracy and projection.

The Role of Intimate Partner Violence Victimization

The moderating role of different types of IPV victimization is reported in Table 2. Psychological IPV victimization was significantly associated with directional bias and interacted with tracking accuracy. Specifically, the greater the psychological victimization, the more the individual overestimated their partner's hostility across the discussion. In addition, and as shown in Figure 2 (panel a), psychological IPV interacted significantly with partner self-rated hostility so that individuals who experienced higher level of psychological victimization showed greater tracking accuracy than individuals who experienced lower levels of victimization. Next, physical IPV victimization interacted both with partner self-rated hostility (i.e., tracking accuracy)

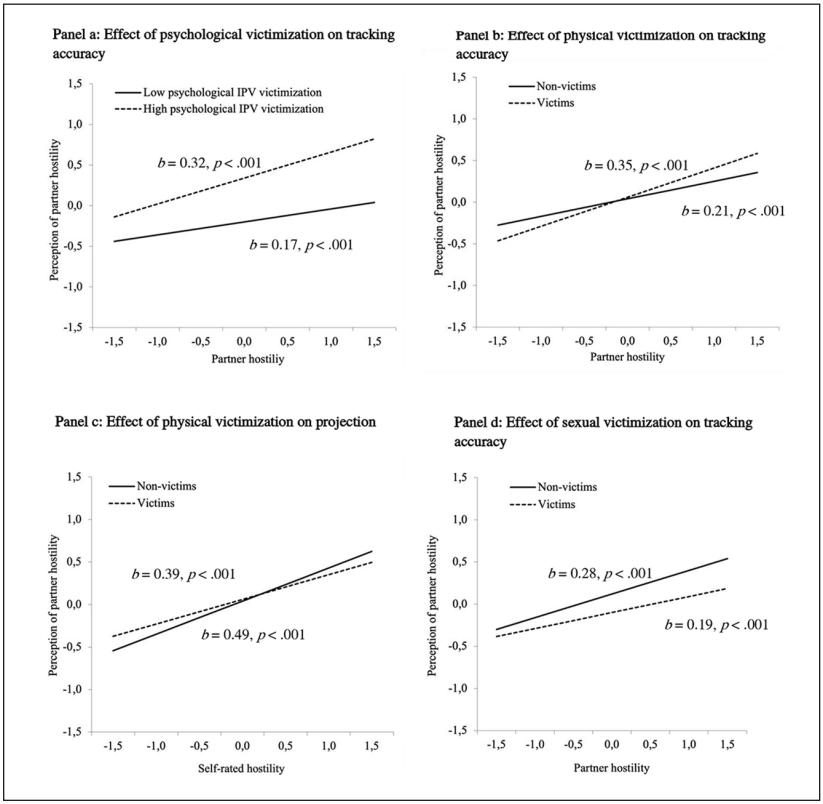

Figure 2. Simple slopes for the effect of intimate partner violence victimization on tracking accuracy and projection: (Panel a): Effect of psychological victimization on tracking accuracy; (Panel b): Effect of physical victimization on tracking accuracy; (Panel c): Effect of physical victimization on projection; (Panel d): Effect of sexual victimization on tracking accuracy.

and the individual's self-rated hostility (i.e., projection), indicating that individuals who experienced physical victimization showed greater accuracy (Figure 2; panel b) and less projection (Figure 2; panel c) than those who did not experience it. Finally, sexual IPV victimization was significantly associated with directional bias and interacted with partner self-rated hostility, suggesting that individuals who experienced sexual victimization underestimated their partner hostility and showed poorer tracking accuracy (see Figure 2; panel d) than those who did not.

Discussion

The current study investigated moment-to-moment accuracy and bias in the perception of partner hostility during a conflict discussion among young adult couples and examined the role of IPV perpetration and victimization therein. Our findings suggest that overall, individuals did not significantly over- or underestimate their partner's hostility and showed significant tracking accuracy and projection when judging their partners' hostility during the discussion. We also observed that projection was stronger in individuals who perpetrated physical IPV than in those who did not, and that individuals who perpetrated sexual IPV overestimated (i.e., directional bias) their partner's hostility throughout the conflict discussion. Regarding victimization, individuals sustaining higher levels of psychological IPV overestimated their partner's hostility and showed better tracking accuracy compared to those who sustained lower levels of psychological IPV. Victims of physical IPV also showed better tracking accuracy and less projection than among nonvictims. Victims of sexual IPV, in contrast, showed poorer tracking accuracy and underestimated their partner's hostility throughout the discussion. In support of theoretical models of social information processing among perpetrators and victims (Clauss & Clements, 2021; Holtzworth-Munroe, 1992), these findings emphasize differences in perception of partner hostility between violent and nonviolent individuals and suggest that these perceptual processes are at play, moment-to-moment, during conflicts.

Perception of Partner Hostility During Conflict

Our findings that young adults generally show significant tracking accuracy and projection, but no directional bias, in their perception of their partner's hostile behaviors is consistent with recent meta-analytical results anchored in the truth and bias framework (LaBuda & Gere, 2023). Thus, overall, individuals' perception of their partner's hostility during a conflict reflect, to some extent, that partner's actual hostility. Evidence for projection nevertheless indicate some bias, in that individuals tend to perceive their partners as more hostile on moments they themselves report being more hostile. This is in line with the use of projection as a common strategy when inferring a partners' internal state (Watson et al., 2000). The absence of directional bias, however, departs from a previous study examining accuracy and bias in perception of hostility during a couple conflict discussion (Overall et al., 2015), in which individuals overestimated their partner's negative emotions. The focus on negative emotions, in contrast with the current study's consideration of a large range of hostile manifestations, may partly explain the discrepancy

in results. Negative emotions are more covert in nature and might necessitate greater reliance on inferential processes, increasing the risk of bias.

The Contribution of Intimate Partner Violence

Our findings highlight that the perpetration of certain forms of IPV modulates the perception of partner hostility. First, psychological IPV perpetration did not significantly moderate accuracy and bias. This form of IPV may be less influenced by problematic schemas and may more strongly reflect underdeveloped and less adaptive conflict resolution skills, which escalate conflicts into verbally aggressive arguments (Johnson, 2008). The perpetration of physical violence, however, moderated projection such that on moments of the conflict discussion when physically violent individuals reported being more hostile, they also perceived their partner as being more hostile. In line with social information processing models of IPV (Holtzworth-Munroe, 1992; Senkans et al., 2020), anger might activate aggressive schemas that distort the processing of social cues during the interaction. Projection might also reflect implicit defensive operations found in IPV perpetrators (Smyth et al., 2024) to minimize, justify, or blame the partner (e.g., my partner was being hostile and provoked me), that are deployed on moment when the perpetrator feels more hostile. Finally, we found that sexual IPV perpetration moderated directional bias so that sexually violent individuals overestimated their partner's overall level of hostility across the conflict discussion. This suggests that sexual IPV perpetration may be linked with a more general bias toward perceiving the partner as hostile. This bias may reflect attitudes that have been shown to support sexual violence, both outside and within romantic relationships, such as sexism and gender hostility (Bareket & Fiske, 2023; Forbes et al., 2006). The directional bias observed among perpetrators of sexual IPV may also reflect attempts to regain control and power (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012) over a partner who is generally perceived as hostile and threatening.

Our findings also show that the different forms of IPV victimization moderate accuracy and bias in perception of the partner hostility in nuanced ways. First, individuals sustaining higher levels of psychological IPV overestimated their partner's hostility and had a greater ability to accurately detect increases in their partner's hostility during the conflict (i.e., tracking accuracy), compared to those who sustained lower levels of psychological IPV. Greater tracking accuracy was also observed in victims of physical IPV, in comparison with nonvictims. Taken together, the findings regarding psychological and physical victimization are is consistent with past studies on threat recognition among victims of IPV (e.g., Clauss & Clements, 2021) and might

reflect an adaptive process that serves to increase sensitivity and vigilance toward potentially harmful situations (Sherrill et al., 2016; Witte & Kendra, 2010). Next, we observed a weaker projection bias among victims of physical IPV than nonvictims. While we expected greater projection as an indicator of increased sensitivity to the partner's hostility, the findings suggest that victims may be better than nonvictims at focusing on their partners' actual reactions, focusing more on external behaviors, thus leaving less room to project their own hostility onto their partner. Finally, victims of sexual IPV underestimated their partner's hostility and showed a poorer ability to track fluctuations in their partner's hostility than nonvictims. It should be noted that sexual IPV in our sample almost exclusively manifested into verbal pressure to engage in sex. This less severe form of victimization can nevertheless result in unwanted sex and feelings of vulnerability. Motivated cognition models (Kwang & Swann, 2010) posit that people tend to show positive bias (i.e., underestimating their partner's negative behaviors), when accuracy could threaten their relationship. Consistently, victims may underestimate their partner's hostility and minimize warning signs to preserve a feeling of security within the relationship.

Limitations

The current findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Although our sample was inclusive in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, statistical power consideration prevented us from examining whether findings vary across sex and gender-diverse groups. However, minority stress among LGBTQ+ individuals may influence both perception of hostility and IPV (Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017). Additionally, cultural background can shape conflict resolution styles, emotional expression, and relationship expectations (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003), potentially affecting perceptions of hostility. Future research should explore how systemic factors (e.g., discrimination, minority stress) interact with IPV and shape the perception of partner hostility. Next, given the repeated measurement, we relied on a broad construct of hostility, in contrast with discrete behaviors or emotions. Despite providing definitions and examples, personal understanding of this construct may vary across participants. Relying on the partner's self-rated hostility as the *truth* also has limitations due to potential self-serving bias. However, external assessments are also limited by coders being unaware of the couple's unique communication style (Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Hammond & Overall, 2013). Future studies should corroborate the current findings with different indicators of partner true hostility. Next, we found modest effects of IPV on accuracy and bias in our community-based

sample, with low IPV endorsement, minor acts of sexual IPV, and low hostility levels. Studies on at-risk couples and clinical populations might reveal stronger biases in couples experiencing IPV. Lastly, our conflict discussion paradigm differs from spontaneous, open-ended conflicts. However, conducting the study online with participants in their natural environment may have mitigated the impact on ecological validity.

Conclusion

By investigating perception of the partner hostility during an actual conflict discussion, our study contributes to shed light on moment-to-moment social information processing in young adult couples experiencing IPV. Overall, our findings point to more negative perceptions of the partner's hostile behaviors among IPV perpetrators and victims (except for victims of sexual IPV). Although increased sensitivity to the partner hostility may be adaptive for victims, it could also be involved in the escalation of conflict into violence (Hammond & Overall, 2013), especially in perpetrators of IPV. Understanding how partners' perceptions of each other's hostility during conflict shape their violent dynamic is necessary to inform interventions aimed at de-escalating conflicts, modifying problematic representations and schemas supporting bias, and promoting healthy conflict resolution skills among young adult couples.

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Data Availability

Data are available from the first author upon request.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Ethical Considerations

This study has been approved by the Ethical Review Board of Université de Montréal (CEREP-19-083-P) and participants have provided informed consent.

Consent to participate

Participants provided written informed consent twice: (1) before completing online questionnaires and (2) at the beginning of the virtual session.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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