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# College Students' Perceptions of Playful Aggression in Romantic Couples

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COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PLAYFUL AGGRESSION IN  
ROMANTIC COUPLES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

December 2009

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
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Research on playful aggression throughout the lifespan suggests the phenomenon fulfills specific unique functions and elicits particular consequences dependent on the exact facets of the situation in which it occurs. Additionally, decades of research on playful aggression in a multitude of populations and under a wide variety of conditions suggest the phenomenon is not uncommon, is regularly enjoyed by those who engage in it, and serves a variety of adaptive functions. However, some researchers have also demonstrated the dark side of playful aggression, illustrating its relationship to serious physical and sexual aggression. This study sought to further elucidate the phenomenon of playful aggression by assessing the behavior in its relational context. Participants recruited from the subject pool at Indiana University of Pennsylvania were presented with vignettes depicting an episode of playful aggression occurring between a college-aged couple. The vignettes differed according to the variables of gender of initiator (male or female initiator), size differential between male and female partner (male taller or female taller), and response of the target (positive or negative). The perceptions and feelings regarding the couple depicted in the vignette were assessed via a multipart survey. Results of the present study indicated that all three independent variables investigated significantly affected the participants' perceptions of the couple and the interaction depicted in the vignette. Size differential affected how participants rated the

aggressiveness of the interaction, whereas gender of the initiator and response of the target affected how participants perceived the couple's relationship. Participants' personal experience with playful aggression also significantly impacted their perceptions of the couple and of playful aggression. Content analysis of the qualitative data provided detailed information about how the participants viewed playful aggression.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although the process of writing a dissertation can often feel like a very lonely endeavor, many others have contributed to the completion of this project. I owe a debt of gratitude to my esteemed committee members: Dr. Husentis, Dr. Raeff, and especially Dr. McHugh, whose brilliance as a researcher and guidance as an advisor rendered her an invaluable chair. I am of course grateful for the undergraduate students who donated their time and opinions and thus provided the rich data on which this study stands. And of course, many thanks to my family and husband, who nagged me about the progression of this project, but only to the degree that they motivated me.

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## CHAPTER I

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

#### Definition of Playful Aggression

Initial interest in the phenomenon of playful aggression grew out of a combined familiarity with the broad area of interpersonal violence (IPV) and the more specialized work of Ryan and Mohr (2005), in which playful aggression was correlated with serious physical and sexual aggression. From the viewpoint of an IPV researcher, this finding appears fairly cut-and-dry and not especially deserving of a deeper investigation. However, when considered in the context of playful aggression in children and non-human primates, which acknowledges the adaptive and positive functions of playful aggression, questions arise. Further inquiry into the somewhat scant research base on playful aggression in adulthood revealed that some researchers have linked the phenomenon to positive correlates (Baxter, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Moore, 1995), including relationship intimacy and flirtation. Confronted with an overall paucity of research in the adult population coupled with the equivocal findings of those few studies conducted, the fundamental question of “what exactly makes playful aggression playful” was born. The present study is an initial effort to answer that very question.

The term playful aggression was selected to identify the phenomenon under study because of its broad and encompassing connotation. Synonymous terms are employed in the research literature including: rough housing; play-fighting; horseplay; and rough-and-tumble play (Gergen, 1990). However, such terms are limited in their application and constrained by their narrow definitions. Additionally, most of these terms are usually associated with specific aggressive behaviors which occur during childhood.

A concise and clear definition of play-fighting is offered by Fagen (1981) which delineates the behavior as engagement in active, playful simulations of fighting. Whereas the concept of simulation remains useful for current purposes, as it captures what Frey and Hoppe-Graffe (1994) call the “as if-mode”, terms which refer to the act of fighting prove inadequate because they denote something about the intention or motivation of the initiator which may or may not be true. Thus, the term playful aggression, defined as any act which simulates aggression in a lighthearted manner, will be employed in this study. The specific behaviors denoted by the term playful aggression may include shoving, punching, throwing, slapping, and hurting during play. These acts were endorsed most frequently by college students in regard to their behavior with romantic partners and close same-sex friends (Gergen, 1990).

#### Playful Aggression in Non-Humans

A copious research base on playful aggression from an ethological perspective exists and perhaps offers several useful ways of conceptualizing and studying the correlate phenomenon in humans. In the ethological literature, the prevailing perspective views playful aggression in non-humans as an important means of social development. Many researchers have conceptualized playful aggression as an adaptive mechanism which prepares young for such necessary activities as fighting, sexual intercourse and social communication (Fagen, 1978; Harlow & Harlow, 1965; Pellis, 1988; Vanderberg, 1978).

#### Playful Aggression during Early Childhood

Compared to the ethological research base, the literature on playful aggression in human children is neither as plentiful nor as unequivocal in its findings and conclusions.

The extant research does illustrate the high rates of the behavior in the general population (Boulton, 1996). Additionally, several useful theories for the functions of and motivations behind playful aggression have been offered.

### *Theories of Children's Use of Playful Aggression*

Evolutionary theories about playful aggression in human children echo those offered in the ethological research. Two such explanations hold particular sway in the study of the phenomenon. The first, known as the “practice fighting hypothesis,” conceptualizes the behavior as a safe way for children to hone real fighting skills (Frey, 1990). The second, known as the “dominance hypothesis,” asserts that the phenomenon occurs because it allows children to establish or illustrate their place in a social dominance hierarchy (Boulton & Smith, 1992). Such hypotheses emphasize the adaptive and useful nature of playful aggression in human children.

Additionally, playful aggression could be conceptualized as a product of social learning, as suggested by Hartup (1974). In one of his seminal works, Bandura (1973) demonstrated that children who observed aggressive behavior would ape that action in their own behavior. Thus, if a child observes a model engaging in aggressive behavior, he or she might attempt to imitate the behavior in his or her peer relationships. Following the social learning perspective, this learned behavior might generalize to other situations later in life. Despite the logical allure and sound theoretical basis of this viewpoint, such a process has not garnered empirical support (Gergen, 1990).

Huesmann's (1988) information processing theory offers a means by which this generalization process may occur (Bandura, 1986; Berkowitz, 1984; Huesmann & Enron, 1984). According to such a premise, a child might construct cognitive scripts based on

early experiences. Such scripts, which operate as maps to help navigate social interaction, are accessed later in life under similar social conditions. Thus, in a particular setting, a child may learn that playful aggression fulfills the useful functions of expressing emotions, illustrating dominance, or gaining affiliation in peer groups. This mode of social interaction then becomes a script which is later activated in social situations similar to the one in which it was learned. Again, although the theory is sound conceptually, scientific support has not been obtained (Gergen, 1990).

Gergen (1990) offers yet another perspective which stresses the unique situational factors of the specific circumstances. Such an outlook, based on the work of Schachter and Singer (1962) and Zillmann (1978, 1988) proposes that aggressive behavior results from the cue-influenced interpretation of undefined autonomic arousal. From such a perspective, the level of arousal dictates the interpretation of the action and the type of response it elicits. Specifically, undefined physical arousal might signal the necessity of aggressive action. Coupled with social cues, such bodily cues might render playful aggression more likely to occur. Thus, if a child is physiologically aroused, and certain social cues exist, such as the absence of adult figures and the presence of peers, that child may engage in playful aggression, due to the summation of these two factors.

Such perspectives illustrate the variability in viewpoints on playful aggression during early childhood. The absence of a prevailing theory also emphasizes the lack of a clear and comprehensive conceptualization of playful aggression in humans. Such a situation calls for a study which attempts to further define the phenomenon and its relevant correlates.

### *Gender Differences in Rates of Playful Aggression*

Despite the lack of theoretical consensus and definitive conclusions in the playful aggression during childhood literature, one thread which appears in many studies is the issue of gender differences. A well-represented viewpoint is that boys display more playful aggression than girls (Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Bretherton, 1989). Such differences have been attributed to the effect of hormones (Archer 1988), reinforcement (Humphreys & Smith, 1984), evolution (Boulton, 1996), socioeconomic status (Seegmiller, 1980), and language (Piel, 1990).

Several researchers have offered arguments opposing the position of gender differences. In their cross-cultural investigation of sex differences in the behavior of children aged 3 to 11, Whiting and Edwards (1973) found stereotypically sex-typed behaviors to be extremely malleable under the processes of socialization. Specifically, Whiting and Edwards found that in cultures where “feminine” work was assigned to boys and cultures where the daily routines of boys and girls did not differ dramatically, the behavior of girls and boys did not evidence the gender differences found in other societies. In Nyansongo, Kenya, half of the boys aged 5 and above cared for infants and helped with domestic chores. In this sample, girls evidenced aberrantly high rates of rough-and-tumble play whereas boys retreated from aggressive attacks by peers at a rate similar to girls. Thus, rough-and-tumble play, historically considered to be in the domain of male behavior, has been shown to be flexible given certain societal conditions.

Additionally, these gender differences have been shown to be influenced by the methodology employed. Studies that utilize playground data or observations from other naturalistic settings in the United States typically find modest to robust gender

differences in rough-and-tumble play, with boys generally engaging the behavior at a higher frequency (Blurton Jones, 1972; Boulton, 1996; Fry, 1987; Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Pellegrini, 1989; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Whiting & Edwards, 1973). However, in laboratory settings, only modest gender differences in the overall frequency of rough-and-tumble play have been observed (DiPietro, 1981). Such findings reiterate the malleability of playful aggression in children.

#### Playful Aggression during Middle Childhood and Adolescence

The frequency of playful aggression appears to increase through early childhood and peak during the period just prior to early adolescence (Seifert & Hoffnung, 2000). Whereas playful aggression in early childhood is largely theorized to fulfill needs of affiliation rather than those of serious aggression or dominance, the behavior has been shown to change in its functions during middle childhood and adolescence (Fagen, 1981; Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Pellegrini, 1988, 1995). During this period of the lifespan, which is associated with an increased concern for one's status among peers and burgeoning sexual interests, playful aggression appears to function as a mechanism to establish dominance in peer groups and to initiate heterosexual interaction (Boulton, 1996; Pellegrini, 2003).

Research suggests that intrasexual playful aggression during this period does function in the manner proposed by the dominance hypothesis (Boulton, 1996; Pellegrini, 2003). However, playful aggression between sexes appears to be fulfilling a different function. In what is sometimes referred to as *poke and push courtship*, youngsters may tease, grab, chase, or lightly hit the object of their affection as a way to initiate heterosexual contact (Maccoby, 1998; Schofield, 1981). Such strategies are probably



utilized because they are indirect and ambiguous and thus, if such overtures are rejected, significant embarrassment does not result (Pellegrini, 2003). In addition to the low risk associated with playfully aggressive techniques, children close to or entering adolescence are already familiar with these behaviors, and thus can employ them with facility and confidence.

Playful aggression as a safe, indirect means to initiate heterosexual contact continues into later adolescence as well. In her study of nonverbal courtship signals in girls aged 13 to 16, Moore (1995) found playful aggression to be a frequent method of flirtation. In a naturalistic setting, Moore observed that over 20% of the subjects utilized some type of playfully aggressive behavior to communicate heterosexual interest. Moore theorized the adolescent girls' propensity toward playful aggression as a courtship signal reflected their inexperience with initiating sexual contact; the young girls poked, pushed, and punched because such actions were familiar to them, as they had been engaging in them throughout childhood. Lockhard and Adams (1980) also observed young couples' (aged 13 to 16) reliance on playful aggression as a method of initiating intimacy and closeness. When compared with older couples (aged 17 to 28), the adolescent pairs utilized behaviors like pinching and neck jabbing to a higher degree (Lockhard & Adams).

The research on playful aggression during middle childhood and adolescence illustrates the diversity of functions and outcomes connected to the behavior. The literature suggests that playful aggression is not merely a type of pretend simulation play quarantined to the childhood years. Playful aggression, between sexes and marked by overtones of sexual intimacy, is of a different sort and ilk than that observed during

childhood. Its meanings and consequences are of a different type and deserve further inquiry.

### Playful Aggression during Adulthood

Research has demonstrated that playful aggression extends into at least early adulthood (Baxter, 1992; Capaldi & Crosby, 1997; Gergen 1990; Moore 1985; Ryan & Mohr, 2005). There is some evidence that playful aggression continues to be a method of nonverbal courtship signaling (Moore), although to a lesser degree than that found in middle childhood and adolescence. In an investigation of nonverbal courtship signals in women, Moore found that 10 percent relied on behaviors like teasing, pushing, and poking to express romantic interest. This rate was about half that observed in the teenage girls. Moore theorized that such behavior was not grown of inexperience or uncertainty, but rather, was employed to gauge the males' receptivity to humor.

Gergen (1990) found that college-aged couples evidenced playful aggression in their interactions, as measured by self-report. Additionally, Gergen demonstrated playful aggression in romantic couples to be related to alcohol use and "going steady." She hypothesized the higher incidence of playful aggression in "steady" couples to be related to the higher levels of intimacy and decreased level of inhibition in such relationships. Similarly, the correlation with alcohol use was theorized to be influenced by the lowering of inhibitions induced by alcohol consumption. Gergen did observe playful aggression in female-female dyads, but this occurred at a lower frequency than did playful aggression in male-female dyads.

Ryan (1995, 1998) demonstrated that acts of playful aggression in college-aged couples were significantly correlated with sexual and physical aggression. In the initial

study, aggressors were more likely than non-aggressors to report, via a questionnaire, a preference for playful aggression during sexual activity (Ryan, 1995). Again utilizing a questionnaire design, Ryan replicated her initial findings when she demonstrated similar findings among physically and sexually aggressive college women and sexually aggressive college men (1998). Ryan and Mohr (2005) demonstrated that a significant proportion of college-aged couples engage in playful aggression. Specifically, participants were more likely to acknowledge the use of playful aggression during sex and at other times than they were to admit to serious physical or sexual aggression. Additionally, Ryan and Mohr found the manner in which college students articulated their use of playful aggression echoed the descriptions of children's rough-and-tumble play. The participants described incidents of "horseplay," "wrestling," and "laughter." In contrast to studies on playful aggression during childhood, Ryan and Mohr's investigation of playful aggression in college couples showed few gender differences. However, one difference elucidated by the study suggested that males are more likely to be the agents of playful aggression, whereas females may be more likely to be the recipients of the behavior.

A novel conceptualization of the phenomenon can be found in the work of Capaldi and Crosby (1997). These researchers videotaped young couples completing a problem solving task and found that a large proportion of physical aggression between the partners was playful, as defined by the use of force not greater than the level of "firm touch." Capaldi and Crosby suggested that playful aggression, when initiated by the female, functioned as an attention getting device. The behavior was thought to arouse the

interest of the male and engage him physically. These findings reiterate the complexity of the phenomenon by suggesting adaptive, instrumental functions.

Baxter (1992) demonstrated that playful aggression may be a relatively common occurrence in college students' relationships and that its presence may be connected to positive relationship qualities. She queried college students about their play activities with same-sex and other-sex relations and found that playful aggression constituted 12% of the play described by the subjects. Playful aggression was more common in other-sex pairs and contrary to the findings of Gergen (1990) and Ryan (1995, 1998) linking the phenomenon to serious aggression, was positively correlated with relationship closeness.

Taken as a whole, this research illustrates the complexity of playful aggression during adulthood. A pattern of action utilized during early childhood to rehearse fighting skills useful in adulthood, establish dominance among peers, and initiate heterosexual contact in a safe and familiar manner adopts multiple, complex functions and consequences when it occurs during adulthood.

#### Identifying When and How Playful Aggression Becomes Serious

Research on playful aggression throughout the lifespan suggests the phenomenon fulfills specific unique functions and elicits particular consequences dependent on the exact facets of the situation in which it occurs. Additionally, decades of research on playful aggression in a multitude of populations and under a wide variety of conditions suggest the phenomenon is not uncommon, regularly enjoyed by those who engage in it, and serves a plethora of adaptive functions. However, some researchers have also demonstrated the dark side of playful aggression, illustrating its relationship to serious physical and sexual aggression.

Thus, the whole of the research base raises some important questions. Given the wide range of functions and consequences of playful aggression, it would be fruitful to ascertain under what conditions and with respect to which influential variables certain functions are fulfilled and certain outcomes occur. Towards this aim, a helpful perspective can be gleaned from a relational viewpoint of playful aggression. Such a perspective has been articulated by multiple researchers (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Shotter, 1984; Shotter & Logan, 1988) and avers that the definitions of actions are delineated by the specific features of the interaction. Thus, the meaning of playful aggression is determined by the combined whole of each of the participants' maneuvers within the interaction. The actors involved in playful aggression define the phenomenon and delineate its functions and effects through the negotiation of the exchange. As Gergen asserts, "The line between what is playful and what is hostile thus becomes fuzzy and unstable depending on the actors' responses within the larger relational context." (1990, pp.383). Within this perspective, it is therefore most advantageous to view playful aggression as a social exchange between two individuals. Playful aggression is a phenomenon that occurs between two people, not something that resides in a single individual. Thus, it is most fruitful to define playful aggression as the whole of the actions and reactions of each participant, rather than by any single action or reaction performed by an individual in isolation. Furthermore, playful aggression must be characterized by the entire sum of the exchange between the two participants; that is, it must be evaluated in light of its entire relational context. This viewpoint bears particular importance on the present study in that it dictated the design. Because it is vital to present playful aggression as the sum of actions and reactions of the actors involved, a

vignette describing the interaction was used. It is hoped that this vignette procedure, rather than a questionnaire procedure, will better capture the phenomenon under investigation, as it is truer to its definition as a something that can only exist between two people.

To this end, this study sought to further elucidate the phenomenon of playful aggression by assessing the behavior in its relational context. A design employing a vignette, rather than a questionnaire, was used. Its relationship to forms of serious and physically harmful aggression was studied by investigating the perceptions of observers to the behavior in dating, college-aged couples. To ascertain what specifically defines the phenomenon as playful rather than serious, the perceptions of outside observers were evaluated in terms of specific facets of the interaction during which playful aggression occurs. Thus, the overall goal of this study was to determine which specific factors, including those specific to an individual participant (gender; nonverbal cues), and those related to the interaction itself (size differential; target reaction) affected the overall perceived definition of a playfully aggressive interaction between a romantically-involved college-aged couple.

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

#### Participants and Procedure

The sample was composed of 64 male and female undergraduates from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Due to the unique nature of the sample, being entirely composed of undergraduate students, the term “Emerging Adult” will be employed to signify the distinctiveness of the participants. Emerging adulthood is a transitional period of the life span marked by exploration (Arnett, 2000). The sample included roughly equal proportions of males and females. The participants were recruited through the university’s subject pool. In exchange for their participation, subjects received extra credit from their class instructor or the fulfillment of a class requirement. Participation in the study consumed approximately less than an hour of the subjects’ time and did not entail any potential dangers to their emotional or physical health.

Participants were provided the following information about the nature of the study:

I am requesting your participation in a study examining your beliefs and feelings regarding romantic relationships during college. You will be presented with a brief vignette describing romantic relationships between heterosexual college students. You will then complete a brief survey assessing your perceptions and feelings regarding the couple. You will also be asked to answer several questions regarding yourself, including your age, relationship status, and gender. Your participation is voluntary, and no penalty exists for non-participation. Your answers will be kept anonymous and confidential. In exchange for your

participation you will either receive extra credit for class or credit for the Subject Pool.

Participants were then presented with a vignette depicting an episode of playful aggression occurring between a college-aged couple. The vignettes differed according to the variables of gender of initiator (male or female initiator), size differential between male and female partner (male taller or female taller), and response of the target (positive or negative). Because there were three variables each with two dichotomous possibilities, eight unique vignettes were presented. The vignettes can be found in their entirety in Appendix A. Participants were then asked to complete a brief survey assessing their feelings and perceptions of the couple depicted in the vignette. Basic demographic information was collected and the participants were debriefed.

#### Measures

The perceptions and feelings regarding the couple depicted in the vignette were assessed via a multipart survey. In the first section, participants responded to a sentence completion task. Participants then rated the interaction on 25 dimensions designed to assess 8 categories: health; normalcy; aggression; love; power; play; sensuality; threat. Participants were then asked to choose 1 of 6 possible future outcomes for the couple, with lower scores indicating longer relationship length and higher scores indicating shorter relationship length. Close-ended questions regarding participants' personal experience with playful aggression followed, after which participants answered an open-ended question in which they had to define the interaction as aggressive or not and explain why.



## CHAPTER III

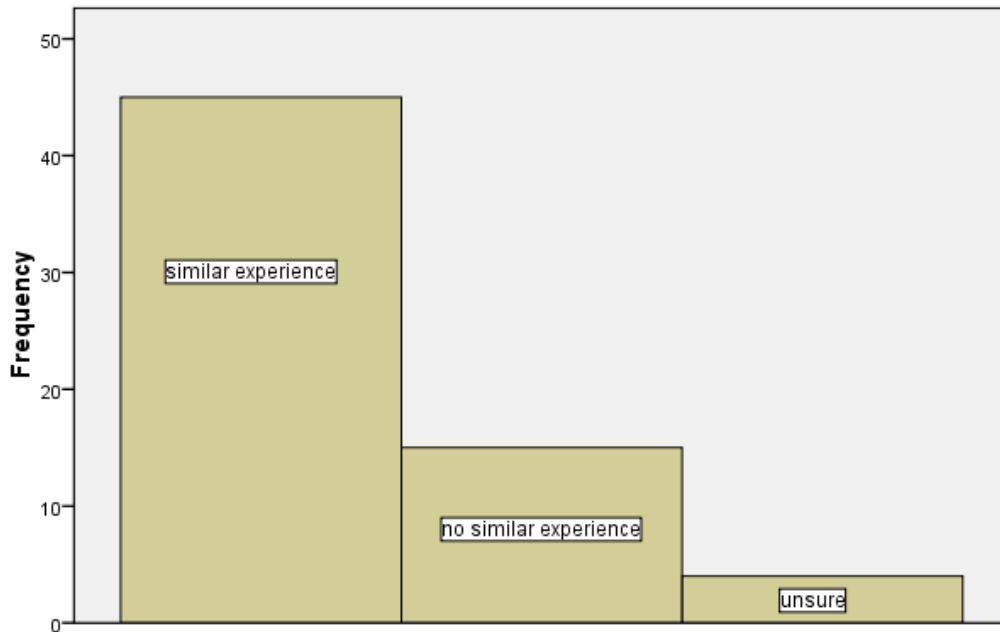
### RESULTS

#### Participants

##### *Demographic Information*

The participants in this study were sampled from the subject pool of Indiana University of Pennsylvania. A total of 64 participants completed the surveys, rendering 8 data points in each cell. Participants responded to demographic questions about age, gender, and relationship status. The mean age of the sample was 19.45 years with a standard deviation of 2.33 years. The sample was roughly equal in terms of sex of participants with 27 (42.2%) males and 34 (53.1%) females. Participants were queried regarding their relationship status with 24 (37.5%) participants stating that they were single, 24 (37.5%) participants stating that they were dating seriously, 11 (17.2%) participants stating that they were dating casually, 2 (3.1%) participants stating that they were married or cohabiting, and 0 participants stating that they were divorced, separated, or widowed. 3 participants failed to complete the demographic portion of the survey.

Participants also responded to questions regarding their personal experiences with playful aggression. Forty five (70.3%) individuals indicated that they had experienced something similar to the interaction described in the vignette. Fifteen (23.4%) individuals indicated that they had not experienced anything similar. Four (6.3%) individuals indicated that they were unsure if they had experienced anything similar to the interaction depicted in the vignette. These findings are displayed graphically in figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Participants' reported experience with playful aggression.

Of the individuals with personal experience of playful aggression, 22 (34.4%) stated having engaged in such an interaction once or twice, 12 (18.8%) stated having engaged in such an interaction three to five times, 2 (3.1%) stated having done so six to eight times, and 9 (14.1%) stated having done so nine or more times. Participants were also asked with whom they had experienced playful aggression. Thirty one participants (48.4%) named a romantic partner, 22 (34.4) named an opposite sex friend, 12 (18.8%) named a sibling, 8 (12.5%) named a same sex friend, and 3 (4.7%) named some other person. Participants were then asked to rate, on a 7 point likert scale, how they had responded to such interactions with 1 indicating the most positive reaction and 7 indicating the most

negative reaction. The mean score to this query was 1.95 with a standard deviation of 1.81. These findings are displayed graphically in figure 2.

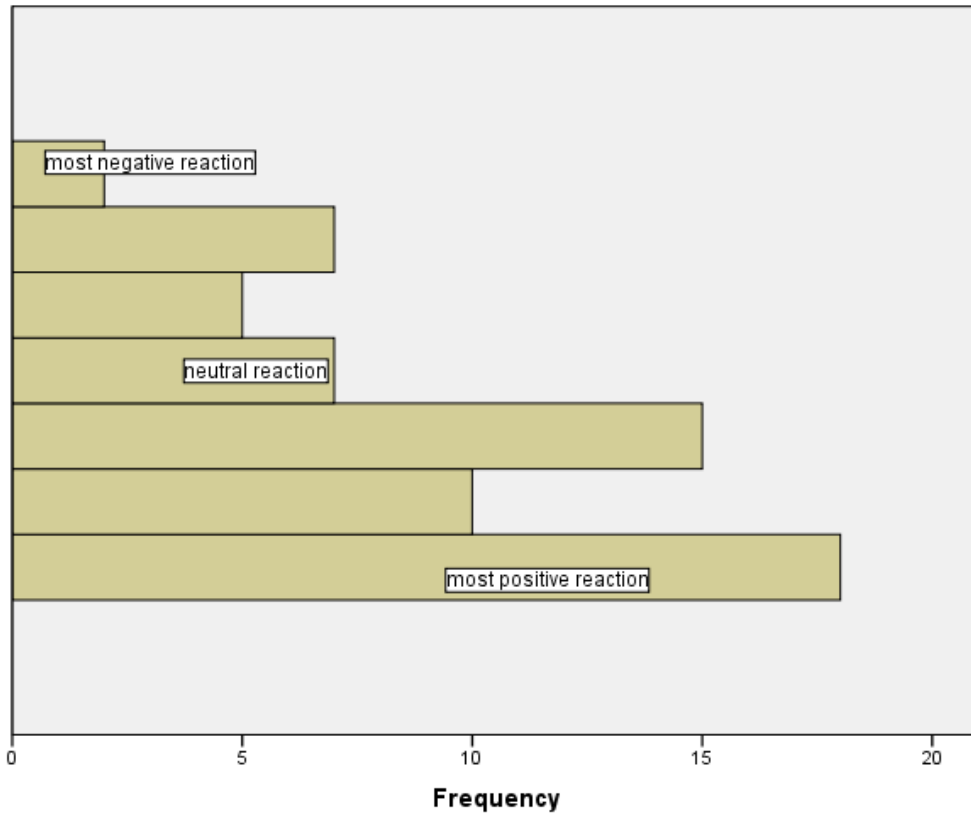


Figure 2. Participants' reported response to playful aggression.

### Quantitative Data

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to investigate four research questions: does the sex of the initiator affect participants' perception of the couple's relationship quality and length; does the size of the initiator affect the participants' perception of the couple's relationship quality and length; does the reaction of the target affect the participants' perception of the couple's relationship quality and length; do any of the independent variables affect perception of the interaction as aggressive or not aggressive. Three dependent variables entered into the MANOVA:

relationship quality as signified by the sum of scores on dimensions 1 through 24; prediction of relationship length; and assessment of the interaction as aggressive, non-aggressive, or ambiguous. The three independent variables entered into the MANOVA were: sex of the initiator, sex of the taller partner, and response of the target. There were statistically significant differences among three groups on the combined dependent variables. The sex of the initiator was found to be significant:  $F(3, 52)=5.81, p=.002$ ; Wilks' Lambda=.749; partial eta squared= .251. The reaction of the target was also found to be significant:  $F(3,52)=13.123, p=.000$ ; Wilks' Lambda=.569; partial eta squared=.431. Lastly, the sex of the taller partner was found to be significant:  $F(3,52)=4.084, p=.011$ ; Wilks' Lambda=.809; partial eta squared=.191. When the results of the MANOVA for the dependent variables were considered separately, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .017, four differences reached statistical significance.

#### *Effect of Initiator's Sex*

On sex of the initiator, prediction of relationship length was found to be significant:  $F(1,54)=12.884, p=.001$ , partial eta squared=.193. An inspection of mean scores indicated that when the female was the initiator of playful aggression, participants predicted shorter length of relationship ( $M=4.705, SD=.212$ ) than when the male was the initiator of playful aggression ( $M=3.629, SD=.212$ ). This finding is graphically displayed in figure 3 (with lower scores indicating longer relationship length).

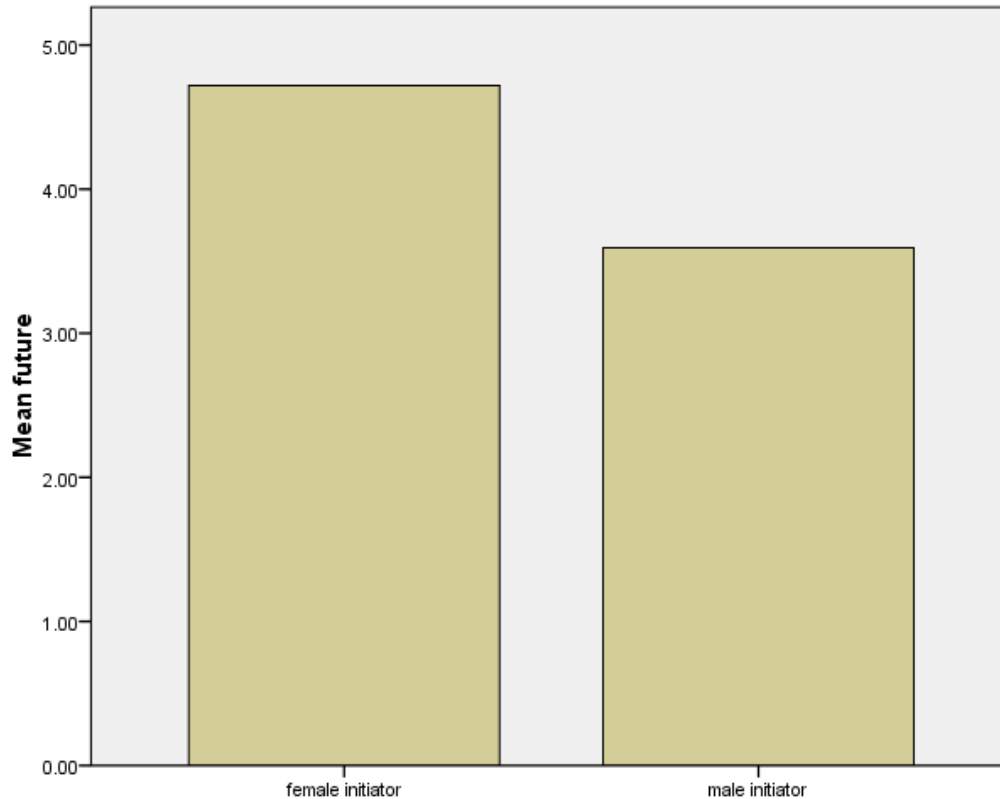
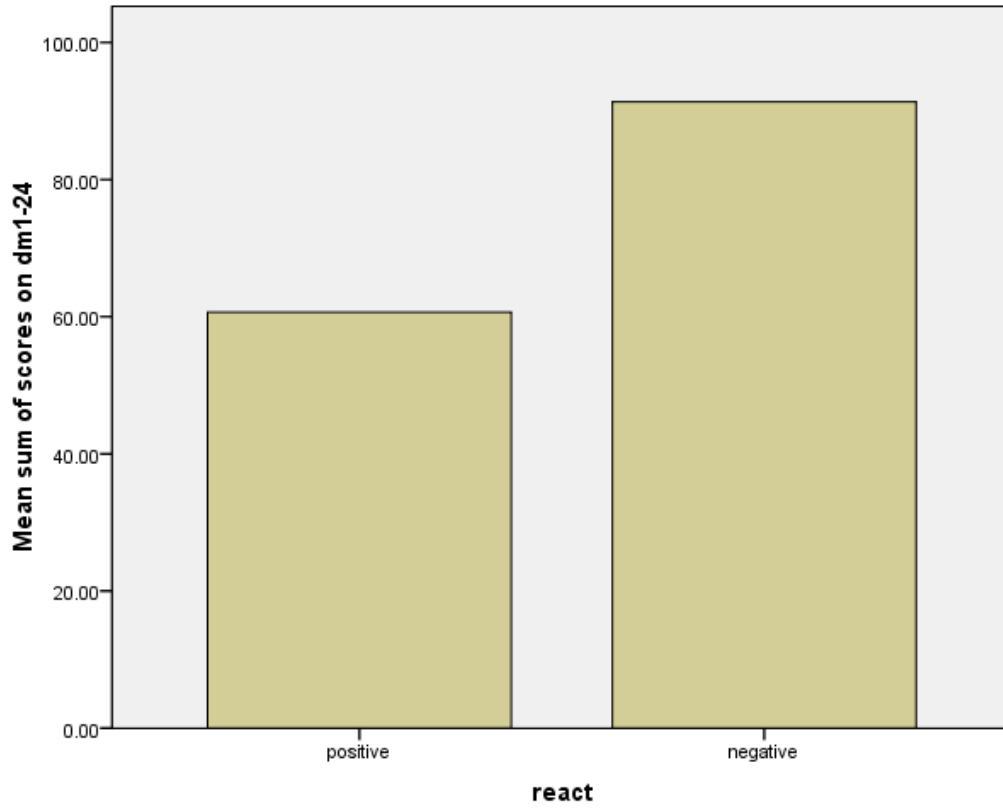


Figure 3. Effect of initiator's sex on participants' prediction of couple's future.

#### *Effect of Target's Reaction*

On reaction of the target, assessment of relationship quality ( $F(1, 54)=29.285$ ,  $p=.000$ , partial eta squared=.352) and prediction of relationship length ( $F(1,54)=17.766$ ,  $p=.000$ , partial eta squared=.248) were both found to be significant. When the target's reaction was positive, participants assessed greater relationship quality ( $M=61.103$ ,  $SD=4.037$ ) than when the target's reaction was negative ( $M= 91.996$ ,  $SD=4.037$ ). Additionally, participants predicted shorter length of relationship ( $M=4.799$ ,  $SD=.212$ ) when the reaction of the target was negative as opposed to positive ( $M=3.536$ ,  $SD=.212$ ). These findings are graphically displayed in figures 4 (with lower scores indicating greater relationship quality) and 5 (with lower scores indicating longer relationship length).



*Figure 4.* Effect of target's reaction on participants' prediction of couple's relationship quality.

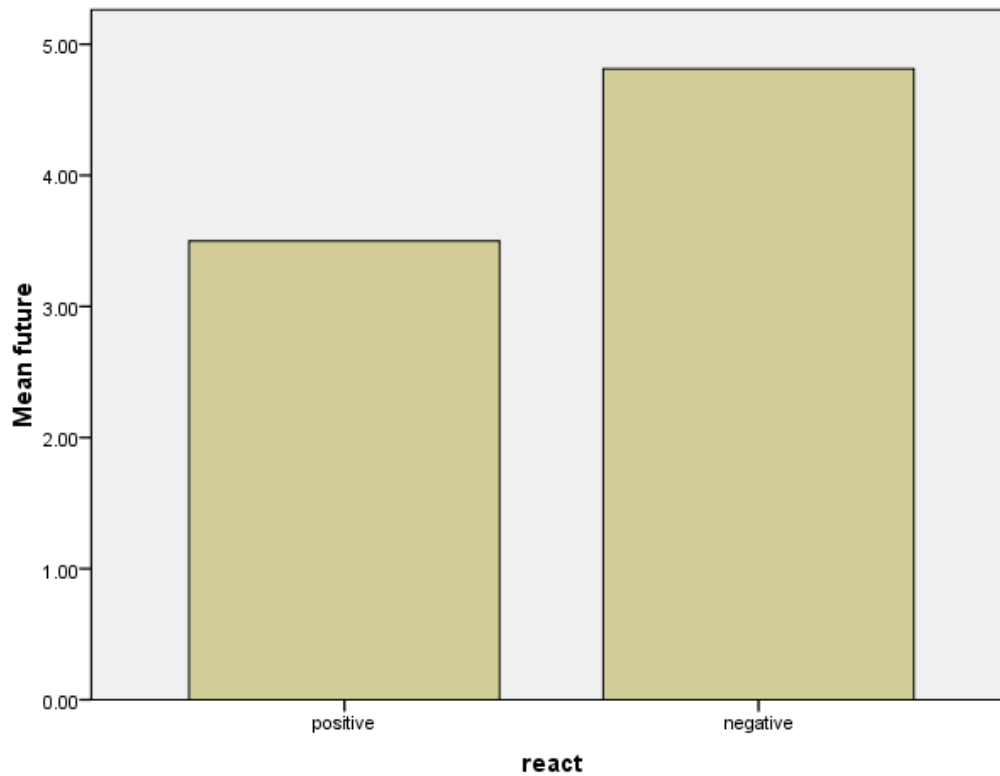


Figure 5. Effect of target's reaction on participants' prediction of couple's relationship length.

#### *Effect of Taller Partner's Sex*

On sex of the taller partner, assessment of the interaction as aggressive or not aggressive was found to be significant:  $F(1,54)=6.078, p=.017$ , partial eta squared=.101. When the taller partner was male, participants were more likely to assess the interaction as aggressive ( $M=2.018, SD=.161$ ) than when the taller partner was female ( $M=1.455, SD=.161$ ). This finding is graphically displayed in figure 6.

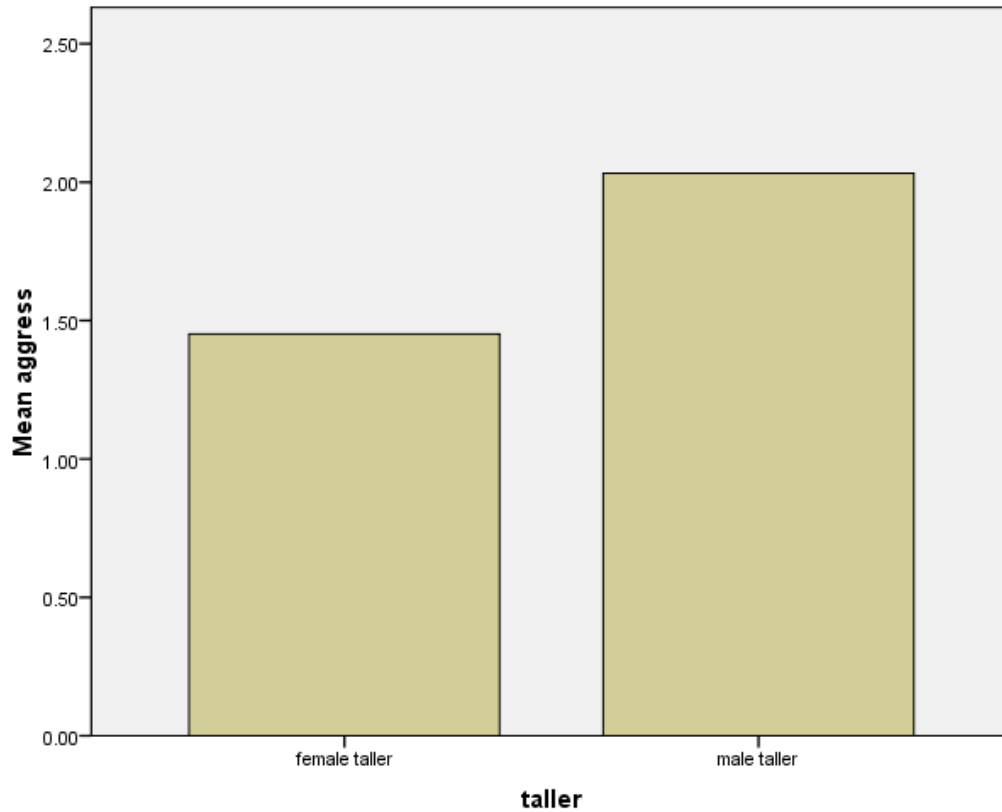


Figure 6. Effect of sex of taller partner on participants' assessment of aggressiveness.

### *Correlations*

Pearson Correlations coefficients were computed to ascertain the relationship between the subjects' experience of playful aggression in their own lives, their reports regarding its frequency, and their perceptions regarding the couple's relationship quality. The following variables were used to compute correlations: likert ratings on the dimensions assessing normalcy (lower scores indicating more normalcy); likert ratings on the dimensions assessing health (lower scores indicating more health); participants' personal experience with playful aggression (on the variable "similar" scores of 1 indicating personal experience, scores of 2 indicating unsure of personal experience, scores of 3 indicating no personal experience and on the variable "times" lower scores



indicating less personal experience); prediction of future (lower scores indicating longer relationship length) for the couple in the vignette. Several significant correlations emerged. At the .01 level, ratings of the couple's relationship health was correlated with both having a similar experience of playful aggression ( $r=.367$ ) and the number of times participants reported experiencing playful aggression in their own lives ( $r=-.413$ ). Any prior experience with playful aggression was associated with a more positive assessment of the couple on dimensions of relationship health. Further, more frequent experiences of playful aggression were associated with an even more positive assessment of the couple on dimensions on relationship health. Also at the .01 level, ratings of the couple's relationship normalcy were correlated with both having a similar experience of playful aggression in their own lives ( $r=.404$ ) and the number of times participants reported experiencing playful aggression in their own lives ( $r=-.467$ ). Again, any prior experience with playful aggression was associated with a more positive assessment of the couple on dimensions of relationship normalcy and more frequent experiences were associated with a slightly more positive assessment of the couple on dimensions of relationship normalcy. At the .05 level, prediction of the couple's future was positively correlated with having a similar experience of playful aggression ( $r=.281$ ) and negatively correlated with the number of times participants reported experiencing playful aggression in their own lives ( $r=-.254$ ). Thus, having any prior experience with playful aggression was associated with predicting longer relationship length for the couple but more frequent experiences did not substantially increase prediction of relationship length.

## Qualitative Data

A qualitative analysis of the responses to the open-ended probe of “Is this interaction between Dave and Alicia aggressive? Please explain why or why not” and the sentence completion task was also performed. The method employed was that of the constant comparative method, in which data are unitized, themes across these units are identified, units are then categorized under these themes, and finally the relationships between these themes are explored. Themes were identified and examined within groups of responses to each individual probe (1 open-ended probe and 8 sentence completion probes). Inter-rater reliability statistics verified the validity of these themes, as all levels of agreement were over .80. A more detailed explanation of the complete coding procedure, along with inter-rater reliability statistics can be found in Appendix E.

### *Is This Interaction Between Dave and Alicia Aggressive?*

In response to the query “Is this interaction between Dave and Alicia aggressive? Please explain why or why not” participants produced a total of 256 individual units of meaning. These units were categorized into 20 distinct themes. The most common theme was labeled “play/fun”. Such responses indicated that the couple was “just goofing around” or “roughhousing” and that the interaction was “all in good fun”. These types of responses accounted for about 18% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by taller male, positive reaction condition (10 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction condition and the initiated by shorter female, negative reaction condition (4 responses). Other positive, non-aggressive themes to emerge were: “flirting” (6%), “good” (3%), “comfortable” (2%), “normal” (2%), “sex/intimacy” (<1%).

The next most common theme to emerge was labeled “level of physical contact”. Such responses indicated that the interaction was assessed for aggressiveness depending on how “light”, “hard”, or “rough” the physical contact between Dave and Alicia was depicted. These types of responses accounted for about 12% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction condition and the initiated by taller female, positive reaction condition (8 responses). “Level of physical contact” responses were least common for participants in the initiated by taller male, negative reaction condition and the initiated by taller female, negative reaction condition (0 responses). Other defining criteria themes to emerge were: “target reaction” (8%), “initiator intent” (7%), “frequency” (5%), “context” (4%), and “enjoyment” (<1%).

The most common negative assessment theme to emerge was labeled “harm” and accounted for about 5% of the total responses. Such responses assessed the interaction as “cruel”, “violent”, or “abusive”. This response was most likely for participants in the initiated by taller male, positive reaction condition (5 responses) and least likely for participants in the initiated by shorter female, negative reaction and the initiated by taller female, negative reaction conditions (0 responses). Other negative themes to emerge were: “dominance” (3%), “gateway to serious violence” (2%), “attention seeking” (1%), and “annoying” (<1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 1.

Table 1

*Is This Interaction between David and Alicia Aggressive?*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short F. + React	Short M. - React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Play/Fun	7	10	6	6	4	4	5	5	47	18
Level of Contact	8	2	0	7	3	4	0	8	32	12
Target Reaction	6	5	3	2	3	0	1	2	22	8
Intent	5	2	1	1	5	2	4	0	20	7
Flirting	1	2	0	6	3	3	2	1	18	6
Frequency	2	5	1	1	1	4	1	1	15	5
Harm	3	5	2	1	1	0	0	2	14	5
Common	0	1	2	0	4	3	1	0	11	4
Context	2	1	2	1	1	0	0	4	11	4
Dominance	0	0	1	1	3	2	1	2	10	3
Good	3	1	0	1	1	0	2	1	9	3
Comfortable	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	3	7	2
Gateway	1	1	0	4	0	0	1	0	7	2
Normal	1	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	6	2
Stage of Relationship	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	2	6	2
Sex Roles	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	2	6	2
Attention	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	1	5	1
Annoying	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	4	<1
Sex/Intimacy	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	3	<1
Enjoyment	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	3	<1

*I Have Acted Like This...*

In response to the query, “I have acted like this...” participants produced a total of 79 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 11 themes. The most common theme was labeled “a few times”. These types of responses accounted for about 14% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter female, negative reaction condition (3 responses). “A few times” was the least common response type for 3 conditions: initiated by shorter male, positive reaction;

initiated by shorter female, positive reaction; initiated by shorter male, negative reaction (0 responses). The next most common frequency to emerge was “never” and accounted for about 13% of the total responses. These types of responses were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction condition (3 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by shorter female, positive reaction and initiated by shorter female, negative reaction conditions (0 responses). Other frequency themes to emerge were: “many times” (4%) and “in the past” (4%).

Another common response to the query, “I have acted like this...” was that of identifying the specific persons with whom participants had engaged in this behavior. The most common specific theme was “in a relationship” and accounted for about 16% of the total responses. These responses were most likely for participants in the initiated by taller male, positive reaction condition (4 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by taller male, negative reaction and initiated by shorter female, negative reaction conditions (0 responses). Other specific partner themes to emerge were: “with friends” (9%), “when young” (7.5%), and “with siblings” (4%).

Another frequent type of response to emerge consisted of citing the specific reasons participants had acted similarly. The most common specific theme was “to play” and accounted for about 12.6% of the total responses. These responses were most likely for participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction and initiated by shorter male, negative reaction conditions (3 responses). “To play” response types were least common for participants in 3 conditions: initiated by taller male, positive reaction; initiated by taller male, negative reaction; initiated by shorter female, negative reaction (0 responses). Other specific reason themes to emerge were: “to flirt” (6%) and “for a

specific reason” (6%) in which participants cited more precise reasons that were too varied to form discrete categories. Such responses included reasons such as “to get attention,” “when I’ve felt like I’ve been hurt,” and “when trying to impress.” These results are graphically summarized in table 2.

Table 2

*I Have Acted Like This...*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short F. + React	Short M. - React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
In a Relationship	2	4	0	2	3	0	1	1	13	16.4
A Few Times	0	2	1	0	0	3	2	2	10	14
Never	3	1	2	0	2	0	1	1	10	12.6
To Play	3	0	0	2	3	0	1	1	10	12.6
With Friends	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	2	7	8.8
When Young	0	0	1	1	0	1	2	1	6	7.5
To Flirt	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	5	6
For a Specific Reason	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	1	5	6
Many Times	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	3	3.7
In the Past	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	3	3.7
With Siblings	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	3.7
Miscellaneous	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	3	3.7

*This Couple Is...*

In response to the query, “This couple is...” participants produced a total of 77 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 15 themes. The most common type of response to emerge seemed to be that of positive relationship qualities. The most common specific theme was labeled “normal”. These types of responses accounted for about 19% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction condition (4 responses) and least common

for participants in the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction condition (0 responses). Other positive themes to emerge were: “fine” (8%); “happy” (6%); “playful” (4%); “comfortable” (4%); flirtatious” (2.5%); “affectionate” (2.5%).

Another type of response to emerge seemed to be that of noting negative relationship qualities. The most common negative theme to emerge was “troubled.” This theme accounted for about 19% of the total responses and was most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction and the initiated by shorter female, negative conditions (5 responses). “Troubled” response types were least common in 4 conditions: initiated by shorter male, positive reaction; initiated by taller male, positive reaction; initiated by shorter female, positive reaction; initiated by taller female, positive reaction (0 responses). Other negative themes to emerge were: “in need of improved communication” (9%), “unusual” (2.5%), “precarious relationship” (2.5%).

Responses also appeared to cluster around noting precise relationship features. The most common relationship feature theme to emerge was “immature relationship”. Terms in this category did not assess the couple’s relationship in an outright negative way but rather consisted of descriptions such as, “having puppy love” and “like most younger-aged couples.” These types of responses accounted for about 10% of the total responses and were most common for participants in 3 conditions: initiated by shorter male, positive reaction; initiated by taller male, negative reaction; initiated by taller female, positive reaction (2 responses). “Immature relationship” response types were least common for participants in 3 conditions: initiated by shorter female, positive reaction; initiated by shorter male, negative reaction; initiated by taller female, negative reaction (0

responses). Other precise relationship feature themes to emerge were: “role reversal” (2.5%) and “platonic” (2.5%). These results are graphically summarized in table 3.

Table 3

*This Couple Is...*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short F. + React	Short M. - React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Troubled	0	0	1	0	5	5	4	0	15	19.4
Normal	4	2	2	2	0	2	2	1	15	19.4
Immature Relationship	2	0	2	1	0	1	0	2	8	9.6
Communication	0	1	1	2	2	0	1	0	7	9
Fine	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	6	7.7
Happy	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	6.4
Playful	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	3.8
Age	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	3	3.8
Comfortable	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	3	3.8
Miscellaneous	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	3	3.8
Role Reversal	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	2.5
Unusual	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2.5
Precarious Relationship	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2.5
Flirtatious	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	2.5
Platonic	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	2.5
Affectionate	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2.5

*The Way This Couple Acts Is...*

In response to the query, “The way this couple acts is...” participants produced a total of 79 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 9 themes. These themes seemed to fall into 3 broader categories in which participants categorized the couple’s behavior as positive, negative, or neutral. The most common specific theme was labeled “normal”. These types of responses accounted for about 29% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter female,



negative reaction condition (5 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction conditions (0 responses). Other positive themes to emerge were: “playful (6%); “flirtatious” (6%).

Within the category of negative behavioral labels, the most common specific theme to emerge was “abnormal”. This theme accounted for about 11% of the total responses and was most common for participants in the initiated by taller female, negative reaction condition (4 responses). “Abnormal” response types were least common for participants in 4 conditions: initiated by shorter male, positive reaction; initiated by taller male, negative reaction; initiated by shorter female, positive reaction; initiated by taller female, positive reaction (0 responses). Other negative themes to emerge were: “bad” (10%), “miscommunicative” (4%).

Within the category of neutral behavioral labels, the most common specific theme to emerge was “immature.” These types of responses accounted for about 16% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter female, positive reaction and initiated by taller female, positive reaction conditions (4 responses). “Immature” response types were least common for participants in 3 conditions: initiated by taller male, positive reaction; initiated by shorter female, negative reaction; initiated by taller female, negative reaction (0 responses). Other neutral themes to emerge were; “platonic” (5%); “physical” (2.5%). These results are graphically summarized in table 4.

Table 4

*The Way This Couple Acts Is...*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short F. + React	Short M. - React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Normal	4	4	4	2	0	5	2	2	23	29
Immature	1	0	2	4	2	0	0	4	13	16.4
Abnormal	0	2	0	0	1	2	4	0	9	11.3
Bad	0	0	1	0	2	3	2	0	8	10
Miscellaneous	3	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	7	8.8
Playful	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	3	5	6.3
Flirtatious	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	2	5	6.3
Platonic	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	4	5
Miscommunicative	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	3	3.7
Physical	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2.5

*This Behavior Is...*

In response to the query, “This behavior is...” participants produced a total of 100 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 14 themes. These themes appeared to fall under 3 broader categories in which participants categorized the couple’s behavior as positive, negative, or neutral. The most common specific theme was labeled “normal.” These types of responses accounted for about 28% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction and the initiated by taller male, positive reaction conditions (5 responses). “Normal” response types were least common for participants in the shorter male, negative reaction condition (2 responses). Other positive themes to emerge were: “flirtatious” (13%); “playful (9%).

The most common specific negative theme to emerge was labeled “unacceptable” and accounted for about 7% of the total responses. These types of responses were most

common for participants in the initiated by taller male, negative reaction condition (3 responses). “Unacceptable” response types were least common for participants in 4 conditions: initiated by shorter male, positive reaction; initiated by taller male, positive reaction; initiated by shorter female, positive reaction; initiated by taller female, negative reaction (0 responses). Other negative themes to emerge were: “gateway to serious violence” (6%), “abusive” (5%), “annoying” (3%), “deceitful” (2%), “miscommunicative” (2%).

The most common specific neutral theme to emerge was labeled “context dependent” and accounted for about 6% of the total responses. These type of responses consisted of participants withholding judgment of the behavior by stating that it “depends on the circumstances” or on “who you ask.” These types of responses were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction condition (3 responses). “Context dependent” response types were least common for participants in 4 conditions: initiated by shorter female, positive reaction; initiated by shorter male, negative reaction; initiated by shorter female, negative reaction; initiated by taller female, negative reaction (0 responses). Other neutral themes to emerge were: “immature” (6%), “abnormal” (5%), “boundary testing” (2%) “sex role dependent” (2%). These results are graphically summarized in table 5.

Table 5

*This Behavior Is...*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short F. + React	Short M. - React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Normal	5	5	3	4	2	3	3	3	28	28
Flirtatious	0	0	2	3	0	1	3	4	13	13
Playful	3	1	0	2	1	1	0	1	9	9
Unacceptable	0	0	3	0	1	2	0	1	7	7
Context Dependent	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	6	6
Gateway	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	6	6
Immature	0	1	0	2	0	3	0	0	6	6
Abusive	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	5	5
Abnormal	0	1	0	0	2	0	2	0	5	5
Miscellaneous	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	4	4
Annoying	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	3	3
Boundary Testing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2
Sex Role Dependent	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Deceitful	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	2
Miscommunicative	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	2

*Dave's Intention is to...*

In response to the query, “Dave’s intention is to...” participants produced a total of 92 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 12 themes. In conditions when Dave was the initiator of the playful aggression, participants were most likely to use terms connoting play to describe his intentions. These types of responses accounted for about 18% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction condition (6 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by taller male, positive reaction condition (2 responses). Other themes to describe Dave’s intentions as an initiator of playful aggression were: “flirt” (14%); “tease” (4%); “get attention” (3%); “be physical” (3%); “control” (3%);

“hurt” (2%); “test boundaries” (2%); “exhibit traditional gender-role behavior” (2%); “attract” (2%); “pursue a sexual relationship” (1%); “pursue a platonic relationship” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 6.

Table 6

*Dave’s Intention is to...(As Initiator)*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short M. - React	Total	Percentage
Play	6	2	4	3	17	18
Flirt	2	5	2	4	13	14
Tease	1	0	1	2	4	4
Get Attention	1	0	2	0	3	3
Be Physical	1	1	0	1	3	3
Control	0	0	1	2	3	3
Hurt	1	1	0	0	2	2
Boundaries	0	2	0	0	2	2
Gender-Role Behavior	0	2	0	0	2	2
Attract	1	0	0	1	2	2
Pursue Sexual Relationship	1	0	0	0	1	<1
Pursue Platonic Relationship	0	0	1	0	1	<1

In conditions when Dave was the target of the playful aggression, participants were equally likely to describe his intentions as “playful,” “attraction,” and “make his partner cease the behavior” (10%). Participants in the initiated by taller female, positive reaction condition (4 responses) were most likely to use terms connoting playful intentions whereas participants in the initiated by shorter female, negative reaction and the initiated by taller female, negative reaction conditions (1 response) were least likely to use such terms. Participants in the initiated by taller female, positive reaction condition (4 response) were most likely to use terms connoting attracting intentions whereas participants in the initiated by shorter female, negative reaction condition (1

response) were least likely to use such terms. Participants in the initiated by shorter female, negative reaction condition (6 responses) were most likely to use terms connoting Dave’s desire to make his partner cease the behavior whereas participants in the shorter female, positive reaction and the initiated by taller female, positive reaction conditions were least likely to use such terms. Other themes to describe Dave’s intentions as the target of playful aggression were: “pursue a platonic relationship” (3%); “get attention” (2%); “flirt” (2%); “be physical” (1%); “hurt” (1%); “pursue a sexual relationship” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 7.

Table 7

*Dave’s Intention is to...(As Target)*

Condition	Short F. + React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Playful	3	1	1	4	9	10
Make Partner Cease Behavior	0	6	3	0	9	10
Attract	2	1	2	4	9	10
Pursue Platonic Relationship	1	1	0	1	3	3
Get Attention	0	0	0	2	2	2
Flirt	2	0	0	0	2	2
Be Physical	1	0	0	0	1	<1
Hurt	0	0	1	0	1	<1
Pursue Sexual Relationship	0	1	0	0	1	<1

*Alicia's Intention is to...*

In response to the query, “Alicia’s intention is to...” participants produced a total of 82 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 12 themes. In conditions when Alicia was the initiator of the playful aggression, participants were most likely to use terms connoting play to describe her intentions. These types of responses accounted for about 10% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter female, positive reaction and the initiated by taller female, negative reaction conditions (3 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by taller female, positive reaction condition (0 responses). Other themes to describe Alicia’s intentions as an initiator of playful aggression were: “flirt” (8.5%); “show affection” (6%); “pursue a platonic relationship” (5%); “make comfortable” (5%); “get attention” (5%); “be physical” (4%); “attract” (4%); “pursue a sexual relationship” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 8.

Table 8

*Alicia's Intention is to...(As Initiator)*

Condition	Short F. + React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Play	3	2	3	0	8	10
Flirt	4	1	2	0	7	8.5
Show Affection	1	3	1	0	5	6
Pursue Platonic Relationship	0	0	3	1	4	5
Make Comfortable	0	0	2	2	4	5
Get Attention	1	0	0	3	4	5
Be Physical	2	0	0	1	3	4
Attract	0	0	1	2	3	4
Miscellaneous	0	2	0	0	2	3
Pursue Sexual Relationship	0	1	0	0	1	<1

In conditions when Alicia was the target of the playful aggression, participants were most likely to describe her intentions as “make her partner cease the behavior” (13%). Participants in the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction condition (5 responses) were most likely to use terms connoting Alicia’s desire to make her partner cease the behavior whereas participants in the initiated by shorter male, positive reaction and the initiated by taller male, positive reaction conditions (1 response) were least likely to use such terms. Other themes to describe Alicia’s intentions as the target of playful aggression were: “avoid conflict” (6%); “flirt” (5%); “show affection” (5%); “play” (4%); “pursue a platonic relationship” (2.5%); “pursue a romantic relationship” (2.5%); “make comfortable” (1%); “get attention” (1%); “be physical” (1%); “pursue a sexual relationship” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 9.

Table 9

*Alicia’s Intention is to...(As Target)*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short M. - React	Total	Percentage
Make Partner Cease Behavior	1	1	4	5	11	13
Avoid Conflict	0	1	2	2	5	6
Flirt	1	3	0	0	4	5
Show Affection	2	2	0	0	4	5
Play	3	0	0	0	3	4
Pursue Platonic Relationship	0	1	1	0	2	2.5
Pursue Romantic Relationship	1	0	0	1	2	2.5
Make Comfortable	0	1	0	0	1	<1
Get Attention	0	0	0	1	1	<1
Be Physical	1	0	0	0	1	<1
Pursue Sexual Relationship	1	0	0	0	1	<1



### *Dave Probably Feels...*

In response to the query, “Dave probably feels...” participants produced a total of 91 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 15 themes. In conditions when Dave was the initiator of the playful aggression, participants were most likely to use terms connoting happiness to describe his feelings. These types of responses accounted for about 6.5% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by taller male, positive reaction condition (4 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by taller male, negative reaction and the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction conditions (0 responses). Participants were equally likely to use terms connoting playfulness to describe Dave’s feelings. These types of responses were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction condition (3 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated by taller male, negative reaction condition (0 responses). Other themes to describe Dave’s feelings as an initiator of playful aggression were: “feeling like nothing is wrong” (5.5%); “domination” (4%); “general negative feelings” (4%); “affection” (3%); “friendship” (3%); “confusion” (3%); “intimacy” (2%); “strong romantic feelings” (2%); “aggression” (1%); “awareness of size differential” (1%); “awkwardness” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 10.

Table 10

*Dave Probably Feels...(As Initiator)*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short M. - React	Total	Percentage
Happy	2	4	0	0	6	6.5
Playful	2	1	0	3	6	6.5
Nothing Wrong	0	1	1	3	5	5.5
Domination	1	0	2	1	4	4
General Negative Feelings	0	1	2	1	4	4
Affection	2	0	2	0	3	3
Friendship	1	2	0	0	3	3
Confusion	0	0	1	2	3	3
Intimacy	1	1	0	0	2	2
Strongly Romantic Feelings	0	1	1	0	2	2
Aggression	1	0	0	1	1	<1
Awareness of Size Differential	0	0	0	1	1	<1
Awkwardness	0	1	0	0	1	<1

In conditions when Dave was the target of the playful aggression, participants were most likely to describe his feelings as “annoyance” (7.5%). Participants in the initiated by shorter female, negative reaction condition (3 responses) were most likely to use terms connoting annoyance whereas participants in the initiated by taller female, positive reaction condition (0 responses) were least likely to use such terms. Other themes to describe Dave’s feelings as the target of playful aggression were: “domination” (6.5%); “general negative feelings” (5.5%); “happiness” (5.5%); “affection” (4%); “aggression” (3%); “playfulness” (2%); “awareness of size differential” (2%); “awkwardness” (2%); “uncertainty” (2%); “feeling like nothing is wrong” (1%); “friendship” (1%); “intimacy” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 11.

Table 11

*Dave Probably Feels...(As Target)*

Condition	Short F. + React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Annoyance	2	3	2	0	7	7.5
Domination	1	0	4	2	6	6.5
General Negative Feelings	0	1	3	1	5	5.5
Happiness	3	0	0	2	5	5.5
Affection	1	1	0	2	4	4
Aggression	1	0	2	0	3	3
Playfulness	2	0	0	0	2	2
Awareness of Size Differential	0	0	1	1	2	2
Awkwardness	0	1	0	1	2	2
Uncertainty	0	1	0	1	2	2
Nothing Wrong	1	0	0	0	1	<1
Friendship	0	0	0	1	1	<1
Intimacy	1	0	0	0	1	<1

*Alicia Probably Feels...*

In response to the query, “Alicia probably feels...” participants produced a total of 97 discrete units of meaning. These units were categorized into 14 themes. In conditions when Alicia was the initiator of the playful aggression, participants were most likely to use terms connoting playfulness to describe her feelings. These types of responses accounted for about 10% of the total responses and were most common for participants in the initiated by shorter female, positive reaction condition (6 responses) and least common for participants in the initiated shorter female, negative reaction condition (0 responses). Other themes to describe Alicia’s feelings as an initiator of playful aggression were: “general negative feelings” (6%); “intimidation” (6%); “wanted” (4%); “comfort” (4%); “happiness” (3%); “intimacy” (3%); “affection” (3%);

“being physical” (2%); “friendship” (2%); “rejection” (2%); “awareness of being in public” (2%); “annoyance” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 12.

Table 12

*Alicia Probably Feels...(As Initiator)*

Condition	Short F. + React	Short F. - React	Tall F. - React	Tall F. + React	Total	Percentage
Playfulness	6	0	2	2	10	9.7
General Negative Feelings	2	2	1	1	6	6
Intimidation	2	0	1	3	6	6
Wanted	2	0	0	2	4	4
Comfort	2	0	1	1	4	4
Happiness	2	0	1	0	3	3
Intimacy	1	0	1	1	3	3
Affection	0	1	0	2	3	3
Being Physical	1	0	0	1	2	2
Friendship	0	1	0	1	2	2
Rejection	0	2	1	0	2	2
Awareness of Being in Public	0	1	0	1	2	2
Annoyance	0	1	0	0	1	<1

In conditions when Alicia was the target of the playful aggression, participants were most likely to describe her feelings as “abused” (8%). Participants in the initiated by shorter male, negative reaction condition (6 responses) were most likely to use terms connoting abuse whereas participants in the initiated by taller male, positive reaction condition (0 responses) were least likely to use such terms. Other themes to describe Alicia’s feelings as the target of playful aggression were: “comfort” (5%); “happiness” (4%); “being physical” (4%); “annoyance” (4%); “intimacy” (3%); “affection” (3%); “playfulness” (2%); “general negative feelings” (2%); “intimidation” (2%); “wanted” (1%); “friendship” (1%). These results are graphically summarized in table 13.

Table 13

*Alicia Probably Feels...(As Target)*

Condition	Short M. + React	Tall M. + React	Tall M. - React	Short M. - React	Total	Percentage
Abused	1	0	1	6	8	8
Comfort	1	3	1	0	5	5
Happiness	2	2	0	0	4	4
Being Physical	2	0	1	1	4	4
Annoyance	1	1	1	1	4	4
Intimacy	1	0	1	1	3	3
Affection	1	1	0	1	3	3
Playfulness	2	0	0	0	2	2
General Negative Feelings	0	2	0	0	2	2
Intimidation	1	0	1	0	2	2
Wanted	0	1	0	0	1	<1
Friendship	0	0	0	1	1	<1

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

#### Summary

Playful aggression has been widely studied in children and adolescents and in non-humans. Although significantly less research has been devoted to studying the phenomenon in emerging adults, studies that have tackled the issue have resulted in some interesting but contradictory findings. Ryan (1995, 1998) found that playful aggression in college-aged couples was significantly correlated with sexual and physical aggression whereas Baxter (1992) found it to be positively correlated with relationship closeness. Although decades of research has shown that the phenomenon is common, occurs across the lifespan and species, and serves a wide variety of functions, contradictory findings in adult samples have shown that a fine line exists between playful aggression as an adaptive and enjoyable occurrence in romantic couples and a gateway to physical and sexual abuse. Thus, this study was conducted in an attempt to delineate between playful and serious aggression by investigating the perceptions of observers to the behavior in a dating, college-aged couple. Specifically, this study investigated whether the sex or size of the initiator of playful aggression, the reaction of the target, and the participants' personal experiences with the phenomenon affected perceptions of the couple's relationship and the aggressiveness of the interaction.

Results of the present study indicated that all three independent variables investigated significantly affected the participants' perceptions of the couple and the interaction depicted in the vignette. Participants' personal experience with playful aggression also significantly impacted their perceptions of the couple and of playful

aggression. Specifically, when the initiator of the playful aggression was female, participants predicted that the couple would have a shorter relationship than when the initiator was male. When the target's reaction was positive, participants predicted that the couple would have a longer and healthier relationship than when the reaction was negative. When the taller partner was male, participants were more likely to classify the interaction as aggressive than when the taller partner was female. When participants reported having experienced something similar to the playful aggression depicted in the vignette, they were significantly more likely to perceive the couple as healthier, more normal, and destined for a longer relationship than when they reported no such similar experiences. In sum, sex of the initiator, sex of the taller partner, reaction of the target, and participants' personal experience significantly affected perception of the couple as well as the aggressiveness of the interaction.

Additionally, the qualitative data produced several prominent and overarching themes. These included ideas that reoccurred across conditions, participants, and survey probes. One such overarching theme seemed to be that of a positive perception of the couple in the vignette. Across all factors, participants repeatedly used words such as "flirty," "playful," and "normal" to describe the couple and their behavior. Negative reoccurring themes included participants classifying the behavior as immature or juvenile, categorizing the couples' relationship as platonic rather than romantic, and suggesting that the behavior may be a gateway to interpersonal violence. Several themes involving sex roles also emerged. These included typifying the male initiator's intention as to "hurt" or "control" whereas those of the female initiator were described as "avoiding conflict" and "making comfortable." Furthermore, participants classified the

male's feeling as "domination" and "awareness of the size differential" and those of the female as "intimidated," "wanted," "abused," and "awareness of being in public." In sum, some participants' perceptions of the couple and their behavior were appeared to be dependent on sex.

### Conclusions

Although all three independent variables affected the dependent variables as hypothesized, the manner in which they did so was unanticipated. Of all the findings, perhaps the easiest to understand is that of the effect of target's reaction on participants' perception of the couple depicted in the vignette. According to the relational viewpoint of playful aggression mentioned previously in the literature (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Shotter, 1984; Shotter & Logan, 1988), the phenomenon must be viewed as an interaction between two individuals, including both the action of the initiator and the reaction of the target. Thus it was not surprising that the reaction of the target was an influential factor in how the sample viewed the couple. However, the variable of reaction had a significant effect on the participants' estimates of the length and quality of the relationship, but not the aggressiveness of the interaction. Given the relational viewpoint of playful aggression theorized in the research base, this was a surprising finding. One explanation for this result may be that whereas the playful aggression had a positive effect on the relationship when it was perceived to be mutually enjoyed, a negative reaction did not affect the perceived aggressiveness of the act because such a reaction could be attributed to misinterpretation on the target's behalf. That a mutually enjoyed episode of playful aggression was perceived to be positive overall for the emerging adult couple's relationship fits with previous findings indicating playful aggression in young adults may



be correlated with intimacy (Gergen, 1990). In sum, this largest effect indicated that when the target of playful aggression had a positive reaction, the overall perception was positive. That the participants were more likely to perceive the relationship as healthy and durable indicates that such mutually enjoyed playful aggression may be associated with increased intimacy thereby serving to strengthen a romantic relationship. However, when the target of playful aggression had a negative reaction, the overall perception was not negative. As this variable did not affect the participants' view of the interaction as aggressive or not aggressive suggests other factors may be more influential in determining aggressiveness. Several of these factors may have been identified by the participants themselves, as some used the open ended section of the aggressive or not aggressive query to describe the criterion they used to make this assessment. The criteria produced were: "level of physical contact"; "initiator intent"; "frequency"; "context"; "enjoyment." Perhaps the lack of these pieces of information in the study design precluded the participants from accurately identifying the interaction as aggressive or not aggressive.

Another unexpected finding was how the sex of the initiator affected the participants' perceptions of the couple's relationship. Given the stereotypical perception of the abusive male and the battered woman, the researcher hypothesized that the participants' view of the couple would be negatively impacted when the male was depicted as the initiator of the playful aggression. Surprisingly, the reverse was found to be true in that a female initiator was associated with a shorter predicted relationship length for the couple. One possible interpretation of this finding is that a non-gender role compliant female is not thought to be a suitable long-term romantic partner. Given that a

female initiator was not associated with the perception of lower relationship quality but only relationship length, it may have been that a dominant, forward, non-traditional female is not viewed as a bad romantic partner but not one with whom a man can forge a long-term, serious relationship. In colloquial terms, the girl who is strong and bold enough to initiate playful aggression may be fun to casually date but is not “take home to mom” or “settle down with” material. It may also have been that the reverse was true in that the male’s violation of traditional gender roles affected the perceptions of the participants. Perhaps it was not the dominant female who doomed the relationship, but rather the submissive male. It is equally likely that participants deemed the passive male as an unsuitable long-term mate. However, as this distinction is impossible to make given the existing data, it is only possible to conclude that participants viewed the violation of traditional gender roles as negatively impacting the longevity of heterosexual romantic relationships.

Also surprising was that only one variable affected the participants’ perception of the interaction as aggressive or not aggressive. Participants were only more likely to categorize the interaction as aggressive when the male was the taller half of the couple depicted in the vignette. It was also somewhat unexpected that size showed only a moderate effect size, accounting for about 10% of the variance in aggression. That size was the only variable to affect aggression and its effect was only moderate suggests those factors most important in making the distinction between aggression and non-aggression were not identified. Again, the participants themselves may have identified some of these factors. Variables such as intent, frequency, and level of physical contact may be more influential in classifying an interaction as aggressive or non-aggressive. Another

potential important factor neither investigated nor identified by the participants may be potential for injury. It may be that this finding subtly suggests that point in that participants were more likely to associate a larger male with potential to cause injury, and thus more likely to categorize an encounter with a larger male initiator as aggressive. Again, the salience of traditional gender stereotypes may have influenced participants. Because physical size was associated with aggression for the male but not the female in the vignette, participants may have been more able to envision a larger male as a threatening, intimidating figure who could cause injury to a smaller, more vulnerable female. Thus a larger male may be interpreted as more aggressive than a larger female because it taps into the gender stereotype of the physically superior and stronger male and the female as the “weaker sex.”

Findings from the correlation data strongly suggested a relationship between previous personal experience with playful aggression and perception of the couple’s relationship as healthy, normal, and durable. Medium strength correlations were found between the number of times participants reported engaging in similar behavior and perception of the couple as “normal” and “healthy.” Medium strength correlations were also found between endorsements of any prior engagement in similar behavior and perception of the couple as “normal” and “healthy.” Small strength correlations were found between endorsement of any prior engagement in similar behaviors and the number of times participants reported engaging in such behavior and perception of the couple’s relationship as “durable.” Taken as a whole, these correlations suggest that familiarity breeds positive attitudes, as those participants who admitted to acting in a similar manner were more likely view the couple’s relationship as normal and healthy. To a lesser

extent, those participants who had been playfully aggressive themselves were also more likely to say that the couple's relationship would last over time. The relative weakness of this correlation could be due to the multitude of factors that influence the durability of romantic relationships.

Several of the findings converged with extant literature and when considered in conjunction, offer interesting perspectives on the phenomenon of playful aggression. The present study found that when the target of playful aggression reacted positively, participants rated the couple's relationship higher on dimensions of quality and length. Gergen (1990) found that going steady was a moderator for horseplay in her study of serious and playful aggression in a college sample. Baxter (1992) also found playfulness correlated with relationship closeness in college couples. Taken together, these findings may suggest a possible positive role of playful aggression for developing intimacy and thus increasing relationship durability in dating couples. Playful aggression, when enjoyed by both parties, may serve to develop and strengthen a romantic relationship through mechanisms of increasing trust, providing levity and fun, and providing a non-sexual way of being physically close. In so far as Gergen found more playful aggression in couples who were going steady and the present study found a connection between the phenomenon and perceived relationship strength and durability, it may be theorized that mutually enjoyed playful aggression can actually have a positive effect on romantic relationships.

Another point of convergence with previous literature is the use of playful aggression as a means of flirting. Moore (1985; 1995) found that both teenage girls and to a lesser extent, young women, relied on playful aggression and teasing as a means of

nonverbal courtship signaling. The use of poke and push courtship by adolescents has been replicated in several other studies (Lockhard & Adams, 1980; Maccoby, 1998; Schofield, 1981) and has been theorized to allow inexperienced adolescents and young adults a low-risk and familiar way to initiate intersexual contact (Pellegrini, 2003). In the present study, the theme of flirtation emerged time and time again in the qualitative data. In response to the query “Is this interaction aggressive?” responses classifying the interaction as “playful/fun” or “flirtatious” were the most common. In the data collected from the sentence completion task, “play” and “flirt” were both reoccurring themes. Thus it may be possible that this indirect, safe means of signaling romantic interest continues into emerging adulthood as many of the participants in the present study appeared to conceptualize the couple’s playful aggression as flirtation. Additionally, several participants classified the behavior as “immature” indicating some adherence to the notion that playful aggression is a safe and familiar way to flirt for those inexperienced in courtship behaviors.

Another point of convergence emerged in the possible functions of playful aggression. Several proposed functions were identified by participants through the qualitative data which corresponded to functions of intimate play proposed by Baxter (1992). Baxter outlined four functions of play in her examination of play in college students: intimacy; lessening interpersonal risk; distancing self from interaction; conflict management. Participants in the present study repeatedly described the playful aggression as flirtation. In so far as playful aggression is conceptualized as a low-risk means of flirtation because it is ambiguous and indirect (Pellegrini, 2003), participants may have been speaking to the function of lessening interpersonal risk when describing

the play as flirtation. Participants also described playful aggression as a way of developing a platonic, presumably as opposed to a romantic, relationship. Thus this reoccurring theme may represent the function of distancing oneself from the interaction in that playful aggression could be a non-confrontational way to tell a potential suitor “let’s just be friends.” Another reoccurring theme to emerge out of the qualitative data was that of communication. Several participants suggested the couple was having communication difficulties or that the playful aggression belied some larger issue that needed further communication. Thus some participants may have interpreted the couple’s playful aggression as a means of conflict management. In sum, many of the prominent themes found in the qualitative data converge with previous literature on intimate play suggesting that playful aggression may serve many important functions in developing and managing interpersonal relationships.

In other respects the present study produced findings contradictory to previous research. One major goal of the present study was to ascertain those factors that differentiate playful aggression from serious aggression. In so far as other researchers pointed to the response of the target of playful aggression in determining how the phenomenon is classified (Fry, 1987; Gergen, 1990), it was hypothesized that the target’s reaction would be an influential variable in whether the participants classified the interaction as aggressive or not aggressive. However, in so far as the target’s reaction did not influence how participants viewed the interaction, it is probable that other factors are more important in determining when playful aggression becomes serious aggression.

Taken as a whole, the results of the present study offer several important implications for theory, research, and practice on the phenomenon of playful aggression.

Although the phenomenon has been studied extensively in both children (Blurton Jones, 1972; Boulton, 1996; Fry, 1987; Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987; Pellegrini, 1989; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Whiting & Edwards, 1973) and non-human primates (Fagen, 1978; Harlow & Harlow, 1965; Pellis, 1988; Vanderberg, 1978) and shown to be quite common in these groups, only a handful of researchers have investigated playful aggression in adult samples (Baxter, 1992; Capaldi & Crosby, 1997; Gergen 1990; Moore 1985; Ryan & Mohr, 2005). The present study bolsters the findings of these researchers who found that playful aggression does extend into at least early adulthood and is relatively common in this population. The self report data showed about 70% of participants had experienced something similar to the playful aggression depicted in the vignette, strongly suggesting that the phenomenon is fairly common in a college-aged sample. Additionally, as roughly 48% of participants reporting past experience with playful aggression named a romantic interest as their partner, it is likely that playful aggression continues to function as an indirect and safe way to initiate heterosexual contact into early adulthood. As the theme of flirtation was a prominent one in the qualitative data, the present study contributes to the research base on playful aggression as a common method of poke and push courtship in early adulthood.

In so far as some investigators have found a connection between playful aggression and intimacy in romantic relationships (Baxter, 1992; Gergen, 1990), some of the present findings add to the burgeoning research base that suggests some playful aggression may actually be beneficial in the development of relationship closeness. Participants viewed the couple's relationship as more durable and of a higher quality when the reaction of the target of playful aggression was positive. Also, participants self-

reported relatively positive reactions to playful aggression in their own lives. These findings suggest a possible positive function of playful aggression in intimate relationships.

Whereas the present study does offer some possible answers to the questions raised by the extant research base on playful aggression, the findings also offer some interesting directions for future research. As the only variable to affect the participants' perception of the interaction as aggressive or not aggressive was the sex of the taller partner, future studies may seek to identify other factors that differentiate playful aggression from serious aggression. Several possible factors emerged from the qualitative data, including frequency, initiator intent, and level of physical contact, offering multiple possible avenues of inquiry.

In so far as the present study uncovered some interesting findings related to gender, future lines of research may concentrate on the role of gender in playful aggression. Specifically, the influence of adherence to and violation of traditional gender roles in the way playful aggression is perceived and its function in intimate relationships may prove a fruitful point of inquiry. Because participants saw the relationship with a female initiator as less durable, possibly because that variant of the interaction featured a violation of a traditional gender norm, an investigation into how dominant females affect the perception of playful aggression and the mechanisms underlying these perceptions may be warranted. Also, because participants were more likely to view the interaction as seriously aggressive when the male was the taller partner of the dyad, an examination of how physical size and gender interact to influence the perception of aggression may be beneficial.



Lastly, the present study may offer some insights for clinicians working with a college population. Results indicated that playful aggression is a relatively common occurrence in this age group and that a large percentage of those engaging in playful aggression find it enjoyable. Thus, clinicians working with this population should be aware that such behaviors are relatively common in this age group. Additionally, in so far as the results suggested that there may be some connection between mutually enjoyed playful aggression and intimacy development in romantic relationships, clinicians should be mindful that playful aggression may be beneficial under certain circumstances. In sum, clinicians working with a college-aged population should be cognizant of the research on playful aggression as well as the research on its connection to serious aggression because of the saliency of these issues in this age cohort. Moreover, the present study pointed to considerable nuances in how playful aggression is perceived and its relationship to serious aggression, clinicians must be careful to evaluate playful aggression within context.

Sample size may have been one limitation of the present study. Although the investigation did uncover several statistically significant results, a larger sample size may have yielded even more information as the present design may have been sensitive to only the largest differences. For instance, a larger sample size may have been able to detect interactions between the independent variables. Although the sample size was large enough to satisfy the assumptions of the statistical analyses employed and uncover main effects, a larger sample would have produced more power and thus may have been able to uncover more subtle effects.

Another limitation was the type of sample used. As the entire sample was composed of college students at a large, public university located in the eastern United States, the external validity of the study may be somewhat limited. Although the primary aim of the present study was to investigate playful aggression in a college-aged sample, it is likely that the results uncovered would not directly translate to other populations. The findings did converge with those of researchers investigating the phenomenon in the same age group (Baxter, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Moore, 1995), but it is not clear if an investigation with an older age cohort would find similar rates of playful aggression. As the vast majority of the research on playful aggression has focused on children and adolescents, it would be interesting to study the phenomenon in an older age group to see how playful aggression changes across the lifespan. Additionally, given the circumscribed nature of the sample used, it is possible that the results would not be reflective of those found in similar age groups but of dissimilar backgrounds, for instance: those not attending university or living in different geographic locations. Thus, the results garnered from the present study must be evaluated with this in mind, and not blindly extrapolated to other populations.

Further limitations lay in the design of the study which relied on a written vignette and a survey evaluating participants' perceptions of the interaction depicted in the vignette. Because the participants were responding to an artificial scenario, the external validity of the study may be somewhat limited. Certainly an authentic interpersonal interaction consists of many more layers of meaning and other subtle nuances that cannot be completely expressed in writing and so perhaps participants would have different reactions to viewing a playfully aggressive interaction in vivo then to reading a vignette

describing such an interaction. Additionally, as participants read the vignettes themselves, it is possible that some missed key variables or misread some specifics of the interaction. Although there was no indication that participants misunderstood directions or incorrectly completed the surveys, it is not clear how carefully participants read the vignettes and thus how much their individual responses were dependent on the manipulated variables. In sum, given the manufactured nature of the design, the results must be evaluated with regard to the potentially limited generalizability to real life situations.

Also, as participants self-reported their own experiences of playful aggression, it is possible that their responses were influenced by social desirability. Participants may have held negative opinions regarding playful aggression and thus hesitant to disclose their own experiences. Furthermore, some participants may have been reluctant to report intimate details about their romantic relationships, of which playfully aggressive interactions may be one. In sum, given the pitfalls of self-reported data, the rates of playful aggression found by the present study may not be a direct reflection of those found through other means, such as direct observation.

In closing, the phenomenon of playful aggression in emerging adult couples is an interesting one that deserves further inquiry. Given the phenomenon's relationship to both serious aggression and positive relationship factors, an investigation seeking to illuminate those variable that define playful aggression as playful was desperately needed. The present investigation sought to do so, in part, by acknowledging the relational viewpoint of the phenomenon through the employment of a vignette rather than a questionnaire. From the results of present study, it is clear that playful aggression is a

relatively common occurrence in this age group, it can have potential positive benefits, and several factors separate the phenomenon from serious aggression. Furthermore, its connection to other salient topics such as traditional gender role conformity and interpersonal violence warrants further inquiry. The topic has important implications for both basic research on human behavior and applied research on human relationships and violence. As the current study only represents one small contribution to the research base on this important and interesting phenomenon, the possibilities for future work in the area are both necessary and substantial.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### *Vignette A*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much taller than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes when they are together, David will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with Alicia. Alicia usually reacts to this by smiling and lightly pushing or punching David back.

#### *Vignette B*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much shorter than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes when they are together, David will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with Alicia. Alicia usually reacts to this by smiling and lightly pushing or punching David back.

#### *Vignette C*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much shorter than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes when they are together, David will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with Alicia. Alicia usually reacts to this by frowning and walking away from David.

*Vignette D*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much shorter than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes when they are together, Alicia will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with David. David usually reacts to this by smiling and lightly pushing or punching Alicia back.

*Vignette E*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much taller than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes when they are together, David will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with Alicia. Alicia usually reacts to this by frowning and walking away from David.

*Vignette G*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much shorter than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes when they are together, Alicia will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with David. David usually reacts to this by frowning and walking away from Alicia.

*Vignette H*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much taller than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes

when they are together, Alicia will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with David. David usually reacts to this by frowning and walking away from Alicia.

*Vignette I*

David and Alicia, both sophomores in college, have been dating for about six months. They met at a Halloween party given by a mutual friend. David thought Alicia was very pretty even though she was much taller than him and so he asked her out. Sometimes when they are together, Alicia will lightly push, punch, pinch, and wrestle with David. David usually reacts to this by smiling and lightly pushing or punching Alicia back.

Appendix B

Survey

**After reading the vignette, please complete the following sentences.**

Dave's intention is to \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Alicia probably feels \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This behavior is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Dave probably feels \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The way this couple acts is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Alicia's intention is to \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I have acted like this \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This couple is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**After reading the vignette, please rate the interaction described in the vignette on the following scales by circling the number that best describes it.**

Aggressive Not at all Aggressive

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Scary Safe

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Loving Not at all Loving

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Intimidating Not at all Intimidating

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Hostile Not at all Hostile

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Healthy Unhealthy

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Common Rare

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Caring Not at all Caring

-----  
1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Normal ----- Abnormal  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Confrontational ----- Not at all Confrontational  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Affectionate ----- Not at all Affectionate  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Friendly ----- Not at all Friendly  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Hurtful ----- Not at all Hurtful  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Playful ----- Not at all Playful  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Dominating ----- Uncontrolling  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Well ----- Unwell  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Harmless ----- Harmful  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fun ----- Not at all Fun  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Stimulating ----- Boring  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Ordinary ----- Strange  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Active ----- Passive  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Sexy ----- Not at all Sexy  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Exciting ----- Dull  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Cruel ----- Comforting  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7



**After reading the vignette, please mark the best answer to the questions below.**

What do you think the future will be like for this couple?

- Dave will break up with Alicia
- Alicia will break up with Dave
- They will stay together and be happy
- They will stay together and be unhappy
- They will marry and start a family
- They will break up and get back together, over and over again

Have you ever experienced anything similar to the interaction between Dave and Alicia?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If you answered yes to the question above, how often have you experienced something similar?

- Once or twice
- Three to five times
- Six to eight times
- Eight or more times

If you answered yes to the question above, with whom did you experience something similar?

\_\_\_ Sibling or other family member

\_\_\_ Same sex friend

\_\_\_ Opposite sex friend

\_\_\_ Romantic partner

\_\_\_ Other person

If you answered yes to the question above, how did you react to the situation?

Positively

Negatively

-----  
1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Is this interaction between Dave and Alicia aggressive? Please explain why or why not in the space below.

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in this research study. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate because you are a student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP).

The purpose of this study is to assess college students' beliefs and feelings regarding romantic relationships. Participation in this study will require approximately 60 minutes of your time. You will be presented with a brief vignette describing romantic relationships between heterosexual college students. You will then complete a brief survey assessing your perceptions and feelings regarding the couple. You will also be asked to answer several questions regarding yourself, including your age, relationship status, and gender. In exchange for your participation you will either receive extra credit for class or credit for the Subject Pool.

No known risks are associated with participation in this study. You may find the experience beneficial as you may gain a better understanding of your own feelings regarding romantic relationships. Additionally, your participation in this study will have farther-reaching benefits, as this research will contribute to the larger research base on romantic relationships.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or IUP. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose not to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying Nichole Livingston or informing the person administering the test. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and will have no bearing on your academic standing or services you receive from the University. The information obtained in the study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement below and deposit in the designated box by the door. Take the extra unsigned copy with you. If you choose not to participate, deposit the unsigned copies in the designated box by the door.

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730).

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name (PLEASE PRINT) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number or location where you can be reached \_\_\_\_\_

Best days and times to reach you \_\_\_\_\_

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

## Appendix D

### Debriefing Form

Thank you for participating in this research study. Your time and effort is greatly appreciated. The aim of this study is to ascertain what specifically defines the phenomenon of playful aggression as playful rather than serious. To this end, you were asked to give your perceptions regarding a fictitious written account of playful aggression occurring between a college-aged couple. To ascertain what specifically defines the phenomenon as playful rather than serious, your perceptions of the couple depicted in the vignette and their behavior will be evaluated in terms of specific facets of the interaction during which playful aggression occurs. Thus, the overall goal of this study is to determine which specific factors, including those specific to an individual participant (gender; facial cues), and those related to the interaction itself (size differential; recipient reaction) affect the overall perceived definition of a playfully aggressive interaction between a romantically-involved college-aged couple. It is hypothesized that a combination of individual and relational factors will affect the overall perception of playful aggression. If you desire more information on this topic please consult the references provided at the bottom of this page for further reading.

Additionally, as this line of research is still in its infancy, your previous experiences with playful aggression were measured in an effort to better understand the phenomenon. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research study, please do not hesitate to contact the project director, Nichole Livingston by phone: (724) 840-3847 or email: [wcr1@iup.edu](mailto:wcr1@iup.edu).

Gergen, M. (1990). Beyond the evil empire: Horseplay and aggression. *Aggressive Behavior, 16*, 381-398.

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## Appendix E

### Coding Procedure

Text from each open-ended probe (1 open-ended probe and 8 sentence completion probes) was analyzed separately. The first step of the qualitative data analysis consisted of breaking down the text into the smallest units of meaning. In this step the principal investigator read through the text and recorded each unit on individual index cards, along with an arbitrarily assigned identification number and the number of the participant's condition. A unit was defined as the shortest string of words that still contained the essential meaning. Typically, this involved breaking sentences down into verbs, adjectives, and nouns and discarding the prepositions, pronouns, and other parts of speech not vital to the overall meaning. For example, in response to the probe, "The way this couple acts is...", one participant wrote, "...most likely normal, and I would think that many couples act this way.". This sentence was broken down into 2 units: "most likely normal" and "many couples act this way" and those 2 units were placed in the "The way this couple acts is..." data pile. When all the text had been unitized and recorded on individual index cards, the principal investigator made an initial pass through all units while recording preliminary categories. These categories were generated by noting repeated themes among the units. For example, many units contained the word play, a variant of the word play, or a synonym of the word play. Noting this occurrence, a "playful/fun" theme was created. Once the preliminary list of categories was produced, the principal investigator began categorizing the units under these themes. This process continued, while paying attention to exclusion and inclusion rules, and revising the preliminary categories into the final themes, until all the units appeared to fit under the least amount of themes possible. Inclusion was satisfied when a unit contained the word or a synonymous word to a specific theme. Exclusion occurred if the unit was better accounted for using another theme. This process was based on the judgment of the principal investigator but later verified by an independent rater. To check the reliability of these final themes, inter-rater reliabilities were computed using Cohen's Kappa. The results of these computations for each probe are listed in the table below.

Probe	Kappa
Is This Interaction Between Dave and Alicia Aggressive?	.851
I Have Acted Like This...	.857
This Couple Is...	.89
The Way This Couple Acts Is...	.897
This Behavior Is...	.839
Dave's Intention is to...	.878
Alicia's Intention is to...	.904
Dave Probably Feels...	.836
Alicia Probably Feels...	.946

## Appendix F

### Final Themes with Sample Units

#### **A Few Times**

a few times  
sometimes  
occasionally  
at times in a relationship  
a couple times

#### **Abnormal**

not normal  
different  
weird  
very different  
strange

#### **Abusive**

abusive  
becoming abused  
getting abused  
in some way a type of abuse  
needs to stop touching in a abusive way

#### **Age**

young  
need to grow out of that  
having puppy love  
like most younger-aged couple

#### **Aggression**

aggression  
aggressive  
a little bit aggressive  
some aggression

#### **Annoy**

sometimes gets old  
annoying  
can be annoying  
annoyed by  
annoyed at times

**Attention**

get attention  
gain attention  
acknowledge  
show attention

**Attract**

get to like  
date  
to date  
go out with  
date a pretty girl

**Avoid Conflict**

just put up with  
avoid roughness  
avoid conflict  
wait out actions  
just walk away

**Awareness of Being in Public**

doesn't want to be seen with  
in public

**Awareness of Size Differential**

tall girlfriend  
picking on size  
already taller  
subconsciously show can be larger than  
make self feel bigger than

**Awkwardness**

awkward  
doesn't know how to act around  
a little awkward

**Bad**

bad sometimes  
do not get along  
not exactly the best  
not very loving  
don't really like each other  
bad



**Boundary Testing**

find boundaries  
see comfort level  
try to get closer  
way to test boundaries

**Comfortable**

comfortable with  
comfortable  
safe  
relaxed

**Common**

common  
way lots of couples act  
many couples do this  
most couples do this

**Communication**

way to express feelings  
communication skills  
way to discuss feelings  
need to communicate  
talking

**Confusion**

confused why walked away  
confused  
confused by reaction  
somewhat confused by behavior

**Context**

depends on circumstances  
depending on who you ask  
when the other person approves  
if the couple mutually accepts it  
alright as long as it is comfortable

**Control**

control  
show control  
have control over

**Deceitful**

deceiving  
opposite of what actually feeling

**Dominance**

feels like he can get anyone he wants  
challenged  
feels somewhat inferior  
belittled by behavior  
control  
powerful

**Enjoyment**

enjoyable  
enjoying themselves  
seems like enjoying the behavior

**Fine**

Fine  
Okay  
It is fine  
fine together  
everything is fine

**Flirt**

way of flirting  
vehicle to show affection  
flirtatious  
just innocent flirting

**For a Specific Reason**

as something competitive  
when I've felt like I've been hurt  
with people I am not sure of myself around  
when trying to impress

**Frequency**

if it continues  
how often  
off and on  
could mind sometimes  
if it's a frequent thing

**Friendship**

has a friend and a girlfriend  
wants to be friends  
see as one of the guys  
also be friends

**Gateway**

might lead to serious injury  
going to lead to something serious  
before it gets too far  
if one gets enraged  
can become aggressive

**General Negative Feelings**

sad  
angry  
nervous  
does not like  
frustrated  
upset

**Good**

good  
appropriate  
seems fine to me  
not bad

**Happiness**

happy with  
happy to have a girlfriend  
happy with things  
excited  
feeling good  
feel like smiling

**Harm**

abusive  
dangerous behavior

**Hurt**

hurt by actions  
hurt  
hurting  
pain

**Immature Relationship**

like a child's schoolyard crush  
like most younger-aged couples  
juvenile  
when I had middle school crushes  
they act like kids

**In a Relationship**

with my boyfriend  
with my fiancé all the time  
with my girlfriend before  
toward most of my relationship  
in past relationships

**In the Past**

before  
in the past  
long ago

**Intent**

if trying to hurt  
intentionally harm  
mean intent  
harm intent  
trying to hurt

**Intimacy**

trying to be intimate  
excite their relationship  
"touchy-feely"  
has a close relationship  
way this couple bonds

**Intimidation**

like a bully  
a little intimidated  
intimidated by  
over-powered

**Level of Contact**

depending on how hard  
light "physicalness"  
how hard  
lightly  
hitting any harder than light  
leaves bruises and marks

**Make Partner Cease Behavior**

make realize doesn't like pinching, wrestling, etc.  
make stop  
make stop behavior  
show doesn't like behavior  
get to stop  
get to stop punching, pinching, etc.

**Many Times**

many times before  
whenever necessary  
on numerous occasions

**Miscommunicative**

miscommunication  
need better communication  
misunderstanding

**Never**

never  
never before

**Normal**

normal  
like most people  
not out of the ordinary  
completely normal  
normal for a relationship

**Nothing Wrong**

like doing nothing wrong  
not doing anything wrong  
what doing isn't wrong

**Physical**

being physical  
touching  
very physical with one another

**Play/Fun**

just fun  
a joke  
playing around  
joke around  
have fun with  
playing around and being silly can be fun

**Precarious Relationship**

possibly going to work it out  
maybe not going to last

**Pursue Platonic Relationship**

have a buddy  
have a solid friend-based relationship  
more like close friends  
just friends  
like a brother and sister

**Pursue Romantic Relationship**

feel together  
confident in relationship  
feels good about the relationship  
has a boyfriend

**Pursue Sexual Relationship**

have a relationship based on sex  
get something sexual from

**Rejection**

neglected  
rejected  
abandoned

**Sex Roles**

typical of a lot of guys  
difference between sexes  
isn't quite a dominant male

**Show Affection**

show that she likes  
showing like  
that he likes her  
way of showing affection  
she likes him

**Stage of Relationship**

jumping into a relationship  
want relationship to further develop  
early in the relationship  
just started dating  
new relationship

**Target Reaction**

how reacts  
taking it the wrong way  
positive response  
smiling back  
reacts  
pinches or wrestles back

**Tease**

tease  
picking on a little  
picking on  
teasing friendly

**Troubled**

not going to last  
“DOOMED”  
in an unhealthy relationship  
looking toward a breakup maybe  
probably going to break up  
obviously having some issues to work out

**Unacceptable**

unacceptable  
not ok

**Uncertainty**

unsure of exact feelings  
not really sure

**Unusual**

strange  
unusual  
somewhat odd

**Wanted**

wanted  
doesn't ignore  
special

**When Young**

when I had middle school crushes  
when I was young and had a crush  
when I was 15  
back in middle school  
around friends when young

**With Friends**

with my friends

with close friends

with past and present best friends

with some friends

with other male friends

**With Siblings**

when I play fight with my brother

with my brothers

with my brother when I was younger