

You-talk in young adult couples' conflict: Family-of-origin roots and adult relational aggression sequelae



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Abstract

The present study examines greater use of the word “you” (i.e., you-talk) during couple’s conflict as linked to conflict behaviors and relational aggression. The way couples navigate relationship conflict is a key risk factor for relational aggression, and investigating conflict microprocesses can inform intervention efforts. In this study, 184 target participants (86 men, 98 women; 58% White, 29% African American, 8% mixed race/ethnicity, 5% other groups) were observed interacting with their parents at age 13 and with romantic partners at ages 20 and 27 to examine origins of you-talk usage and its links to romantic relationship dysfunction. Links were explored in a series of hierarchical linear regressions. Adverse conflict navigation behaviors established in one’s family-of-origin during adolescence (i.e., autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior) predicted target’s use of you-talk during conflict with their romantic partners at age 20. You-talk was concurrently associated with autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior and relational aggression, and you-talk in turn predicted a relative increase in both undermining behavior and relational aggression at age 27. Use of you-talk is discussed as disrupting key features of conflict navigation and having potential developmental origins which may serve as targets in efforts to reduce relational aggression.

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Introduction

Relational aggression is a public health crisis, exacting a lasting toll on the emotional and physical health of millions of young adults each year (Leemis et al., 2022). In community sample couples, aggression frequently manifests in reaction to dysregulating conflict in a process referred to as “situational couple violence” (Johnson, 1995; Johnson et al., 2014). Better understanding the processes influencing the success of couples’ conflict can help guide relational aggression detection and intervention efforts. Recently, programs like Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) have made it possible to analyze language use to understand couples’ communication at a more granular level. Studies employing LIWC have revealed that the language used by couples plays a crucial role in shaping the meaning and success of various relationship processes, including conflict (e.g., Ireland et al., 2011; Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). Specifically, couples’ use of the second person pronoun “you” (i.e., you-talk) during conflict has emerged as an important predictor of relationship dissatisfaction (Biesen et al., 2016; Sillars et al., 1997; Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). However, there is a need for research exploring whether the hindrance to conflict resolution presented by “you-talk” creates risk for relationship aggression (Rentscher et al., 2013; Sillars et al., 1997; Simmons et al., 2005). Further, much remains unknown about *why* you-talk is harmful during conflict. The current project aims to establish connections between you-talk and theory-driven metrics of successful conflict navigation. Finally, research is needed that explores the developmental origins of you-talk during conflict. In this pursuit, the current study applies observations of family conflict discussions in adolescence to longitudinally investigate precursors of individuals’ tendency to use you-talk when in disagreements with a romantic partner in adulthood. As you-talk can be readily identified by researchers and clinicians, understanding how you-talk during conflict is shaped by other close relationships and maps onto specific conflict behaviors could have important implications in identifying and reducing risks of relational aggression and its negative sequelae.

You-talk in couple discussions and relational aggression

You-talk during romantic conflict has been linked to a variety of harmful processes (e.g., worse perception of interaction quality, observed negativity; Biesen et al., 2016; Simmons et al., 2005; Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). However, questions remain about its meaning, origin, and link to aggression in ongoing relationships as well as its potential to predict an increase in aggression in future relationships. Conflict theory suggests aggression in community sample couples is primarily situational and arises from factors like frustration, inadequate problem-solving skills, and escalating arguments—factors that may be associated with the use of you-talk (Johnson, 1995; Straus & Gelles, 1988). An

investigation into how you-talk disrupts conflict resolution and contributes to situational couple violence is warranted.

Relational aggression, a type of non-physical aggression, manifests in younger community sample couples and involves behaviors such as avoidance, ignoring, and withdrawal (Follingstad et al., 2005; Jose & O'Leary, 2009). It represents an insidious relationship problem that is more prevalent and often deemed more psychologically harmful than physical aggression (Linder et al., 2002; Morales & Crick, 1998). Despite its significance, relational aggression has been historically understudied, prompting a need for exploration of precipitating factors.

Blame during conflict may increase the likelihood of relational aggression, as aggression tends to emerge when one partner perceives a discrepancy between their desires and reality blames their partner for this disconnect (Scott & Straus, 2007). Further, researchers suggest that using "you-talk" signals a focus on the partner's role in a conflict, attributing the issue to the partner and implying blame (Rentscher et al., 2013; Sillars et al., 1997; Simmons et al., 2005). Moreover, blame signifies an approach to conflict that lacks the intention to assume personal responsibility or collaborate with one's partner (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Consistent with this notion, you-talk has been linked to conversational dominance during health-related disagreements between couples, suggesting that you-talk can mark an approach to conversations inhibiting an equal sharing of ideas (Rentscher et al., 2013). You-talk also tends to occur in the absence of use of the word "we", which is an important marker of collaborative efforts to resolve conflict (Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). You-talk during conflict may contribute to a dynamic where conflict navigation dissolves into blame, is frustrating and dysregulating, and ultimately creates risk for relational aggression (Johnson, 1995; Johnson et al., 2014).

While the current investigation reflects the first direct exploration of the link between you-talk and relational aggression, there is indirect support for this association. You-talk has been found to occur when partners are annoyed with one another, a risk factor for aggression, and one study has linked you-talk during conflict with physical aggression victimization by one's partner (Giordano et al., 2016; Rasmussen, 2017; Timmons et al., 2021). Yet, correlating you-talk during conflict with relational aggression adds to an understanding of why relational aggression manifests and highlights a risk factor for this prevalent but often understudied form of aggression.

You-talk in couple discussions and autonomy-relatedness undermining

You-talk during conflict likely creates risk for a host of negative outcomes, including relational aggression. Yet, understanding the meaning of you-talk during conflict necessitates investigating links with actual behaviors co-occurring during conflict. Self-Determination Theory posits that for successful conflict navigation to occur, partners must be able to both autonomously express their opinions while still feeling secure in their relationship (Knee et al., 2014). Individuals who feel autonomous in their relationships are more positive during and satisfied after conflict (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Knee et al., 2005), and higher relatedness with close others has been linked to experiencing more satisfying and stable relationships (Simpson, 1990). Yet, longstanding research also

suggests “autonomous-relatedness” can reflect a single overall construct important for healthy relationships where individuals report feeling both autonomous and connected to their romantic partner (Bowlby, 1980; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Moore, 1987). Links between you-talk and observed autonomy-relatedness processes during conflict may help illuminate how you-talk disrupts fundamental relationship processes negotiated through conflict. Importantly, frequent use of you-talk during conflict seems likely to disrupt both processes, reducing the autonomy and felt relational closeness of one’s partner. Frequently using you-talk during conflict is one way to place responsibility for the topic of disagreement on the other partner rather than leaving responsibility diffuse (e.g., “you leave *your* mess everywhere” compared to “the house is always messy”) and to focus the argument around traits possessed by one’s partner rather than the topic of disagreement (e.g., “you just think that because *you* are a man”; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Simmons et al., 2005). Such efforts highlight the partner’s personal role in the conflict rather than presenting the conflict topic as something the couple will tackle together, while also setting the partner up to have to defend themselves personally instead of objectively expressing their view. In this way, you-talk may undermine a partner’s ability to autonomously express their opinion on the conflict topic. Frequent use of you-talk may also reduce the relational closeness felt between partners, as efforts to place blame are likely to increase emotional distance between partners. Indeed, blame has been linked to the perception of anger and hostility in one’s partner (Dimidjian et al., 2002; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). Further, you-talk typically occurs in the absence of collaborative efforts to resolve conflict which could bridge emotional distance (Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). As you-talk has thus far only been explored in relation to general measures of negative communication behaviors, the current project aims to explore one reason why you-talk during conflict is harmful by linking you-talk to theory driven measures of conflict success (Allen et al., 2002; Williams-Baucom et al., 2010).

Family-of-origin predictors of you-talk

In addition to understanding the relational correlates of you-talk, a full understanding of the nature and meaning of the phenomena also requires understanding its origins. You-talk during couples’ conflict has primarily been explored as a function of couple level processes, but it may also be predisposed through exposure to adverse conflict behaviors in one’s family-of-origin. As above, Self-Determination Theory suggests exploring difficulties in autonomy and relatedness processes may be helpful in understanding ways in which aggression and its relational correlates (i.e., you-talk) develop. Parent-child relationships characterized by a lack of both autonomy and relatedness are detrimental to the development of adolescents and may negatively shape their future relationships (Allen et al., 1994a, 1994b). Having one’s autonomy and relatedness undermined by their parents during conflict likely sets the stage for how individuals imagine future conflicts will play out. For example, researchers have posited that individuals who experience hostility from their family-of-origin may come to expect hostility in future romantic relationships (Dodge & Somberg, 1987). Thus, experiencing an undermining of autonomy and relatedness from parents may prime individuals to pre-emptively counter

such attempts from future romantic partners by, for example, maintaining distance from romantic partners, a behavior linked to you-talk (Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). Further, individuals whose parents have employed a conflict style characterized by an undermining of autonomy and relatedness may lack opportunities to practice managing conflict in a way that is mutually respectful and lack models for what adaptive conflict navigation looks like.

Alternatively, experiencing undermining of autonomy and relatedness may interfere with development in ways that impact later conflict navigation. Researchers have linked feeling autonomous with viewing conflict as a chance for growth rather than as an attack on one's ego (Hodgins & Knee, 2002); Individuals who have had their autonomy undermined by their parents likely engage in a more personal, defensive style of navigating conflict and may use you-talk to center the argument around traits of the other person rather than arguing about the topic itself, inhibiting an equal exchange of ideas. Finally, growing up with a parental relationship lacking autonomy and relatedness likely provides few models for adaptive emotion regulation, which may hinder the development of important regulatory abilities and create vulnerability for perpetrating relational aggression (Allen et al., 2002; Roth et al., 2019). You-talk has been linked to both insecure attachment and trait-like anger, suggesting that you-talk might be a manifestation of the emotion regulation deficits characteristic of an insecure attachment style that often lead to aggression perpetration (Dunlop et al., 2020; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Weintraub, 1981).

While ample theorizing supports a link between the experience of having one's sense of autonomy and relatedness undermined and later use of you-talk, this idea has never been directly examined. Yet, experiencing autonomy undermining behavior from mothers and peers has been associated with later relationship aggression perpetration, and researchers have documented a pathway between experiencing autonomy-relatedness undermining from parents and hostility against parents and peers (Niolon et al., 2015; Schad et al., 2008). Confirming the link between parental efforts to undermine autonomy and relatedness and you-talk would validate the conceptualization of you-talk as a marker of relational aggression that occurs in the context of autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors.

Income

Importantly, autonomy-relatedness undermining in parent-adolescent interactions may land differently depending on the level of risk versus stability in an adolescent's environment. Prior research has suggested that autonomy undermining behaviors may serve an important protective function if adolescents are living in a more dangerous environment marked by a lower socioeconomic status (McElhaney & Allen, 2012). In this way, parental use of autonomy-relatedness undermining may model a healthy level of concern when utilized in a riskier environment; autonomy-relatedness undermining may be unrelated to you-talk at low levels of parental income corresponding to riskier child-rearing environments. To account for this possibility, the relationship between parental

autonomy-relatedness undermining and you-talk will be explored at high, moderate, and low levels of income.

You-talk and relative increases in negative relationship behaviors over time

In addition to understanding its origins and concurrent correlates, a complete picture of the role of you-talk in relationship development also requires consideration of its longer-term implications. Thus, the current project also examines you-talk and relative increases in aggression and in autonomy-relatedness processes over time. Propensities for you-talk may become even more detrimental as relationship intensity and the stakes of conflict discussions grow across development (Pollard & Harris, 2013). Interpersonal styles that are established in adolescence have been shown to carry forward into adulthood, thus, adolescents in relationships high in one conflict strategy may continue to use these same aggressive strategies into their adult relationships (Crockett & Randall, 2006; Oudekerk et al., 2015). Indeed, research suggests that propensity to enact relational violence is a learnt pattern that increases from young adulthood onward (Cui et al., 2013). The presence of such patterns may be indicated through increases in both use of autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors in conflict and relational aggression perpetration. Given that relationship level predictors of aggression are more malleable in younger relationships, identification of risk factors at an early stage may be critical to altering the risk of future relational aggression in adulthood (Anderson, 2007).

Romantic partner continuity

You-talk may portend relationship aggression even in adult relationships with new romantic partners. Literature on aggression across development suggests stability in relationship aggression even as individuals enter relationships with new partners (Robins et al., 2002). We explore if you-talk is linked to relative increases in negative relationship processes with the same or a new romantic partner, including romantic partner consistency as a covariate and exploring potential moderation.

Gender

Gender has historically been studied as an important factor in relationship aggression. Indeed, men perpetrate violence at a higher rate and resulting in more serious injury compared to women (UNODC/UNECE Task Force on Crime Classification, 2011). While models on situational violence and from a family violence perspective minimize the importance of factors like gender and power and instead conceptualize violence as arising from mutually escalating conflict, it remains important to consider whether aggressive processes manifest differently in men and women (Straus, 2011). Thus, the current study explores gender as a covariate and potential moderator in study analyses.

Current investigation

The current study explored associations between young adult you-talk during conflict and concurrent relationship behavior, family-of-origin experiences, and later adult relationship aggression. This longitudinal study followed a community sample of adolescents from age 13 to age 27, using both self-report methods and observed interactions between adolescents and their parents and romantic partners. The following was hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1a: Parents' use of behaviors undermining autonomy and relatedness towards the target teen at age 13 will predict target's greater you-talk during young adult romantic partner conflict at age 20.

Hypothesis 1b: The association between parents' use of behaviors undermining autonomy-relatedness and you-talk during conflict will be significant and positive only at high or moderate levels of parental socio-economic status.

Hypothesis 2. Use of you-talk during young adult romantic partner conflict (age 20) will be positively associated with perpetration of relational dating aggression.

Hypothesis 3. Use of you-talk will be positively associated with autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors during young adult (age 20) romantic partner conflict.

Hypothesis 4. Use of you-talk during young adult romantic partner conflict at age 20 will be positively associated with a relative increase in perpetration of relational dating aggression from age 20 to age 27.

Hypothesis 5. Use of you-talk during young adult romantic partner conflict at age 20 will be positively associated with a relative increase in behaviors undermining autonomy-relatedness during adult romantic partner conflict from age 20 to age 27.

Method

Participants

This report is drawn from a larger longitudinal investigation of adolescent peer influences on adult development. Participants included 184 seventh- and eighth graders (86 boys and 98 girls). Participants were recruited from the seventh and eighth grades of a public middle school drawing from suburban and urban populations in the Southeastern United States. A recruitment letter was mailed to all eligible students' parents and follow-up efforts were made at school lunches. After adolescents received parental permission and enrolled in the study as a participant, they were asked to identify a close friend, defined as someone "you know well, spend time with, and who you talk to about things that happen in your life." Researchers then recruited close friends to participate in the study. Once someone was identified and involved as a close friend in the study, they could no longer be selected as a target participant. Of all eligible students, 63% enrolled in the study either as target participants or as friends providing collateral information. This sample appeared generally comparable to the larger population of families in this school system in terms of both racial/ethnic composition (e.g., 37% non-White in sample vs. ~ 40% in the school system) and

socioeconomic status (mean household income \$44,900 in the sample vs. \$48,000 in the community). Participants provided informed assent before each interview session, and parents and adult participants provided informed consent. Interviews took place in private offices within a university academic building. The study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board.

Of the studies' full 184 participant sample, 174 participants at age 13 ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.3$, $SD = .64$) came into the lab with both of their parents and participated in a revealed differences task (discussed in detail below). At age 20 ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.0$, $SD = 1.08$) and age 27 ($M_{\text{age}} = 27.7$, $SD = 1.42$), participants and dating partners visited the lab and participated in a revealed differences task. 144 participants were eligible at age 20 and 94 completed procedures. At age 27, 138 were eligible and 72 completed procedures. Participants also reported on the relational aggression present in their relationship at age 20 and age 27. Thirty participants completed procedures at age 27 with the same romantic partner from age 20 and 42 participated with a new romantic partner. Procedures took approximately 2 hours for each lab visit.

Participants first completed procedures in 1989. Participation at age 20 occurred between 1999 and 2001, and participation at age 27 occurred between 2006 and 2008. The final sample was racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse and representative of the community from which it was drawn: 107 (58.2%) participants identified themselves as White, 53 (28.8%) as Black/African American, 2 (2%) as Hispanic, 2 (1.1%) as Asian, 1 (<1%) as American Indian, and 19 (10.4%) as of mixed race or ethnicity. 1 couple was in a same sex relationship at age 20 and 3 couples were in same sex relationships at age 27.

Attrition analyses. The 174 participants who completed procedures at age 13 did not differ on income ($p = .37$) or gender ($p = .42$) from the full sample. Because romantic partner procedures were only completed for participants in a romantic relationship at age 20, the primary measure of you-talk was available for 94 out of 184 original participants (40 men and 54 women). The 94 participants with this measure available did not differ from the 90 for whom it was missing on measures of interest at baseline (parents' autonomy-relatedness undermining, $p = .68$), gender ($p = .35$) or income ($p = .49$). Beyond this, attrition was observed for self-reported relationship aggression at age 27 ($N = 21$) and autonomy-relatedness undermining at age 27 ($N = 35$). Other than modest effects of gender on attrition for the aggression data at age 27 (18 boys vs. 9 girls attrited, $p = .052$) there were no other significant attrition effects.

To best address any potential biases due to attrition in longitudinal analyses, full information maximum likelihood (FIML) methods were used with analyses including all variables that were linked to future missing data (i.e., where data were not missing completely at random). Because these procedures have been found to yield the least biased estimates when all available data are used for longitudinal analyses (vs. listwise deletion of missing data; Arbuckle, 1996; Mueller & Hancock, 2008), the sample of 184 individuals was utilized for these analyses. This full sample thus provides the best possible estimates of variances and covariances in measures of interest and was least likely to be biased by missing data.

Measures

Autonomy-relatedness undermining. At age 13, adolescents participated in a revealed differences task with their mother and father in which they discussed a family issue about which they disagreed. Typical topics of discussion included money (19%), grades (19%), household rules (17%), friends (14%), and brothers and sisters (10%); other possible areas included communication, plans for the future, alcohol and drugs, religion, and dating. At age 20 and age 27, participants came into the lab with their romantic partners and discussed topics of disagreement in their relationship (e.g., communication problems, money or budgetary disagreements, or jealousy within the relationship). All interactions lasted 8 minutes and were videotaped.

Both the family-of-origin interactions and romantic partner interactions were coded using the autonomy and relatedness coding system (Allen et al., 1991). Two trained graduate student coders watched each video tape twice and then rated behaviors; their codes were then averaged. Coders were blind to other data from the study, and different coders rated behaviors for interactions at each time point. Bi-weekly reliability meetings run by the study PI were implemented to reduce coding drift, and there was significant overlap in coders' tenure in the lab. Past research using this coding system has found it to be a reliable predictor of both family and individual functioning (Allen et al., 1994a, 1994b).

Although autonomy-relatedness undermining could theoretically be examined as separate constructs, preliminary results supported examining them as a single construct, consistent with the notion that autonomy and relatedness are interrelated in close relationships (Allen et al., 1994a, 1994b; Murphy et al., 1963). Thus, a single score for autonomy-relatedness undermining was given on a zero to 4 scale by each coder. Behaviors that undermine autonomy include avoiding the disagreement by giving into the other's position immediately or distracting the other away from the disagreement (thus stifling the discussion), over-personalizing the disagreement by invoking the opinion of an outside party, falsely characterizing the individual's behavior in an exaggerated way, invoking guilt, or using personal examples as reasons, or partners' attempts to pressure the other into selecting their choices by using an impatient tone of voice, signaling frustration or incredulity, making statements of ultimate position, or repeating themselves incessantly. Behaviors that inhibit relatedness include statements of hostility toward the teen that devalue the teen as a person, interrupting or cutting off the other, or ignoring what they are saying.

Interrater reliability calculated using intraclass correlation coefficients was $r = .69$ for maternal and $r = .76$ for paternal behavior undermining autonomy and relatedness at age 13, respectively. Further, reliability was $r = .71$ for target participants at age 20, $r = .70$ for romantic partners at age 20, and $r = .92$ for target participants at age 27. All reliability coefficients were considered good (.60–.74) or excellent (.75 or higher; Cicchetti & Sparrow, 1981).

You-talk. You-talk was measured using transcriptions of the romantic partner interactions at age 20. The you-talk category of Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software was used (Pennebaker et al., 2015). Specifically, all iterations of you-talk (e.g., you'll, yourself) were summed and then divided by the total words used in the interaction to determine the

proportion of you-talk relative to overall talk. The you-talk of the target participant and their romantic partner were both calculated.

Relational aggression. Target adolescents reported on the levels of relational aggression in their relationship at age 20 and age 27 (Morales & Crick, 1998). The relational aggression scale was composed of five items and measured the reporter's aggression towards their romantic partner (e.g., "I have threatened to break up with my romantic partner in order to get him/her to do what I wanted"). Each item was rated on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = always) with higher scores indicating higher levels of relational aggression perpetration. Past research has linked relational aggression to being less trusting, more frustrated, jealous, and clingy in romantic relationships (Linder et al., 2002). Relational aggression scales have shown relatively good internal consistency in previous studies ($\alpha = .73$, $\alpha = .72$; Linder et al., 2002) and in the current investigation ($\alpha = .65$ at age 20, $\alpha = .84$ at age 27).

Income. At age 13, participants' parents reported on annual household income on the following scale: (1) under \$5,000; (2) \$5,000–9,999; (3) \$10,000–14,999; (4) \$15,000–19,999; (5) \$20,000–29,999; (6) \$30,000–39,999; (7) \$40,000–49,999; and (8) \$50,000 or more; mean income was \$44,900.

Gender. Participant gender identity was collected at the start of the study. Participants were asked to choose between "male" and "female" as their gender identity.

Analytic plan. R program *OpenMx* (version 2.15.5; Boker et al., 2011) was employed using full information maximum likelihood handling of missing data for assessment of key relations in hierarchical regression models. Power estimates indicate that 80% power would be obtained for standardized estimates equal to or greater than .21.

For all analyses, participant gender was entered in the first step followed by variables of interest for a given hypothesis. We also examined possible moderating effects of gender on each of the relationships described in the primary analyses below. For hypothesis 1, income was also entered in the first step and moderation by income examined. When moderation was significant, the Johnson-Neyman region of significance was explored (Johnson & Neyman, 1936).

Regression analyses for hypotheses 2–5 controlled for partner's use of you-talk at age 20 to account for the interdependence of both partner's language during conflict (Kenny & Cook, 1999). To account for behavioral interdependence of partners, analyses for hypothesis 3 also controlled for partner's use of autonomy-relatedness behaviors.

For hypotheses 4 and 5, analyses controlled for outcome measure at age 20 (relational aggression for hypothesis 4, autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors for hypothesis 5) to capture relative increases in these constructs. This approach of predicting the future level of a variable while accounting for predictions from initial levels (e.g., stability), yields one marker of change in that variable: increases or decreases in its final state relative to predictions based upon initial levels (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Regressions for hypothesis 4 and 5 also controlled for whether individuals were with the same partner or a new partner at age 27.

Results

Preliminary analyses

The variables of interest were mostly normally distributed, with skewness less than 2 and kurtosis less than 4 (Curran et al., 1996). Bivariate correlations are presented in Table 1. Outliers, multicollinearity, assumption of independent errors, random normally distributed errors, homoscedasticity, linearity, and non-zero variance were examined for each analysis, and all found to be acceptable.

Primary analyses

Hypothesis 1. The association between parents' autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors towards the target teen at age 13 and the teen's use of you-talk towards their romantic partner at age 20 were examined. Parents' use of autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors significantly predicted use of you-talk at age 20 ($\beta = .21, p < .01$). Income significantly moderated this relationship ($\beta = .94, p < .01$; see Table 2). Parents' use of undermining autonomy-relatedness behaviors was only positively associated with you-talk at middle ($\beta = 3.02, p < .01$) and high ($\beta = 4.22, p < .01$) levels of income.

Hypothesis 2. Associations between you-talk and relational aggression measured at age 20 were next examined. Use of you-talk was positively associated with relational aggression at age 20 ($\beta = .29, p < .05$; see Table 3). Gender was also significantly associated with you-talk, indicating men perpetrated more relational aggression than women ($\beta = .21, p < .05$). Moderation by gender was explored but was found to be non-significant ($p = .42$).

Hypothesis 3. Analyses examined the contemporaneous link between use of you-talk and autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors. Results indicated that use of you-talk at age 20 was directly associated with use of autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors at age 20 ($\beta = .45, p < .01$; see Table 4).

Hypothesis 4. Associations between you-talk and relational aggression at age 27 were examined. Analyses revealed that you-talk at age 20 was associated with a relative increase in relational aggression from age 20 to age 27 ($\beta = .27, p < .05$; See Table 5). A follow-up analysis testing if partner continuity between age 20 and age 27 moderated this association was not significant ($p = .12$).

Hypothesis 5. Associations between you-talk and autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors at age 27 were examined. You-talk at age 20 was associated with a relative increase in autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors from age 20 to age 27 ($\beta = .32, p < .05$; see Table 6). A follow-up analysis testing if partner continuity between age 20 and age 27 moderated this association was not significant ($p = .65$).

Table 1. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for main study variables.

	Mean	SD	Range	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. You-talk (Age 20)	4.41	2.56	0.51–10.23	-								
2. Partner's You-talk (Age 20)	5.20	2.58	1.28–12.32	.20	-							
3. Parent's AR undermining (Age 13)	.66	.33	0.08–1.90	.27 ^a	.22 ^b	-						
4. AR undermining (Age 20)	.63	.54	0.00–2.38	.57 ^a	.12	.02	-					
5. Partner's AR undermining (Age 20)	.56	.49	0.00–2.44	.46 ^a	.45 ^a	.11	.51 ^a	-				
6. AR undermining (Age 27)	.79	.75	0.00–3.00	.41 ^a	.01	.00	.39 ^a	.14	-			
7. Partner's AR undermining (Age 27)	.88	.88	0.00–3.00	.20	.08	.09	.21	.13	.56 ^a	-		
8. Relational aggression (Age 20)	7.20	3.07	5–26	.17	.09	.11	.20 ^b	.09	.26 ^b	.02	-	
9. Relational aggression (Age 27)	6.60	2.71	5–28	.37 ^a	.12	.29 ^a	.26 ^b	.11	.42 ^a	.23 ^b	.40 ^a	-
10. Same/different RP (Age 20/27)	.27	.44	-	-.06	.05	.01	-.06	-.04	.04	.20	-.14	-.03

Note. AR = Autonomy-Relatedness. RP = romantic partner.

^aCorrelation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

^bCorrelation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Relation of you-talk (age 20) to parent's use of autonomy-relatedness undermining (age 13) moderated by income.

	You-talk (age 20)						
Variable	B	SE B	β	95% CI	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Step I.							
Gender	.37	.54	.08	[-.70, 1.45]			
Statistics for step					.08	.01	
Step II.							
Parent's AR undermining (age 13)	1.40	.90	.18	[-.39, 3.19]			
Income (age 13)	-.18	.15	-.15	[-.47, .11]			
Statistics for step					.29	.08	.07
Step III.							
Parent's AR undermining (age 13) X income	1.19	.38	.94**	[.43, 1.96]			
Statistics for step					.43	.18	.10
F	4.53**						

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note. AR= Autonomy-Relatedness.

Table 3. Relation of relational aggression (age 20) to you-talk (age 20).

	Relational aggression (age 20)						
Variable	B	SE B	β	95% CI	R	R ²	Δ R ²
Step I							
Gender	.97	.48	.21*	[.02, 1.92]			
Statistics for step					.21	.04	
Step II.							
Partner's you-talk (age 20)	.02	.09	.03	[−.16, .21]			
Statistics for step					.21	.04	.00
Step III.							
You-talk (age 20)	.26	.09	.29**	[.08, .45]			
Statistics for step					.35	.12	.08
F	4.15**						

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Post-hoc analyses

An additional post-hoc analysis was conducted testing the link between you-talk and relative changes in relational aggression from age 20 to age 27, controlling for age 20 autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior, to test the possibility that you-talk

Table 4. Relation of autonomy-relatedness undermining (age 20) to you-talk (age 20).

	AR undermining (Age 20)						
Variable	B	SE B	β	95% CI	R	R ²	ΔR^2
Step I.							
Gender	.02	.12	.02	[−.21, .25]			
Statistics for step					.02	.00	
Step II.							
Partner's AR undermining (age 20)	.63	.12	.55**	[.40, .87]			
Partner's you-talk (age 20)	−.03	.02	−.12	[−.07, .02]			
Statistics for step					.51	.26	.26
Step III.							
You-talk (age 20)	.10	.02	.45**	[.06, .14]			
Statistics for step					.64	.41	.15
F	15.35**						

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note. AR = Autonomy-Relatedness.

Table 5. Relation of relational aggression (age 27) to you-talk (age 20).

Variable	Relational aggression (age 27)				R	R ²	Δ R ²
	B	SE B	β	95% CI			
Step I.							
Gender	.12	.09	.16	[−.06, .29]			
Statistics for step					.16	.03	.16
Step II.							
Relational aggression (age 20)	.06	.02	.38*	[.02, .09]			
Same or different partner (age 20/27)	.04	.08	.05	[−.11, .19]			
Partner's you-talk	.11	.10	.12	[−.09, .31]			
Statistics for step					.40	.16	.13
Step III.							
You-talk (age 20)	.04	.02	.27*	[.01, .07]			
Statistics for step					.48	.23	.10
F	5.02**						

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

predicted a relative increase in relational aggression because it was a marker of these behaviors. As shown in [Supplemental Table 1](#), you-talk at age 20 was associated with a relative increase in relational aggression from age 20 to age 27, even after accounting for autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior at age 20 ($\beta = .40$, $p < .01$).

Table 6. Relation of autonomy-relatedness undermining (age 27) to you-talk (age 20).

Variable	AR undermining (age 27)			95% CI	R	R ²	Δ R ²
	B	SE B	β				
Step I.							
Gender	.07	.19	.05	[−.32, .45]			
Statistics for step					.05	.002	
Step II.							
Partner's you-talk (age 20)	.005	.04	.02	[−.07, .08]			
Statistics for step					.05	.003	.001
Step III.							
AR undermining (age 20)	.48	.15	.40**	[.17, .79]			
Same or different partner (age 20/27)	.14	.18	.10	[−.21, .49]			
Statistics for step					.41	.17	.16
Step IV.							
You-talk	.08	.04	.32*	[.01, .17]			
Statistics for step					.48	.23	.06
F	3.07**						

p* < .05. *p* < .01.
Note. AR = Autonomy-Relatedness.

Discussion

This study explored observed and longitudinal correlates of use of the word “you” during conflict with a romantic partner to gain a better understanding of the origin and meaning of you-talk as it relates to relational aggression. You-talk was contemporaneously associated with greater use of autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors and relational aggression perpetration and predicted a relative increase in both behaviors into later adult relationships. Evidence was also obtained suggesting family-of-origin roots of later use of you-talk in romantic relationships. Taken together, results suggest that you-talk may be an early marker of the intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional relationship behaviors that occurs in the context of autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors.

The association found between you-talk and relational aggression provides the first direct link between these constructs, to our knowledge. Observed links between you-talk and relational aggression are consistent with conflict theory highlighting unsuccessful conflict as a risk factor for aggression in community sample couples (Johnson, 1995; Straus & Gelles, 1988). Specifically, Johnson (1995) proposed several distinct forms of relationship violence including situational couple violence, a reciprocal form of violence common in community samples motivated by frustration, inadequate problem-solving skills, and escalating arguments. Prior research suggests frequent you-talk may disrupt conflict by creating a focus on the partner’s role in the disagreement in a manner consistent with blame, likely pushing said partner into a position of lower relationship power and

reducing collaborative conflict navigation (Rentsher et al., 2013; Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). You-talk also predicted a relative increase in relational aggression, suggesting you-talk reflects a pattern of conflict navigation that increases in predictive impact over time. Findings are in line with research supporting the influence of young adult relationship dynamics on later relationships (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Importantly, you-talk predicted a relative increase in relational aggression above and beyond influences of prior autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior. Findings were also not moderated by gender. While possibly due to limits in statistical power, the lack of moderation is consistent with theory that situational couple violence processes do not differ by gender (Johnson, 1995).

Concurrent associations between you-talk and autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors extend prior research linking you-talk and negativity during conflict by introducing autonomy-relatedness undermining as a specific, theory driven metrics of poor conflict management that you-talk likely facilitates (Williams-Baucom et al., 2010). You-talk may reflect efforts to make the conflict about one's partner rather than about the topic at hand, creating animosity between partners, reducing collaboration, and prompting negative feelings (Dimidjian et al., 2002; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). As successful conflict navigation requires partners to have their point of view heard while also feeling connected to their partner, links between you-talk and efforts to undermine both processes offers insight into why you-talk is associated with less satisfying conflict resolution (Allen, 2002; Biesen et al., 2016). You-talk was also associated with a relative increase in autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors into later adult relationships. You-talk may reflect a pattern of conflict navigation that results in increasing undermining of autonomy-relatedness as relationships and the conflicts that accompany them become higher stakes (Pollard & Harris, 2013).

Study associations between you-talk and participants' autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior held even when controlling for autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors of romantic partners. It appears participants' typical repertoire of conflict behaviors may dictate the language used during conflict, above and beyond contributions from partners' behavior. Further, links between you-talk and relative increases in both relational aggression and autonomy-relatedness behaviors were observed regardless of whether individuals were in the same relationship or in different relationships from age 20 to age 27. While future research is needed, findings suggest that use of you-talk may be indicative of a more stable method of negotiating relationship disagreements that carries forward even as individuals enter new relationships. Indeed, research has found consistency in the way individuals resolve conflict in different contexts (e.g., peer vs. parent; Sternberg & Dobson, 1987).

Finally, you-talk was linked with parents' use of autonomy-relatedness undermining behaviors during conflict, providing the first evidence of developmental origins of you-talk. This finding adds to a robust literature highlighting the role of family-of-origin conflict navigation in influencing romantic relationships by suggesting a mechanism by which family-of-origin conflict may shape even the language used during romantic conflict (e.g., Monk et al., 2020). The association was moderated by income and only significant in families with middle or high levels of income, consistent with literature

suggesting behaviors like autonomy undermining otherwise considered controlling may be protective to teens in higher-risk environments (McElhaney & Allen, 2012). In middle- or high-income homes, experiencing autonomy-relatedness undermining from parents may disrupt certain developmental processes, interfering with ego and emotion regulation development and prompting hostile conflict resolution that utilizes you-talk (Hodgins & Knee, 2002; Weintraub, 1981). Learning to navigate conflict in this way may be a precursor to more direct efforts to assert aggression in relationships.

If replicated, findings indicate that individuals who frequently use you-talk during conflict may impede their partner's ability to express their perspective and to maintain a sense of closeness in the relationship. Educating couples about the significance of autonomy and relatedness during conflict and offering practical linguistic guidance on how to uphold these processes may enhance conflict resolution effectiveness and decrease the likelihood of conflicts escalating into aggression. Thus, findings support the common couples therapy practice of shifting from "you" statements to "I" statements while informing potential psychoeducation for couples about why this shift in language could prove beneficial (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Moreover, findings underscore the potential benefits of linguistic intervention by highlighting the association between you-talk and relational aggression.

Study limitations and future directions

Study findings should be interpreted while minding certain limitations. In concurrent (though not in longitudinal) analyses, you-talk and autonomy-relatedness undermining were both drawn from the same interaction, although measures were created via quite distinct methods and by coders unaware of the hypotheses of this study. Nevertheless, the positive association between you-talk and behaviors undermining autonomy-relatedness may reflect common method variance. Future research should consider exploring such associations across different discussions from the same couple. Of note, conversations involved discussing relationship differences suggested by the continuing participant. Participants may have utilized more withdrawal if discussing a topic broached by their partner, and withdrawal may facilitate aggression but not involve you-talk. Future research could compare you-talk use during conflicts about topics proposed by each partner. Further, while associations between you-talk and autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior suggest that you-talk at least sometimes signals personalizing and distancing behaviors, we cannot be certain of the exact context in which you-talk is being used. Future research could explore associations between you-talk and conflict behaviors at a more granular level (e.g., moment-to-moment) to better understand how you-talk may specifically help perpetrate relational aggression.

Additional processes should also be considered in explaining associations between family-of-origin autonomy-relatedness undermining behavior and you-talk. Parents' efforts to undermine autonomy and relatedness could be a reaction to concerning behaviors the adolescent is already employing, like distancing themselves from their parents, that are later reflected in use of you-talk with romantic partners. Genetic factors may also play a role. Future research could explore why family-of-origin autonomy-

relatedness undermining is linked to you-talk, testing if developmental impacts and/or expectations about future conflicts account for this association.

Importantly, cited findings linking income to autonomy processes assessed the same participants used in the present study (McElhaney & Allen, 2012); replication outside of this sample is necessary. Future research could explore associations between parenting and you-talk in a region with more racial and socio-economic diversity. Studies could also more directly measure neighborhood safety to better understand how parenting within a more dangerous environment shapes the way parenting practices are metabolized and inform later relationship dynamics.

It is also important to contextualize our findings within the characteristics of our sample. Our sample was primarily comprised of couples identifying as heterosexual. A nascent body of work suggests aggression may be motivated by different factors for men in same sex relationships, and an understanding of micro-process precipitants of aggression in non-heterosexual relationships is warranted (Stanley et al., 2006). Further, our analyses focused on young adult romantic relationships and a form of aggression common in this sample; future research may replicate analyses in more committed older adult relationships to explore if other forms of aggression (e.g., physical aggression) are linked to you-talk during conflict. Relatedly, you-talk during conflict could be explored as a risk factor for couples with higher levels of relationship aggression. Indeed, theories of Intimate Partner Terrorism highlight factors like power and control (Johnson et al., 2014; Love et al., 2020). While conflict itself may be less predictive of aggression, you-talk during conflict may in fact be an early marker of attitudes consistent with a need for power and control. Research in this area could reveal a broader conceptual relationship between you-talk and aggression where you-talk predisposes aggression via multiple pathways.

The proportion of explained variances for study findings are relatively modest. This is not unexpected considering that aggression is multiply determined, and we are measuring one specific pathway of risk (e.g., Valois et al., 2002). We also note that our sample size for longitudinal observed findings was small, although analyses were bolstered by the use of FIML. It is noteworthy that we nevertheless manage to account for significant variability given these conditions, but it is also therefore crucial to replicate findings to ensure their validity.

You-talk may be closely tied to autonomy and relatedness processes, stemming at least in part from family-of-origin behaviors and contributing to trajectories of relational dating aggression. Findings point to the value of using you-talk as a signal for intervention, potentially revealing deeply engrained, maladaptive patterns of conflict that have significant consequences for present and future adult relationships. Findings further support linguistic analysis as a valuable tool for understanding relational aggression and its development.

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Open science statement



As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are not available, as they are part of an ongoing longitudinal study involving sensitive participant information. The materials used in the research are available. They can be obtained by emailing: cp7ze@virginia.edu.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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