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How does the public define interpersonal violence? A conjoint experiment

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Abstract

Public understanding of what constitutes interpersonal violence has been the topic of much conceptual debate. In this study, we aim to contribute to this literature by generating empirical insight. We recruit a quota representative sample of the Dutch population ($N = 724$) and expose participants to vignettes describing interpersonal conflict. We use a conjoint design to manipulate six features of the vignettes and examine how these impact participants' willingness to label the incident as violent. Results showed that – in line with ideal victim effects – events involving more vulnerable victims and more blameworthy perpetrators are more likely to be labelled as violence. Further, 'traditional' representations of interpersonal violence as events that produce physical injury to the victim, generated high violence ratings. Still, public understanding of interpersonal violence was relatively inclusive – various non-physical confrontations were also considered to be violent.

Keywords

conjoint design, ideal victim, interpersonal violence, public perceptions, physical injury

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Interpersonal violence is given great importance wherever it appears. Violent events trigger strong emotions and considerable societal debate. Interpersonal violence is also a complex concept – while its meaning seems intuitively clear, it is difficult to define exactly what constitutes interpersonal violence. In this paper, we examine understandings of what constitutes interpersonal violence among the general public.

Comprehensive insight into public understanding of violence is crucial for several reasons. First, in some jurisdictions, members of the public participate in the legal system as jurors (e.g. in the United Kingdom), and as such public understandings of violence can shape criminal justice proceedings. Second, the issue of how the public understand interpersonal violence is crucial for criminological research. Kivivuori (2014) argues that – as a result of reduced exposure to interpersonal violence in daily life in many Western societies – the threshold of the kind of behaviors and experiences that are perceived as “violence” has been lowered: more experiences now fall under the umbrella of violence. In research that uses victimization surveys this can increase rates of self-reported violent victimization. Given the centrality of this issue, considerable previous research has examined how public understandings of interpersonal violence come about, and how such understandings may change over time (Kivivuori, 2014; Lauwaert, 2019). However, most of this work is conceptual – there has been little empirical examination of these ideas. This research note takes up this question and generates exploratory empirical insight into the public understanding of what constitutes interpersonal violence.

Conceptualisations of interpersonal violence

In academic circles, there is a broad distinction between those who use “narrower” definitions of violence that center on one individual doing physical injury to another with some form of intent (e.g. Allen and Anderson, 2017), and those who use wide definitions. An example of wider definitions can be found in the field of domestic violence, for instance, where some stakeholders include *emotional* forms of abuse under the definition of domestic violence (World Health Organization, 1996), thus reducing the focus on physical harm.

In the public domain, the notion of violence is socially constructed (De Haan, 2008) – its meaning is not fixed but changes under the influence of social norms and priorities. While this is true of many socio-cultural concepts, the issue is particularly pressing in the case of violence. Violence is negative and indicates a moral condemnation of the behavior being labelled as such (see e.g. Felson and Feld, 2009; Graham et al., 2011). That is, labelling an event as an instance of violence is not a neutral description, but signals the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior (Boches and Cooney, 2022; Triplett et al., 2016). While the general principles that govern changes in the concept have been theorized in detail – little is known about what these effects look like, or what criteria members of the public use to make such assessments.

Previous research has highlighted several factors that are likely to play a role. For instance, in the field of terrorism, Huff and Kertzer (2018) observed that among the general public in the United States, features such as the severity of the attack (number of casualties), the tactic of the perpetrator, and their motive, were key determinants of definitions of terrorism – bombings with multiple casualties were most likely to be

recognized as terrorism (Huff and Kertzer 2018), especially when the perpetrator was seen to be acting on behalf of a group (Kantorowicz et al., 2025). All three of these considerations (severity; perpetrator tactic; perpetrator motive) are likely to be relevant in the context of interpersonal violence as well as in the context of terrorism.

When it comes to *interpersonal* forms of violence (as opposed to terrorism), we typically have only one victim. As such, their personal characteristics may impact perceptions of interpersonal violence. Christie (1986: 12) described the concept of the *ideal victim*: “a person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim.” The central idea is that the ideal victim is innocent or blameless in their own victimization. Lewis et al. (2021) studied public perceptions of who is considered an ideal victim and demonstrate that – indeed – public representations of “ideal” or legitimate victims are characterized by descriptions of innocence, vulnerability, helplessness and harm. In terms of the personal characteristics that trigger ideal victim effects, the victim may be a member of a vulnerable group (Christie, 1986). Another central feature in the domain of victim characteristics is gender. Triplett et al. (2016) showed that events with women as victims are more likely to be labelled as violence than events involving men as victims. If we consider that women are stereotypically perceived as more vulnerable than men, we can subsume such findings under the broader concerns associated with ideal victim effects. Here, we propose that these criteria not only impact the assessment of the victim, but also the incident as a whole. That is, incidents with “ideal victim features” are more likely to be labelled as violent. Aside from the victim themselves, ideal victim processes also often involve an offender who is very blameworthy – just as the ideal victim is the archetype of a victim, the perpetrator in such vignettes is the archetype of a perpetrator: big, bad, and ruthless in their treatment of the victim. This last component – the *relationship* between the victim and perpetrator – is central in sociological perspectives on the morality of violence (Black, 1976; Cooney, 2009). Black (1976) argues that the severity of sanctions applied to a certain behavior depends on various dimensions of social distance between the victim and perpetrator. In the field of moral psychology these dynamics are put in terms of attitudes and perceptions of observers: the relational and social structure of the event impacts how (un)acceptable the event is perceived to be in the eyes of an audience (see e.g., Graham et al., 2011; Haidt, 2008; Rai and Fiske, 2011).

Overall then, based on the theoretical and empirical work discussed above, we can identify six decision criteria that are likely to shape the perception of an event as violent: The severity of harm done to the victim (Christie, 1986; Huff and Kertzer, 2018); the tactic of the perpetrator (Huff and Kertzer, 2018); the motive of perpetrator (Huff and Kertzer, 2018; Kantorowicz et al., 2025); the gender of the victim (Triplett et al., 2016); the victim’s membership in a vulnerable group (Christie, 1986); and the relationship between victim and perpetrator (Cooney, 2009; Rai and Fiske, 2011). We explore how these considerations shape people’s understanding of an event as violent.

Alongside its conceptual contribution, this paper aims to make a methodological contribution. We use a conjoint design to study the features of a vignette that shape participants’ perception of the event as violent. This type of design is popular for instance in political sciences (Huff and Kertzer, 2018; see e.g. Gutmann et al., 2024), as it is well-suited to capturing multidimensional attitudes and preferences (Kantorowicz, 2022). In

criminology, however, conjoint designs are under-utilized. Hence, this paper aims to demonstrate its application in the field of criminology. Conjoint designs are a subtype of experimental designs, in which participants are presented with vignettes that differ on key features – participants are then asked to express some preference (e.g. pick between two candidates or rate the vignette on some outcome measure). Participants' ratings can be aggregated to study the contribution of each of the manipulated features to the outcome. In a conjoint design different levels of the manipulated features do not need to be fully crossed, as in a standard experimental design. This means that multiple features can be manipulated at once because not all combinations need to be included. Conjoint designs might be fruitfully employed for research questions such as how multiple characteristics of defendants influence sentencing decisions (see e.g. [Robertson et al., 2019](#)), or, as in our case, public understandings of legal and criminological concepts.

The current study

In this work, we examine on the decision criteria that impact the tendency to label a certain event as violent. We draw on a quota representative sample from the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, rates of interpersonal violence (as indicated by homicide rates) are relatively low ([UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023](#)). Many people can expect to live their lives comparatively free of direct exposure to interpersonal violence. This is conducive to the aims of the current study, where we are interested in *public opinion* at a societal level that is not (or as little as possible) colored by people's personal experiences of interpersonal violence.

Methods

This project was approved by the Ethics Review board at the first author's institution, under authorization number 2023-010-ISGA.

Design

This study used a conjoint design, in a vignette format. We manipulated six features of the vignettes that our participants read (details below). Each participant saw six vignettes that were randomly selected from the complete set. The order in which these vignettes were presented was randomized. Conjoint experiments often use binary choice vignettes (where participants pick either option A or B) but in this case there was no forced choice, participants simply indicated for each vignette whether they considered the incident described 'a form of violence' on a 7-point Likert scale (see details below). This option was preferred to underscore that interpersonal violence does not have a 'hard boundary' ([van Breen et al., 2025](#)) but instead to allow for more flexibility in people's perceptions.

Statistical power

Following the procedure outlined by [Schuessler and Freitag \(2020\)](#), we determined that, for this set up to detect AMCE effects of medium size (0.2) with 80% power, a total sample size of 700 participants is required. As such, we aimed to recruit at least 700 participants.

Participants

Participants were recruited through the LISS panel. The LISS panel is curated by CenterStat, a professional organization funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). The panel offers access to a cross-section of the population that is representative on key demographic characteristics such as age and gender, as well as (self-described) ethnic background and socio-economic status. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study.

A total of $N = 729$ participants took part in this study. As noted above, the sample was (approximately) representative of the Dutch population. Roughly half of our participants were women (56%) and half were men (44%), there were also 2 participants who described their gender as 'other' (non-binary; or third gender) – as such this latter group was somewhat under-represented in the sample compared to the population. The average age of the sample was 51 years old, ranging from 18 to 92 years old. The large majority (91%) of the sample were born in the Netherlands (compared to 86% in the population), 3% were born in another country in Europe, and the remaining 6% were born in other regions of the world. Right at the end of the study, participants were also asked whether they had personal experience with interpersonal violence (either as a victim, perpetrator or witness), as a check. In this question "violence" was left undefined. Of our 729 participants, 172 (24%) indicated that they had personal experience with violence (for ethical reasons we did not probe further into their role in the event), a further 17 (2%) indicated 'I'd rather not say'.

Variables

Independent variable: Manipulation. The structure of the manipulation was taken from [Huff and Kertzer \(2018\)](#). Participants were presented with short vignettes describing an instance of interpersonal conflict. We manipulate 6 dimensions of the vignettes, with several levels each. The factors to be manipulated were identified based on previous research, as outlined in the introduction. For some factors, namely, Perpetrator Tactic, Injury Severity and Relationship between Victim and Perpetrator, the levels were serially ordered – that is, these are ordinal variables. For instance, in the case of Perpetrator tactic, we based the ordering of tactics on criminal severity of the tactic, ranging from verbal abuse (mildest) to assault (most severe). The other three factors (Gender of Victim; Vulnerable group membership; Motive) used categorical levels, where the levels reflected different exemplars of the factor to be manipulated. The Victim Gender category included one level where the victim was described as a woman and the other where the victim was described

as a man. For the description of the victim as a member of a vulnerable group, we included levels for the most prominent vulnerable groups in Dutch society, including the elderly and the disabled, but also various groups that are socially stigmatized such as immigrants, members of ethnic minority groups, and LGBTQI+ groups. Finally, for Motive, the levels were based on those commonly associated with cases of interpersonal violence, including a level reflecting “No known motive.” All the combinations of the 6 factors (with multiple factor levels) resulted in a total of 3183 vignettes in the first instance. This number was then reduced by suppressing impossible combinations (e.g., a person sustaining physical injuries from a verbal attack). Repeating this for all impossible combinations resulted in a total of 2560 unique vignettes. Further details on all the levels associated with each variable are given in [table A in the appendix](#). Each participant saw 6 vignettes, resulting in more than 4300 observations (6 vignettes $\times$ 726 survey respondents), which means that each unique vignette was, on average, assessed two times. The presentation of the vignettes was fully counterbalanced. The counterbalancing criteria were that all vignettes should be presented equally often over all participants, and that each participant should not see multiple vignettes that were the same, or too similar to one another. To achieve this, the vignettes were divided into 6 groups that were all different from each other in terms of the victim characteristics. Every participant saw 1 vignette from each list. The order in which vignettes were drawn from the 6 lists was counterbalanced across participants. Within each list, the vignettes were selected randomly.

Dependent variables. After each vignette, participants were asked (1) whether they would describe the incident as a form of violence and (2) how problematic they found the incident described. Each of these questions was answered using a Likert scale from 1 (‘Not at all’) to 7 (‘Definitely’).

Exploratory variables. The LISS database contains various demographic characteristics of panel members, including their age and ethnic identity. In addition, at the start of the experiment we asked participants to indicate their political orientation on a 7-point scale from “Strongly left-oriented” (1) to “Strongly Right-oriented” (7). These variables were used to explore whether tendencies to rate the vignettes as violent differed for the population subgroups, as has been shown (for example) in previous literature on the role of political orientation in moral intuition ([Haidt et al., 2009](#)). We also included some additional measures of individual attitudes, such as Fear of Crime and Punitiveness, these are described in the [Appendix](#).

Analysis plan

Each participant rated 6 vignettes. To account for the lack of independence of responses within survey participants, we correct our standard errors by clustering them at the level of respondents. In line with [Hainmueller et al. \(2014\)](#), we estimate Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE) via ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. Conjoint experiments often use binary choice (where participants pick either option A or B) but in this case there was no forced choice, participants simply rated each vignette on a 7-point

Likert scale (as described under Design). As such, the effect sizes below are not odds ratios, but point differences.

The analysis was applied in R using the package *cregg* (Leeper, 2020). We first examine the impact of the 6 manipulated features on (a) ratings of the event as “a form of violence” and (b) the problematic nature of the event. Subsequently, we examine how participants’ political orientation and other demographics impacted their responses, through subgroup analysis. When interpreting the results we adhere to a standard 5% significance level, and we construct corresponding 95% confidence intervals.

As a first step, we established that the randomisation elements were successfully implemented. Using a “balance test” (Panagopoulos, 2014), we established that the randomisation of vignettes was successful – there were no differences in demographic characteristics across the experimental conditions (see table C in appendix). Additionally, we established that there were no effects of presentation order (see figure A in appendix). Specifically, we examined carry-over effects between the earlier and later trials, there was no evidence that the interpretation of the manipulated features differed between earlier and later trials (see table D in appendix).

Results

All the vignettes to which participants were exposed were negative and confrontational in nature, and as such the mean ratings of “violence” were relatively high: across all vignettes participants gave an average rating of 5.5 out of 7 (SD = 1.33). Nearly all of the manipulated factors were relevant in shaping participants’ perceptions of violence, with the exception of Victim Gender – as shown in Table 1. Below, we discuss each of the manipulated factors in turn.

On the side of the perpetrator, we manipulated their tactic in the act, and their apparent motive for it. The vignette was much more likely to be rated as a form of violence when the perpetrator used a *physical* tactic than when the tactic was non-physical, with large effect sizes. People are very sure that assault is violence ($M_{\text{ASSAULT}} = 6.0$). For the non-physical vignettes (verbal assault) people are less sure, but the means are still above the mid-point (4) of the scale ($M_{\text{THREATENED}} = 5.1$, and $M_{\text{VERBAL ASSAULT}} = 4.3$). We also manipulated the apparent motive of the perpetrator in committing the act. As shown in

Table 1. Effect of the manipulated factors on ratings of violence.

Manipulated factor	Estimate	Std. Error	df	t-value	p-value
Tactic	-.477	.016	3861	-29.14	<.001
Motive	-.038	.011	3882	-3.52	<.001
Injury severity	-.180	.016	3860	-11.00	<.001
Victim gender	.030	.020	3737	1.50	.133
Vulnerable group	.036	.008	3650	4.32	<.001
Relationship vict & perp	-.053	.032	3879	-4.03	<.001

Note. The model from which these estimates are derived includes a random subject factor.

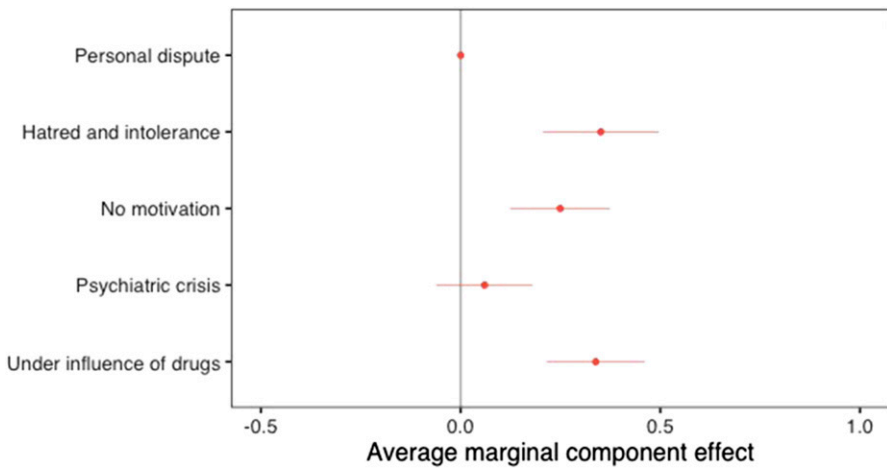


Figure 1. Effect of perpetrator's motive on violence ratings. The vertical line represents the reference category, other categories are shown relative to the reference category.

Figure 1, the lowest mean was observed when the motivation for the violent act was given as a “personal dispute” between victim and offender ($M_{\text{DISPUTE}} = 5.32$), or a mental health condition ($M_{\text{PSYCHIATRIC}} = 5.4$). The other motivations triggered higher ratings of ‘violence’: when the perpetrator was under the influence of drugs, had “no motivation,” or hatred and intolerance as a motivation. These patterns could be summarised as showing a distinction between those motives that are somewhat out of the perpetrator’s control and generate lower ratings of violence (previous dispute with victim; psychiatric conditions), and those that suggest a more direct link with the perpetrator’s life choices and produce higher ratings of violence (drugs; hatred & intolerance; random act of violence without motive).

On the side of the victim, we manipulated the severity of their injuries, their gender, and their description as a member of a vulnerable group. When the victim receives physical injuries, participants are more likely to rate the event as violent ($M_{\text{SERIOUSINJURY}} = 6.22$) than when there are no physical injuries ($M_{\text{TRAUMATISED}} = 5.39$). Just as perpetrator tactic, above, this dimension generated large effect sizes. Events with female victims generated slightly higher ratings of violence ($M_{\text{WOMAN}} = 5.55$) than events with male victims ($M_{\text{MAN}} = 5.50$), though this difference did not reach significance. In the General Discussion we return to how this finding fits within the literature on gender-based violence. The results pertaining to vulnerable groups are shown in Figure 2. When victims are described as elderly or disabled, participants are more likely to rate the event as a form of violence compared to baseline. There was no evidence that participants considered vulnerable groups more generally: describing the victim as gay, a member of an ethnic minority group, or a person with a migration background (immigrant), did not significantly impact ratings of violence – as evidenced by confidence intervals that overlap with the baseline. These differences might be explained with reference to physical

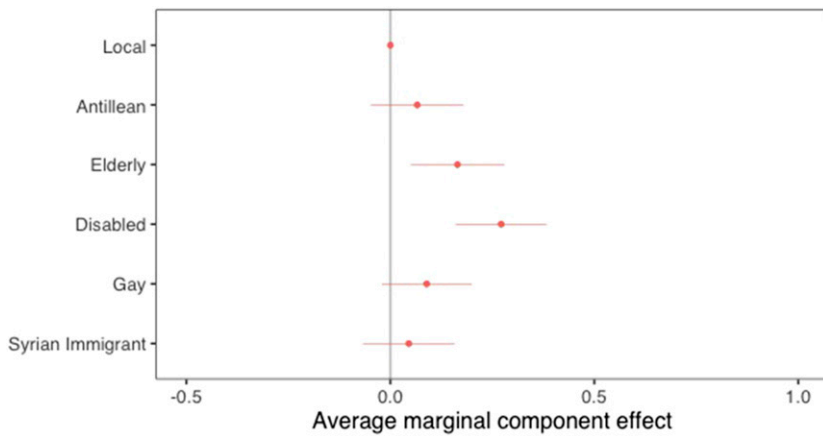


Figure 2. Effect of victim's membership in a vulnerable group on violence ratings. The vertical line represents the reference category, other categories are shown relative to the reference category.

vulnerability, as opposed to socio-cultural vulnerability: the elderly and the disabled can be understood to be *physically* frail, which does not apply to other minority groups such as the LGBT+ community.

Finally, we manipulated the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator: the highest violence ratings were given to vignettes where a victim was attacked by a stranger ($M_{\text{STRANGER}} = 5.60$), and lower ones when the relationship was closer ($M_{\text{COLLEAGUE}} = 5.44$; $M_{\text{(EX-)PARTNER}} = 5.48$).

Exploratory findings

Violence as problematic. Previous research has argued that ratings of violence arise largely from the perception of the event as “bad,” problematic or shocking (Triplett et al., 2016). Therefore, we first examine whether ratings of violence can be explained by the problematic nature of the event. We observed that ratings of violence and perception of the incident as problematic were highly correlated: vignettes that received high violence ratings also tended to be rated as highly problematic, $r = .71$.

Impact of participant's demographics. Women gave higher violence ratings than did men ($M_{\text{women}} = 5.56$; $M_{\text{men}} = 5.40$), $F(1,725) = 6.85$, $p = .009$. Those with right-wing political orientations adhere to stricter definitions of violence compared to those with left-wing orientations, $B = -0.10$, $t = -3.61$, $p < .001$. Age and migration background had no impact on violence ratings. Participants who self-reported previous experience with interpersonal violence gave slightly higher violence ratings overall (as Triplett et al. (2016) also show), though this effect did not reach significance, $p = .27$. There was little evidence for

interactions between individual-level characteristics and the manipulated factors, as described in the [appendix](#).

Discussion

This study examined the decision criteria that the general public use when considering whether a certain act is an act of interpersonal violence. Findings showed that in Western Europe, the public understanding of interpersonal violence is relatively inclusive and contextual. For instance, under some circumstances, threats are viewed as a form of violence. More specifically, our findings showed that participants take into account a variety of factors, such as the tactic of the perpetrator, the motive of the perpetrator, and the extent of injury to the victim. These findings closely mirror those of [Huff and Kertzer \(2018\)](#), who also find that effects of perpetrator tactic, motivation, and the extent of injury done to the victim matter in the perceptions of terrorism by the general public in the United States. Further, on the side of the victim, events with victims who are elderly or disabled were rated as more violent than those with non-vulnerable victims. Finally, ratings of violence are higher when the relationship between the victim and perpetrator is *less* close. There was little evidence for different opinions by population subgroups.

Considering these patterns, it seems that participants were sensitive to three central issues that appeared across different manipulated factors. First, our participants gave considerable weight to the physical nature of an event: vignettes where a victim is physically attacked and injured generate the highest violence ratings, and also the largest effect sizes. Second, there was evidence for ‘ideal victim effects’ ([Christie 1986](#); [Lewis et al., 2021](#)), in the factor Vulnerable group, as well as the Relationship factor and the Motive factor. Linking to the physicality element above, participants were more likely to recognise an event as violent if the victim was physically vulnerable (e.g., elderly and disabled). In the Relationship factor, higher violence ratings are triggered when the victim and perpetrator were strangers to one another, compared to when there was some pre-existing relationship between them. This suggests that participants interpret the existence of a relationship between the victim and perpetrator to mean that the victim played a role in precipitating the act (and is less innocent), whereas – when the perpetrator is a stranger – the victim is by definition innocent as they had no previous dealings with the perpetrator. Similar considerations around the innocence of the victim and blameworthiness of perpetrator are seen in the Motive factor. When the perpetrator was described as having ‘no motivation’ for their act this translates to high violence ratings – presumably because in such cases the perpetrator can be said to be more callous, and less justified in their act. Conversely, perpetrators described as suffering from mental health crises are treated relatively leniently – this might be interpreted as the perpetrator being less blameworthy – as their actions are not (fully) under their own control. Overall, then, we might summarise these findings by saying that relevant decision criteria appear to reflect three dimensions, namely, the physicality of the event, as well as the vulnerability of the victim and the blameworthiness of the perpetrator.

A final finding of interest was the fact that the gender of the victim made little difference in ratings of violence. Vignettes involving female victims did not attract higher

violence ratings than vignettes involving male victims. In reflecting on this finding, we note that the contribution of gender dynamics to crime and violence go much beyond the mere fact of the victim's gender. Women and men typically experience different types of violence, in different types of relationships (Liem et al., 2024). In this study, we focused only on the gender of the victim *per se*, manipulating all features as independent factors – to separate out their influence in affecting the socio-cultural construction of 'violence'. In studies where the vignettes more closely approximate the emotional reality of a violent event, we do see stronger gender differences (e.g. Triplett et al., 2016). In short, then, we believe it is possible to observe (much) stronger effects of gendered dynamics on perceptions of violence in designs more closely tailored to capture them.

Contributions and limitations

This work has implications for legal policy, and perhaps legal practice. Our findings suggest that public definitions of violence are relatively inclusive in Western Europe. While the 'traditional' manifestations of violence (physical attacks) generated the highest ratings, participants were willing also to recognise non-physical events that did not result in physical injury as violence, as evidenced by averages above the mid-point of the scale. Additionally, some of these criteria are contextual, and not directly related to the event itself. In legal frameworks, however, definitions of violence and violent events are (of necessity) more conservative. This offers some interesting reflections for issues such as public responses to sentencing decisions in high-profile cases. In terms of contributions to the academic literature, this work provides preliminary empirical evidence for an issue that – until now – has been studied in a conceptual sense only, namely, how the notion of interpersonal violence is constructed in the public domain (van Breen et al., 2025). Here we 'break down' the assessment of what counts as a violent event into specific decision criteria. This also relates to a limitation of the study: the model explained 49% of variance in ratings of violence. This indicates that there are likely additional considerations that shape perceptions of interpersonal violence, which were not captured here. Further, our findings demonstrate how ideal victim effects shape not only perceptions of the victim, but also the assessment of the incident as a whole – specifically, the public's willingness to label an event as 'violent'. There were also a number of more detailed patterns that are relevant to specific branches of research. For instance, the effect of relationship between the victim and the perpetrator on ratings of violence sheds light on a well-known effect in the gender literature, where it is often observed that observers and outsiders have a tendency towards 'victim-blaming' when it comes to domestic abuse. Here we see something similar: attacks on a close other, such as an intimate partner, in a context of a pre-existing conflict were among the *least* likely to be judged as violent (keeping other factors constant). By breaking down those perceptions into their contributing dimensions, our findings can shed light on how these patterns come about. Relatedly, these effects also provide support for (aspects of) Blackian accounts of the acceptability of violent events (Cooney, 2009: 157) – events where the relationship between the perpetrator and victim is more distant attract more public concern and condemnation.

The findings of this study are likely to be specific to Western Europe (or other low-violence contexts such as some Asian countries) given that it has been argued that the ‘inclusive’ perceptions of violence are made possible by the low rates of more traditional manifestations of violence (Kivivuori, 2014). At the same time, we believe that this study also generates insights that may be more generalisable. First, the kind of criteria that people keep in mind when deciding whether an event “counts” as violent: the physicality of the event, the blameworthiness of the perpetrator, and the innocence of the victim. These considerations may also play a role in socio-cultural contexts beyond Western Europe. Second, this study provides some evidence for the more abstract principle that perceptions of what violence entails are not fixed but socially constructed and shaped by socio-cultural context (de Haan, 2008). In socio-cultural contexts where traditional manifestations of violence are low, we see evidence for the development of a more inclusive definition of what violence entails. How these principles play out in other socio-cultural circumstances remains an empirical question.

Regarding the methodological contributions of this study, our analysis is relatively straightforward – consisting of comparisons of mean scores for the levels of the manipulated factors. This is a feature of conjoint designs – related to the fact that the factors are not fully crossed (as outlined in the Methods above). We considered this design to be particularly suited to our comparatively wide-ranging research question – if we aim to understand how the public define violence, several factors must be considered alongside one another – to get an overview of the dynamics. Further, conjoint designs are less prone to social desirability bias (Horiuchi et al., 2022). An additional strength of this work was the fact that our sample was representative of the population on key demographic features. Finally, as already outlined above, this study provides empirical support for processes that – until now – had been studied in a conceptual sense only.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical insight into an issue that – until now – has been studied in a conceptual sense only – namely, how the notion of interpersonal violence is constructed in the public domain. We show that – when determining which events “count” as interpersonal violence – members of the general public consider the physical nature of the event, as well as the innocence of the victim and the blameworthiness of the perpetrator.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Ethical considerations

This project was approved by the Ethics Review board at the first author's institution, under authorisation number 2023-010-ISGA.

Consent to participate

All participants provided written consent to participate (in the form of a checkbox) after being informed of the study requirements.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available in the LISS repository, at <https://www.dataarchive.lissdata.nl/study-units/view/1>.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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