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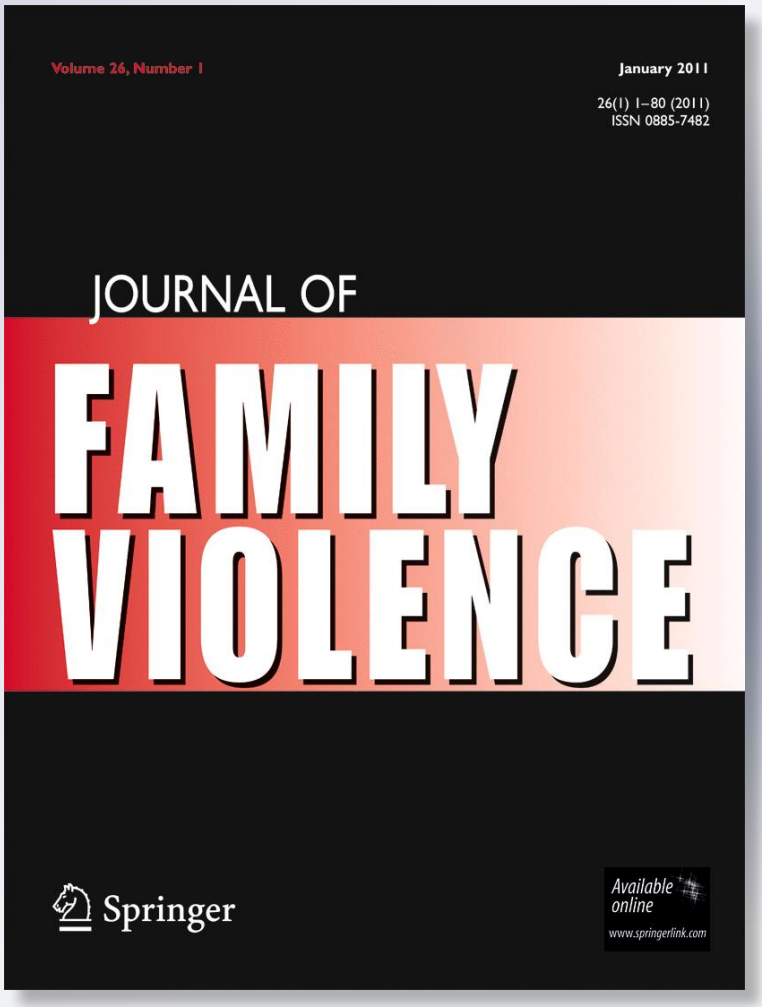

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reasons for Staying in Intimately Violent Relationships: Comparisons of Men and Women and Messages Communicated to Self and Others

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Abstract Victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) often are blamed for remaining in abusive relationships. As a result, victims may communicate messages rationalizing *why* they stay. Systematic, comparative examinations of these messages directed toward self and others by males versus females have not been conducted. This study addresses a gap in the literature by exploring victims' communication regarding staying. Self-reports of 345 heterosexual IPV victims (N=239 women, 106 men) demonstrated that more justifications were communicated internally to self than externally to others. Men and women differed significantly in only three of 14 messages, with men choosing more stereotypically masculine reasons for staying. Findings are discussed in terms of applications to victims and their stay-leave decision-making in IPV relationships.

Keywords Intimate partner violence · Gender identity · Reasons for staying · Stay-leave decision-making · Stages of Change Model

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For men and women who stay in abusive relationships, the personal costs of violence may be exacerbated by identity-threats from others' reactions (Chang 1989; George 2002). In addition to dealing with the trauma of abuse, people whose victimization is revealed must also manage the questions, threats, and stigmatizing reactions that accompany disclosure (intentional or otherwise) of that victimization (Dutton 1992). The misconception that victims can simply leave abusive relationships remains to this day. Researchers have examined male and female victimization and reasons victims give for staying in abusive relationships (e.g., Cavanagh 1996; Rhodes and McKenzie 1998). However, no studies have comparatively, quantitatively looked at male and female victims' reasons for remaining in abusive relationships or the ways in which these reasons may be tied to victims' communication of identities to self and others. Until stay-leave decisions are studied comparatively among both sexes, researchers will not have more comprehensive understandings of intimate partner violence (IPV) as it operates for both men and women in society.

The goal of this study was to determine if victims' reasons for staying in IPV relationships differ according to sex and/or intended source of message. To contextualize the current study, I begin with a description of prominent theoretical perspectives on gender identity to understand male and female IPV victimization; research questions are framed in terms of the Stages of Change Model (Prochaska and DiClemente 1984) as applied to violent relationships (e.g., Khaw and Hardesty 2009). I then present results of a survey study evaluating the communicative "reasons for staying" given by male and female victims of IPV. I follow presentation of my methodology and results with a discussion of findings in terms of practical and theoretical implications and directions for future research.

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Victimization Identities

Social Performance

Social situations allow humans to strengthen their identity relationships, as the ability to exchange identity reinforcing information allows men and women to understand how they are viewed by others (Goffman 1959). Because communication is a tool used to both transmit and shape understanding of identity concepts, meanings ascribed to others are influenced by social encounters (Gergen 1985). In many cases, *impression management*, the negotiation of one's social self-presentation, may be strategic; people in uncertain social situations will give specific thought to the way they wish to present their identities (Goffman 1959).

Identity roles involve affiliation with certain social positions (e.g., Victim/Non-victim) (Stryker 1980). People are identified not only socially, by their affiliation with groups (e.g., Men), but also personally, by their distinction from other groups (e.g., Women) (Howard 2000). Cultural norms and past experiences with a variety of individuals provide interactants with a set of *performance guidelines*. One way of enacting an identity may be implemented in a variety of situations with diverse people (Goffman 1959). For example, boys may be socialized to enact stoic norms of masculinity by their close social networks, by their affiliation with dominant groups, and via media representations of ideal masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Thus, the immediate situation, surrounding culture, and dominant discourse all play a role in the way people present themselves to others (Deaux 1993). Volatile situations, such as revealing abuse victimization to outsiders or coming to grips with one's own victimization status, are fraught with uncertainty regarding accepted social norms.

Gendered Victims Gender is one aspect of people's identity that must be reinforced in every situation and involves "configurations of practice" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 836). Therefore, a construct such as masculinity is not an inherent trait. It is accomplished via social behaviors in situations changing constantly according to gender and power relations (Butler 2006). Like other aspects of an identity, gender is formed and maintained through repeat performances and subsequent reinforcement (Goffman 1959; Pearson and VanHorn 2004). When individuals choose to enact behaviors indicative of gender roles and invest *identity resources* to maintain those roles, they are demonstrating commitment to a particular gender identity (Burke and Reitzes 1981; Butler 2006). For example, although hegemonic masculinity is not the most common type of gender enactment and most men do not embody this type of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is still considered to be an ideal standard for men to obtain (Connell 1987, 1995). If individuals do not internalize or enact the gender identities socially expected of them, they may be subject to powerful exhibitions of dominance or control, particularly in the context of IPV. This theoretical conceptualization of gender relationships suggests that individuals deviating from expected gender norms through their status as IPV victims will be subject to censure (Bem 1993; George 2003).

Research on IPV has shown that both men (Eckstein 2009) and women (Chang 1989) are judged under assumptions that they should remain silent about victimization, maintain abusive relationships, and not request assistance for their IPV (Hartman and Belknap 2003; McMahon and Pence 2003; Romito and Grassi 2007). Abused men and women may internalize these relational norms and frame abusive behaviors as expected of successful partners in romantic relationships (Eckstein 2009, 2010). Additionally, feeling they have failed at a "successful" identity, victims may internalize victimization stigma. Relationship professionals and social support sources may help enforce these beliefs in the minds of victims. Indeed, both male (Migliaccio 2002) and female (McMahon and Pence 2003) IPV victims have received blame from professional counselors for not leaving abusive partners.

The longer victims remain in abusive relationships, the more likely they are to receive blame from members of society (Lloyd and Emery 2000; McMahon and Pence 2003). Cultural norms may influence individuals' interpretation of their victimization. Societal assumptions that victims can just leave abusive partners may result in victim attributions of self-blame for not ending abuse. Women are held responsible for the success of intimate and family relationships, and men are judged under expected norms of relational dominance and control; both are held responsible for fixing their abusive situations (Stamp and Sabourin 1995). Most victims do end up leaving abusive situations, but for those who stay, leaving is a complicated process in which people are subject to the power of their partner and their own feelings of helplessness (Kurz 1996; Walker 2000). The results of social stigma and an internalized sense of failure may serve to influence victims' likelihood of understanding their victimization and ultimately leaving abusive relationships. Even for those who understand the problematic nature of their victimization, leaving is itself a process burdened with rationalizations.

Leaving as a Process

The process of leaving an abusive relationship is typically a progression from deciding to resist abuse to ultimately getting out and moving on from the abusive relationship

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(Kirkwood 1993; Kurz 1996; Wuest and Merritt-Gray 1999). One formulation, the Stages of Change Model (Prochaska and DiClemente 1984), is particularly salient for IPV victims as an applied explanation of people's readiness to enact change in their lives. Khaw and Hardesty (2009) used the model to identify IPV victims' current status in leaving abusive relationships. Stages in the model include (a) *precontemplation*, in which an individual does not intend to enact change any time soon; (b) c*ontemplation*, in which a problem's existence is acknowledged and change is considered; (c) *preparation*, in which people develop a plan to make change; (d) *action*, in which people implement their change plans; and (e) *maintenance*, in which individuals work to reinforce and sustain their implemented changes (Prochaska and DiClemente 1984).

Leaving a relationship is a process that occurs over time. Women who initially leave their abusive partners may re-enter the relationship multiple times before ultimately leaving and never returning (Merritt-Gray and Wuest 1995). Therefore, the notion of staying in an abusive relationship may actually be part of an ongoing process of leaving (Kirkwood 1993). The actions of staying/leaving often are not dichotomous and instead operate cyclically and in stages for IPV victims. At different stages of the leaving process, victims may both internalize and externalize different messages for remaining in an abusive relationship. Additionally, self-communication and other-communication may differ among victims, depending on a variety of situational and personal-identity factors (Sokoloff and DuPont 2005).

In an initial review, Ferraro and Johnson (1983) covered women's possible motives for staying in abusive relationships. Women may avoid blaming their abusers by attributing violence to external factors (e.g., having a bad day at work). They may enact a *salvation ethic* and focus on the safety and support of their children by minimizing their own pain. Women also may appeal to tradition or religion as a rationale for not leaving an abusive marriage. Additional motives for remaining in abusive relationships have been proposed in subsequent research (Cavanagh 1996; Rhodes and McKenzie 1998; Wuest and Merritt-Gray 1999). Fear of repercussions, including stalking, increased physical violence, and homicide, also may be factors influencing women's decisions to stay (Davies et al. 2009; Wilson and Daly 1993). Thus, the abusive partner's power and the victim's feelings of helplessness have influenced women's decisions to remain in IPV relationships. Qualitative interviews with men suggest they may manage IPV similarly. Men purportedly stay in abusive relationships because of a commitment to marriage, societal embarrassment for revealing victimization, obligations such as protecting children or wanting to maintain custody, and negative responses or lack of responsiveness from officials for filing abuse complaints (Eckstein 2009, 2010; Muller et al. 2009). These rationalizations of men for staying in IPV relationships appear similar to those given by women, but some research suggests women communicate different reasons than men for remaining in IPV relationships (Wuest and Merritt-Gray 1999). To better understand the possible myriad reasons why people choose particular rationalizations for staying with abusive partners, messages for staying need to be systematically examined. I proposed the following research questions to explore this area and to determine differences in victims' responses: RQ1: What reasons do men and women communicate most frequently for remaining with abusive partners? RQ2: What differences, if any, exist between male and female reasons for remaining with abusive partners?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through Internet postings in general hobby and violence- and family-specific forums and chat groups, and via domestic violence agencies and men's groups (e.g., organizations related to fathering, men's rights, men against rape) nationwide. The posting included a description of the project and a link to access the survey online. English-speaking U.S. citizens who reported having been in an abusive relationship (characterized by physically and/or psychologically abusive behavior) with a past heterosexual romantic partner were eligible to participate. To attempt to address the issue of participants responding dishonestly or with less than serious intentions, responses to the 30–45 minute survey (part of a larger study) were excluded if people stopped responding at any time. In other words, the personal and time investments for completing the survey were high for participants included in the sample. Further, this study included, and therefore may be generalizable only to, people self-identified as former victims. To protect the safety of participants, individuals currently involved in romantic relationships characterized by IPV were not eligible.

A total of 345 people (239 females, 106 males) completed the questionnaire. Participants ranged from 18 to 72 years of age (M=42.12, SD=11.59). Abusive relationships averaged 8.98 years in length (Mdn=6.75 years, SD=8.06, *range*=2 months to 55 years). After the abuse started, participants either left their partner immediately or stayed in the relationship, on average, 6.97 years, with some individuals remaining as long as 51 years with their abusive partner (Mdn=4 years, SD=7.21). These demographic and relationship characteristics demonstrate a range of abusive relationship types and

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therefore represent a variety, and perhaps not specific individuals or IPV relationship typologies (e.g., intimate terrorism or situational couple violence, per Johnson 2008), of abuse victims in the general population. Whereas the sample size does not allow for generalization of specific reasons used within the larger U.S. population, the findings from this study nonetheless suggest specific strategies victims use for IPV identity management as well as an application to theoretical models of IPV theorizing. The differences between men and women and their general trends are in keeping with established IPV population studies regarding sex of victims: women, who represent the larger subsample in this study, are known to experience IPV in its varied forms more than are men (Greenfeld et al. 1998; Johnson 2008; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).

Procedures

After agreeing to participate and acknowledging informed consent, participants accessed the survey through a secure server using SSL data encryption. To ensure anonymity, the collector settings on the survey were set to not save IP addresses when sending composite data to the researcher's online account.

Respondent assessments of past objective events may be affected by retrospective error (Henry et al. 1994). However, retrospective recall techniques are helpful for researchers assessing subjective perceptions of past behaviors. To obtain data on perceptions of coping and victimization, this method is particularly useful (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). When researching IPV victims, specific numbers of abusive acts (e.g., hits or slaps) may not be as important as victims' collective construction of the events, which may be more representative of a state of victimization (Lehmann and Santilli 1996; Pape and Arias 2000; Walker 2000).

Additionally, when victims are no longer in the abusive relationship and have begun to view their experiences from positions outside the relationship, retrospective methods examine outcomes of victimization such as coping and identity effects. Retrospective accounts may in fact be better predictors of future behaviors and perceptions than would time-frame-limited assessments. This is because participants report past events as they currently perceive them; current beliefs are often tied to the predictability of future actions (Frye and Karney 2004; Karney and Coombs 2000; Stone et al. 1998). In this respect, participants are reporting from a current mind-set, as they have reframed past events. In other words, it is not the objective truth of the past event that influences future outcomes, but rather the way that victims remember or perceive the past that affects outcomes. These considerations imply that retrospective, self-report assessments are helpful for researching the varying experiences of IPV victims.

Several studies have identified the reasons victims give for remaining in abusive relationships (Eckstein 2009; Ferraro and Johnson 1983; Wilson and Daly 1993; Wuest and Merritt-Gray 1999). In this investigation, the reasons men and women communicated for remaining in IPV relationships were assessed via a checklist derived from this past research. Items are provided in Table 1. Participants were instructed to indicate the reasons they used for themselves and/or others to explain staying in the abusive relationship.

To capture behaviors not identified in previous research, an *Other/Fill in the blank* option was presented. I began analyzing this open-ended data with a process of *open coding*, as defined in a qualitative research tradition. First, I examined the data for emergent themes among responses. Using a constant comparative method, I implemented a *concept-indicator model* to find categories (Strauss 1987). Specifically, I used a process of comparing re-emerging key words, or indicators, across participants' responses; I continually noted discrepant and convergent data to create a master category list (LaRossa 2005). This list was used as a guideline for independent coders to categorize the data.

Three senior-level, undergraduate students were trained to identify themes present in the responses. Coders were asked to assign each message to one category of reasons that abuse victims might use to explain their relationship. After receiving these instructions, the coders practiced classifying a random sample of messages. Divergent codes were discussed to clarify differences in opinion. Following a 30-min training session, each coder classified all messages independently from the other coders by placing each response into one of ten possible categories, derived from the open-coding process (see Table 4). When coders disagreed, final placement was determined by majority decision between the three judges. The average inter-rater agreement between coders for all categories was κ=.78 for reasons communicated to self and κ=.72 for reasons communicated to others.

Results

RQ1 asked which reasons men and women used most frequently for remaining with abusive partners. Reasons were distinguished between those participants used for themselves versus for others. Frequency scores indicated that both men and women reported many more reasons communicated for themselves than for others (see Table 1). Phi coefficient analyses were conducted to ascertain the likelihood that using a reason for oneself was connected to using that same reason with others. Results showed that, for most reasons, there was a statistically significant probability tied to self- and other-usage (see Table 1).

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Table 1 Comparison of reasons for remaining with abusive partner by sex and target recipient

Reason	Used for self			Used for others			ϕ
	Men	Women	χ^2	Men	Women	χ^2	
I would have been a failure if I left the relationship.	73.6%	73.2%	0.01	12.3%	16.3%	0.94	0.14**
I had no one to help me.	59.4%	67.4%	2.03	12.3%	14.6%	0.35	0.23***
I had to be the strong one in the relationship.	64.2%	48.5%	7.19**	23.6%	13.8%	5.02*	0.28***
I did not want to be perceived as weak.	61.3%	59.8%	0.07	6.6%	10.0%	1.06	0.09
I was too embarrassed for someone to find out.	60.4%	62.8%	0.18	9.4%	15.9%	2.56	0.23***
I was too afraid of what he/she might do if I left.	56.6%	60.7%	0.50	21.7%	27.2%	1.17	0.42***
I had to stay to save him/her.	55.7%	46.9%	2.27	17.0%	18.8%	0.17	0.36***
I thought that the abuse was my fault.	48.1%	52.3%	0.52	14.2%	12.1%	0.27	0.27***
I had nowhere to go.	44.3%	52.7%	2.06	16.0%	20.9%	1.12	0.37***
It was not his/her fault that he/she hurt me.	39.6%	38.9%	0.02	22.6%	21.3%	0.07	0.40***
I had to stay to protect him/her.	34.9%	22.2%	6.17*	9.4%	9.6%	0.00	0.30***
My religion would not allow me to leave.[a]	47.7%	58.6%	1.28	13.6%	24.3%	1.90	0.37***
I believe marriage should last forever, no matter what.[b]	66.2%	67.3%	0.02	27.8%	29.1%	0.04	0.24**
My children needed both parents.[c]	86.8%	72.9%	5.31*	52.6%	34.7%	6.08*	0.32***

N=345 participants (n=239 women, n=106 men)

The final three reasons were rated only by those to whom they were applicable; therefore, [a] n=70 women, 44 men; [b] n=110 women, 72 men; [c] n=118 women, 76 men

Phi (ϕ) scores are the likelihood association between using the message for both self and others

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Post-hoc analyses were conducted to ascertain the associations between different reasons used for self and others. These relationships were tested by obtaining phi coefficient scores. Several distinct groupings emerged. First, central themes of message usage were formed around reasons appealing to personal strength and a desire to protect one's partner (see Table 2) and around reasons indicating stigmatizing reactions from others and oneself (see Table 3). In addition to these two larger groupings, there was also a significant association between using rationalizations removing partner culpability (i.e., *It was not his/her fault that he/she hurt me*) and claiming self-blameworthiness (i.e., *I thought the abuse was my fault*) for oneself (ϕ=0.36, p<.001) and to others (ϕ=0.28, p<.001). Further, victims who used the reason, *I had no one to help me*, also were likely to use the reason, *I had nowhere to go*, with themselves (ϕ=0.55, p<.001) and others (ϕ=0.59, p<.001). Strong significant associations also demonstrated a propensity to use reasons appealing to marital ideals (i.e., *I believe marriage should last forever, no matter what*) and religious obligations (i.e., *My religion would not allow me to leave*) for oneself (ϕ=0.73, p<.001) and to others (ϕ=0.52, p<.001). Finally, using a self-blame reason was found to be significantly tied to reasons demonstrating desires to save (ϕ=0.21 for self, ϕ=0.22 for others, both p<.001) and protect (ϕ=0.21 for self, ϕ=0.28 for others, both p<.001) the abuser and a fear of what he/she might do if the victim left the relationship (ϕ=0.23 for self, ϕ=0.17 for others, both p<.001).

RQ2 asked if men and women differed in reasons used for remaining with abusive partners. Chi-square analyses indicated that sex differences existed for some of the reasons. Men were significantly more likely than women to report using reasons involving maintaining an image of personal strength (χ^2=7.19, p<.01 for self; χ^2=5.02, p<.05 for others) and maintaining the necessity of traditional parenthood (χ^2=5.31, p<.05 for self; χ^2=6.08, p<.05 for others). Further, males also were significantly more likely than women to use the reason, *I had to stay to protect [her]*, for themselves (χ^2=6.17, p<.05).

Participants also completed a free-response item describing any additional reasons they used—for themselves and/or for others—for remaining with their partner. The open-ended responses from this item were coded for emergent themes. Most of the reasons overlapped categorically with those on the checklist (e.g., reason on checklist: *My religion would not allow me to leave*; reason by respondent: *I'm a Christian so I can't leave my marriage*). However, particularly in IPV research, it is important to allow victims' voices to emerge (Campbell 2000; Walker 2000). Therefore, if participants took the time to describe a message, credence was given to their own interpretation, even if their description resembled an entry on the checklist.

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Table 2 Inter-relationships of reasons appealing to strength and protection

	RS1	RO1	RS2	RO2	RS3	RO3	RS4	RO4	RS5	RO5
R1: I had to be the strong one in the relationship.										
Reason for Self	–	–								
Reason for Other	–	–								
R2: It was not his/her fault that he/she hurt me.										
Reason for Self	0.26***	0.18**	–	–						
Reason for Other	0.10	0.20***	–	–						
R3: I had to stay to save him/her.										
Reason for Self	0.36***	0.27***	0.43***	0.27***	–	–				
Reason for Other	0.13*	0.23***	0.28***	0.41***	–	–				
R4: I was too afraid of what he/she might do if I left.										
Reason for Self	0.17**	0.15**	0.25***	0.14*	0.29***	0.16**	–	–		
Reason for Other	0.05	0.11*	0.13*	0.18**	0.07	0.24***	–	–		
R5: I had to stay to protect him/her.										
Reason for Self	0.36***	0.25***	0.38***	0.17**	0.49***	0.20***	0.33***	0.06	–	–
Reason for Other	0.13*	0.25***	0.16**	0.24***	0.21***	0.38***	0.17**	0.19***	–	–

N=345 participants (*n*=239 women, *n*=106 men)

Cell entries are phi (ϕ) coefficients. *RS* Reason for Self, *RO* Reason for Other

Relationships between self and other sources for each reason are presented in Table 1

*$p<.05$ **$p<.01$ ***$p<.001$

Ten possible categories emerged from the open-coding process: (a) lack of practical resources, (b) lack of relational resources, (c) excusing the partner, (d) positive emotions, (e) face concerns, (f) fear, (g) hope for the future, (h) normative behavior, (i) tradition, and (j) parenting. Table 4 reports category frequencies, Cohen's kappa reliability scores, percentage of endorsement, and examples of each category. Overall, 303 reasons were coded for self and 166 reasons were coded for others. Self reasons primarily expressed hope for the future (23.4% of all reported), such as *I know she will change if I give her time*. Hope for the future reasons also were foremost among reasons used for others (19.9% of reasons reported).

Discussion

Implications for Research and Education

The reasons used for self and others varied in overall frequency of reported use (*RQ1*), with many more reasons reported as communicated to self. Reasons for staying tended to be used in consistently thematic ways by victims. These findings are valuable in that they outwardly demonstrate the internal processes at play when victims contemplate their abusive relationship, in terms of their own cognitions. Reasons for staying included hope for the future, positive emotions toward and excuses for one's

Table 3 Inter-relationships of reasons related to stigma

	RS6	RO6	RS7	RO7	RS8	RO8	RS9	RO9
R6: I would have been a failure if I left the relationship.								
Reason for Self	–	–						
Reason for Other	–	–						
R7: I did not want to be perceived as weak.								
Reason for Self	0.45***	0.19***	–	–				
Reason for Other	0.10	0.26***	–	–				
R8: I thought that the abuse was my fault.								
Reason for Self	0.27***	0.14*	0.25***	0.07	–	–		
Reason for Other	0.09	0.25***	0.08	0.21***	–	–		
R9: I was too embarrassed for someone to find out.								
Reason for Self	0.35***	0.11*	0.43***	0.14**	0.37***	0.10	–	–
Reason for Other	0.15**	0.23***	0.17**	0.17**	0.06	0.25***	–	–

N=345 participants (*n*=239 women, *n*=106 men)

Cell entries are phi (ϕ) coefficients. *RS* Reason for Self, *RO* Reason for Other

Relationships between self and other sources for each reason are presented in Table 1

*$p<.05$ **$p<.01$ ***$p<.001$

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Table 4 Reasons offered by participants for remaining with abusive partner

Reason	Used for self		Used for others	
	n	%	*n*	%
Hope for future (κ=.82 for self; κ=.65 for other)	71	23.4	33	19.9
"It will change; we are trying to work things out."[a]				
"He's really a good person; he'll eventually show his love."				
Positive emotions (κ=.77 for self; κ=.81 for other)	38	12.5	21	12.7
"I love him."				
"I relied on her."				
Excusing partner (κ=.73 for self; κ=.71 for other)	33	10.9	24	14.5
"It's the alcohol that makes her hurt me."				
"She had an abused childhood."				
Practical resources (κ=.82 for self; κ=.78 for other)	31	10.2	9	5.4
"I would be alone and don't have anyone to help."				
"I would be destitute, we would be homeless and have no food."				
Relational resources (κ=.66 for self; κ=.52 for other)	30	9.9	18	10.8
"Who else would want to be with me? I've already been damaged."				
"Being with him was better than being alone."				
Parenting (κ=.87 for self; κ=.95 for other)	24	7.9	16	9.6
"He would take the children from me."				
"I would put up with anything to be a dad every day."				
Normative behavior (κ=.84 for self; κ=.72 for other)	24	7.9	17	10.2
"This is how relationships are supposed to be."				
"My mom and dad fight too."				
Fear (κ=.80 for self; κ=.84 for other)	21	6.9	9	5.4
"Afraid I would be killed."				
"Threatened to harm my family."				
Face concerns (κ=.74 for self; κ=.70 for other)	20	6.6	11	6.6
"I was ashamed."				
"I caused the abuse."				
Tradition (κ=.77 for self; κ=.73 for other)	11	6.6	8	4.8
"I strive never to break promises."				
"I believe my marriage vows require me to stay."				

n=303 reasons used for self, 166 reasons used for others

[a] Each category includes two exemplars from participants' coded responses to the open-ended question

partner, lack of practical and relationship resources, parenting and religious concerns, views of abuse as normative, and feelings of fear and shame. These reasons for staying provide support for IPV theorists explicating the leaving process as not only stages of change, but also comprised of relational uncertainty, boundary management, and the presence of intrusion in relationships (Hardesty and Ganong 2006; Khaw and Hardesty 2009). As an illustration of these connections, fear given as a reason for staying may legitimize to counselors the presence of *intrusion*, possibly in the form of stalking or continued abuse (Davies et al. 2009). Positive emotions toward a partner, parenting concerns, and/or lack of relationship resources may each correspond to *boundary renegotiation* in the form of victims who want the abuser in their lives, co-parenting and reconstruction of identity, and psychological well-being, respectively (Hardesty and Ganong 2006; Khaw and Hardesty 2009). Thus, awareness of all possible reasons given by men and women may not only aid in identifying where victims exist in the process of leaving, but also supports the phase- or stage-theories of change in IPV victimization.

Scholars have proposed sex differences in reasons for remaining in IPV relationships (Wuest and Merritt-Gray 1999). To date, no comparative study of men and women has tested this claim. The current research provides an important step in that direction. Men and women differed only in three of 14 messages the survey presented for staying with their partner (*RQ2*). Consistent with theories of masculine identity maintenance through communication, men reported more frequent use of reasons appealing to personal strength, fatherhood, and a desire to protect others. According to theories of gender and communication of identity, abused men deviate from gender expectations and

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are subject to censure (Bem 1993). One way men may deal with societal denigration is to employ masculine victim rationalizations to re-validate their identities (Eckstein 2010; George 2003). Symbolic interactionist perspectives on identity suggest that people's communication demonstrates an awareness of cultural rules and situational norms (Goffman 1959). Thus, men's use of masculine reasons for staying—used for themselves and for others—may exhibit a socially constructed understanding of gender. This conscious awareness suggests that, particularly in vulnerable situations, people become strategic in their identity-portrayals.

Culturally, consideration of this awareness is telling; if victims feel forced to shape their victimization status and/or gendered identity in ways deemed socially appropriate, men and women will continue to be stigmatized for their victimization. Using reasons associated with personal and with social stigma were related in this study. Thus, violence awareness programs with mass media involvement become even more necessary to shape a society's understanding of and attitudes toward violence and victims, because the only other sources of information are people's everyday encounters. As Pennington-Zoellner (2009) suggests, a variety of resources in each community may be needed to fully address diverse social networks and subcultural belief systems. For educators and researchers, victims' cultural awareness has two implications: It is vital to produce accurate information addressing all victims and crucial to distribute this information to widely available sources.

Implications for Practice

Discovering the reasons people find effective in communicating decisions to stay could educate IPV professionals about which areas are important to address in counseling. Victims offer different reasons for staying/leaving at each stage of relationship exit, and these reasons may be tied to levels of uncertainty in relationships. Using Khaw and Hardesty's (2009) explication of relational ambiguity and stages of change, the reasons for staying found in the current study (*RQ1*) clearly correspond to victim characteristics at each stage of progression.

For example, someone in the stage of *precontemplation*, who is not planning to change in the foreseeable future, may give reasons such as abuse as normative or make excuses for one's partner. It also should be noted that not every person wishes to ever leave their abusive relationship. In such cases, reasons for staying given by people still in IPV relationships (not included in this sample) may differ in significant ways from people who eventually leave (measured in this sample) but who are merely in the precontemplation stage. *Contemplators*, who acknowledge existence of a problem and seriously consider change, may report positive emotions toward the abuser and/or religious or marital loyalty commitments (two reasons significantly associated in this study) as reasons for staying. Victims in the *preparation* or *action* stages, who are either developing a plan to leave or actually leaving, may be likely to cite lack of practical resources available to them if they have failed attempts at the *maintenance* stage. Therefore, practically speaking, this study exhibits how each reason given for staying with an abusive partner can alert counselors to the current exit status of IPV victims.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this research is that online participation limits responses to those who are literate, have access to Internet technology, and frequent particular message-board sites or domestic violence/men's groups. Because concerns for participant safety precluded including IP address tracking in the online survey, no record was kept of participant locations. Therefore, possibly affecting generalizability, there is no way of knowing if this sample predominantly consisted of particular U.S. geographic regions. Additionally, females participated in greater numbers than males. Although men were targeted by specific advertising and were recruited through a variety of topical forums, they were difficult to attract. The number of men who responded was half that of female respondents. Therefore, participants were disproportionately female. One explanation is that fewer men experience IPV than do women (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). As a result, men in this sample may be exceptional cases rather than an ideal comparison group. On the other hand, men are less likely to identify behaviors such as slapping or hitting as assault than are women (Goodyear-Smith and Laidlaw 1999); men may not perceive that IPV victimization has occurred to them. Thus, results from this sample are limited to the extent that they may not accurately represent the experiences of abused men in the larger population. Future research should address this limitation by specifically targeting men and women from similar backgrounds who access comparable resources online.

Directions for Future Research

Victims' reasons for remaining with partners indicate an area for future research. Learning more about these reasons may be enlightening for people starting the process of leaving an abusive relationship or going through stages of change in leaving, as risk factors for IPV victimization continue even after leaving IPV relationships. For example, Hardesty and Ganong (2006) found women's initiation of marital separation resulted in escalated violent attempts at control from husbands. As a result, women's decisions to remain involved with partners were motivated by concerns for children, but these worries were balanced against fear of

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victimization (Hardesty and Ganong 2006). Present results indicated men's similar concerns about leaving, suggesting that addressing safety concerns, resources, and parenting ideologies are important first steps in confronting IPV for both men and women. To test these ideas, future studies can explore the relationships among victims' fears, reasons for staying, and risk factors for IPV victimization. Knowing which fears and communicated reasons for staying predict violent outcomes in abusive relationships with male and female victims could inform counselors and IPV practitioners about which specific risk factors are critical to address. Further, reasons victims give for staying may be tied to specific violent behaviors experienced; in this case, awareness of the factors that predict actually staying also could raise awareness (and perhaps address?) violent behaviors in the IPV relationship. Finally, whereas reasons for staying conceptually align with and are apparently applicable to specific stages of change, this study did not measure victims' change-stage when giving each reason. Future research could link/confirm a particular stage of change corresponding to reasons victims give. Concrete support for this study's suggested links between staying rationalization messages and stages of change would provide IPV practitioners with a helpful identification resource.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that men and women in IPV relationships communicated more messages to affirm self-identities than messages communicating their identities to others. Ultimately, this study showed that men may choose more stereotypically masculine identity reasons for staying with their partners than would women, but overall men and women largely converge on the reasons they give to self and others for remaining in IPV relationships. Applying theoretical stage models of how people leave abusive situations, this research can be used when addressing victims who are communicating their identities in the process of leaving abusive relationships.

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