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'I'm Strong for Her' versus 'I Rely on Him': male and female victims' reasons for staying reflect sex-gender conflations

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ABSTRACT

Male and female victims' communication of intimate partner violence to others in the face of potential repercussions shows how language reflects/is reflected by relational identities when deciding to stay/leave abusive relationships. In this study, a non-clinical sample ($N = 484$), self-identified as male ($n = 156$) or female ($n = 331$) victims, indicated reason-messages used with self and/or others for why they stayed in these violent relationships. Analyses of both independent messages and grouped themes showed victims' communication as inherently (and perhaps, falsely) gendered. Viewed through a gender- (versus sex-) lens, victims' reasons for staying suggest barriers to support may be communicated as gendered.

The far-reaching extent and severe consequences of intimate partner violence make it a global public health issue (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006). *Intimate partner violence* occurs in romantic relationships characterized by partners intending to harm through physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and/or controlling communication tactics. In the United States, more than 113 million people will experience psychological, and 45 million people will experience physical, abuse victimization in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). It is important to study intimate partner violence because of its serious psychological and physical health consequences over a victim's lifespan. Intimate partner violence is financially costly for the victim[1] (King et al., 2017) and society (Kruse, Sørensen, Brønnum-Hansen, & Helweg-Larsen, 2011), because victimization is associated with numerous physical and mental health problems, both directly (i.e. tied to abuse incident) and secondarily (i.e. resulting from abuse over time), including: depression, PTSD, gynecological and gastrointestinal issues, chronic pain, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Campbell, 2002; Sillito, 2012). Further, time and costs to manage these health problems pose barriers to maintaining jobs, social networks, and ongoing medical care (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006; Khaw & Hardesty, 2009). Finally, societal costs of intimate partner violence include the establishment of normative, cultural permissibility (Aloia & Solomon, 2016) and perpetuation of overall violence (Shorey, Tirone, Nathanson, Handsel, & Rhatigan, 2013; Wood, 2001).

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Beyond this import to victims and society, studying partner abuse contributes to (and from) communication theorizing pertaining to cultural stereotyping and stigmatizing identities. Because communication with others is a primary means for humans to both internally and socially construct interpersonal norms, it is essential to explore language surrounding intimate partner violence. For example, misunderstanding partner violence precipitators and reinforcing gender-based norms both facilitate perpetrators and hinder victims seeking judgment-free support (e.g. for gender influence, see Hanasono et al., 2011). Importantly for current purposes, 'awareness that something is a problem does not automatically imply insight into its nature or knowledge of solutions' (Klein, 2013, p. 6). As Klein (2013) points out, language is used (a) to further knowledge, (b) to raise awareness, and/or (c) to create institutional change. In violent contexts, it is necessary to examine language for all three of its inherent aims. This study addresses the first two possibilities (i.e. knowledge, awareness) of communication language (content-level) for its ability to convey identities (relational-level) as one step toward creating change, Klein's final language possibility.

Typically framed as a domestic 'women's problem,' intimate partner violence is inherently sexed (i.e. biologically-based group assignment such as fe/male) *and* gendered (i.e. communicative behaviors enacting particular identity styles based on social norms/expectations). Historical portrayals of victimhood as feminine have seriously affected victims seeking social support and health resources and/or looking to leave intimately violent relationships (Langley & Levy, 1977; Messing, 2011). Indeed, women who do not immediately leave abusive partners are labeled as reinforcers of stereotypical victimhood – as masochistic, weak pushovers (i.e. feminine; Daigle & Mummert, 2014; Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal, & Mirkin, 2014; Symonds, 1979). Even in cases where heterosexual men are victims of female partners, narratives surrounding those relationships paint perpetrators as masculine and victims as weak or feminine (Eckstein & Cherry, 2015). These understandings, largely based on early psychodynamic perspectives, are still perpetuated by clinicians without understanding intimate partner violence dynamics, let alone hearing from victims themselves (Keeling & Fisher, 2015; O'Doherty, Taft, McNair, & Hegarty, 2016; Pajak, Ahmad, Jenney, Fisher, & Chan, 2014; Virkk, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to uncover how victims label their own experiences.

Knowing how both men and women understand their intimate partner violence and also communicate it via language to others in the face of potential repercussions (e.g. retaliation, identity-threats, health consequences) can shed light on their perceptions of barriers to getting help. It can also educate practitioners and laypersons regarding how their reactions positively/negatively influence victims' help-seeking. Finally, identity and communication are reciprocally influential and dominate as ever-present in partner violence contexts and so hold great potential for examining the applicability of communication theories.

The purpose of this study was to contribute theory-based research showing victims' communication as inherently (falsely?) gendered – with the ultimate goal of providing practical applications for language use regarding intimate partner violence victims. First, I review key components of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) (Hecht, 1993) to frame previous partner violence research in terms of gendered identity messages. Scholars' and practitioners' conflation of sex/gender provides insight into how victims

identify as well. Next, I present a self-report study on non-clinical male and female victims' stay-reason messages.

Communicating messages for staying: managing gender identities

Interpersonal communication is often strategic; it both directly influences and is influenced by people's identities (Smith & Hipper, 2010). Individuals tailor *impression management*, self–other negotiation through communication, according to both idiosyncratic/micro and societal/macro expectations (Goffman, 1959; Hecht, 1993). Social interactions can positively reinforce people's overall identity sense, but handling continuous societal negativity or interpersonal shaming leads to self-questioning (e.g. stigma; Goffman, 1963).

It is unsurprising that those involved with intimate partner violence, either as perpetrators (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995) or victims (Eckstein, 2016), feel the need to rationalize relationships labeled dysfunctional by society. This is because individual characteristics, particularly those apparent to others, are inextricably tied to personhood. Even when internally battled (e.g. *perceived* versus *presenting* selves), it is difficult to counter others' cultural attributions and prescriptions to *apparent/known* features (Goffman, 1963). This normative labeling is particularly salient with *master* identity categories such as sex, race, age, or sexual orientation. Thus, in volatile situations such as intimate partner violence, victims' assigned labels have pre- and pro-scriptive outcomes.

Identity management in the communication theory of identity

Hecht's (1993) CTI synthesizes and extends social, interactional- and culture-based understandings of people's shaping and being shaped by communication. Hecht and others describe interactions as reciprocal events (see Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2004) and propose 10 ways people's identities are 'located' and 'layered'. Specifically, those identities: (a) possess aspects from self-, interactional-, and group-levels that are (b) both flexible, stable, and 'emergent' (c) and inform/ed by (d) emotions, cognition, and behaviors to ultimately (e) express 'expectations and motivations.' The fact that these identities can (f) be described at surface- (i.e. content) and meta- (i.e. relationship) levels in (g) interpretive and/or denotative, and (h) prescriptive (i.e. 'appropriate, effective' as determined by others) ways means that people's communication about them is (i) daily enacted to reinforce or challenge our communal roles, depending on (j) which terms, labels, and corresponding meanings are used by self/others in communication processes (Hecht & Choi, 2012). By intertwining research on which CTI is based, I show how CTI explains victims' identities shaping and shaped by their communication.

In terms of an overarching 'identity', relationships largely inform self-understandings of this term. In other words, *interactional* identities inform and are informed by other identity realms; this reciprocality reflects the CTI axiom that identities are comprised simultaneously of multiple life-contexts (Hecht, 1993). CTI further posits that self-views are formed by emotional and cognitive reflection. So even if individuals cannot easily change their sex, the way they view that master status is tied inextricably to their success in relating with others. Per CTI, societal norms are used prescriptively, so people's understanding of interactional importance influences their communication preferences and habits.

Basically, someone's daily life becomes easier when their communication is *self-concordant*, or in keeping with who they believe they 'are' (Milyavskava, Dadolny, & Koestner, 2014). For example, cultural standards for womanhood necessitate maintaining 'healthy' relationships (see Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). A sexed-female may *self-present* as a competent woman, but if others *altercast* (see Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1963) that she failed to uphold standards, it becomes extremely difficult for her to maintain that competence (*perceived* and *presenting*) and thus, her communicated identity. People's identities are tied not only to implicit perceptions (i.e. 'individual' levels); identities are shaped concurrently by interactional scenarios.

Intimate partner violence research shows most victims are held accountable for relationship maintenance (Baly, 2010). In nonviolent contexts, relational responsibility may operate in differently gendered and/or sexed ways (Canary & Wahba, 2006; Walzer, 2008). Viewed from a communication lens of identity/language interaction, this sex-gendered partner violence expectation has implications for the messages people use to manage their relationships. In cases where relational communication deviates from 'healthy' expectations, negatively affects satisfaction, and relational maintenance behaviors fail to resolve problems, ongoing commitment to partners is likely balanced against the amount of relational investment felt (Rusbult, 1983). Someone who decides to remain in an unsatisfactory relationship may intertwine their commitment level with feelings of psychological attachment to the partner (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994), something particularly common in violent partner relationships characterized by psychologically controlling communication (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004; Wood, 2006). Ultimately, both the communication *from/within* the relationship and the communication *about/outside* partner violence contexts are shaped by the identities of victims, their partners, and those with whom they interact.

Unfortunately, when efforts at healthy relational maintenance fail, victims may stay silent and try to hide their failure from others. This is because when abuse becomes apparent (Goffman, 1963), either through self-disclosure or inability to hide symptoms, victims are typically held responsible – if not for fixing the situation, then for leaving it. Such reactions toward intimate partner violence are not limited to an uneducated public; even 'trained' relationship professionals often react with similar denigration toward victims who remain with abusive partners (Virkk, 2015). In keeping with CTI postulates, victims who experience/d stigmatization from both 'laypersons' and supposed 'professionals' come to internalize these derogatory messages in ways that shape their future interactions with the public and health practitioners (O'Doherty et al., 2016; Pajak et al., 2014).

Having encountered repeated communication from others critiquing their relational and personal choices, victims of partner violence quickly learn which language is socially acceptable (Shorey et al., 2013), particularly in relation to associated sex-gender expectations (Eckstein, 2012). These *performance guidelines* may be revealed explicitly or implicitly through their communication to themselves and others (Goffman, 1959). As posited by CTI, messages may become ingrained and/or patterned for a particular individual because, although identity communication is situation-specific, repeating these performances for others over time reinforces them to oneself and others (Moore, 2017). The language of those performances may reveal underlying identity processes for victims because partner abuse presents an identity challenge, which must then be

managed in identity-shaping ways both internally reinforcing victim-identities for recipients as well as externally via public identity-work negotiations (Eckstein, 2012).

Research suggests CTI accurately captures the mutually influential/representative language-identity connection in partner violence contexts; victims' apparently recognize, or are at least aware, that some reasons are more successful when communicating a culturally desired identity. Victims' self-directed reasons for staying tend to focus on their personal competence, whereas their messages to others tend toward preservation rationale (e.g. psychological and physical repercussions of leaving) (Eckstein, 2010). For example, Eckstein (2012) found that victims who reported using 'non-weakness' as a reason for staying were more likely to be confident in their personal relationship expectations, suggesting cognizance of contradictory societal messages: 'People who leave relationships are weak for giving up' versus 'People who stay with abusers are weak for not being independent.'

Appealing to individual reasons, such as personal strength, in self-directed messages also may be an effective coping strategy (albeit, only 'effective' in terms of personal psychology) when a victim's self-talk that they stay in the relationship because they are 'strong' re-affirms for them their view of a self who is competent and in control (Eckstein & Cherry, 2015). Ultimately, victims' language may show either consistency or inconsistency between internal thoughts and external portrayals. To test this dis/connection between internalized identity and perceptions of others' altercasting as posited by CTI (Hecht, 1993), the following research question was proposed:

> RQ1: What connection, if any, exists between messages men and women communicate to self versus others to rationalize staying in an intimately violent relationship?

According to CTI, the interactional/relational domain is but one aspect affecting victims and it is inseparable from master domain categories that shape identity. Distinguishing sex from gender within a larger intersectional framework may have additional repercussions for victims' communication. For example, findings that women self-disclose more than, or cope differently from, men are typically associations actually mediated by gender, rather than sex (e.g. Feng & Xiu, 2016). But the extent to which men/women manage potential identity-threats in gendered (as opposed to sexed) ways remains largely unexplored in partner violence contexts, a problematic dearth considering intimate partner violence stigma is exacerbated when occurring on multiple identity fronts (e.g. male victims; Eckstein, 2016).

Gendered messages

People tailor identity-reinforcing and goal-directed language to their expectations of the recipient, but they also tend toward their own preferred styles (Goffman, 1959; Milyavskava et al., 2014). Because our society is largely gender-based, the messages people can 'appropriately' communicate in different heteronormative settings are structured accordingly (Lindsey & Zakahi, 2006). It follows that a common predictor of intimate partner violence communication is victims' biological sex – of particular interest for violence scholars (see Dutton, 2012). Unfortunately, sex is most often conflated with gender identity; indeed, the term 'gender' may be the most commonly used term in the partner violence (and Communication) literature to reference a biological sex binary (e.g. Wood, 2006). Using 'gender'

to refer to sexed male/female social categories equates everyone in a category with masculinity/femininity, respectively; this equivocation fails to problematize heteronormative, power-based conceptions of romantic relations (Bumiller, 2008). Whereas this stereotyping is flawed in terms of how men/women actually *are* versus normative cultural understandings (e.g. see Dindia & Canary, 2006 on perceived versus actual differences among men/women), conflating sex-gender becomes even more problematic in situations where sexed or gendered identities are at the crux of particular roles in daily lives.

Unsurprisingly, scholars studying victims' reasons for staying have historically focused on biological female's experiences. This is because of a belief that women in particular stayed because of psychological deficits such as self-sacrifice, passivity, and masochism (Langley & Levy, 1977) that are typically associated with feminine gender roles (Wood, 2001). Women are believed to possess a salvation or *sacrifice ethic*, staying to change their abuser (e.g. disassociating violence from the 'real' person; Wood, 2000) or because their children needed a father-figure (Peled & Gil, 2011). Over time, explanations strayed from the victim-blaming tone of earlier work and focused on external stay-reasons such as a lack of resources or fear of retaliation (Davies, Ford-Gilbe, & Hammerton, 2009), although most studies of stay-reasons focus on the victim and *her* circumstances.

Without actually studying men, some researchers claimed that women's stay-reasons differed from those of male-identified victims (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). The comparatively limited intimate partner violence research on men suggests reasons they chose to stay with abusive partners are more structural in nature, such as societal stigma for being a 'male victim' and lack of legal and support resources available to men (Dutton, 2012; George, 2002). However, in more recent studies, both men and women implied stay-reasons involving lack of available local support resources and hope for a better future or a partner's change (Davies et al., 2009). Again, both men's and women's reasons are assumed (and often explicitly stated) in these studies, to reflect gendered reasons; male- and female-identified participants are respectively assessed as representatives of a 'typical' man/woman *sex* while simultaneously being labeled by the term for male/female *gender*.

More recent systematic sex-comparisons show victims largely converged on stay-reasons and with few exceptions, most messages were not tied to victims' sex. Contrary to previous research equating sex-gender designations, Eckstein (2010) found sex differences only for reasons appealing to personal strength, fatherhood, and desires to protect others. However, a follow-up study determined those differences to be a product of gender interactions rather than solely biological sex (Eckstein, 2012). Fear, excusing abuse, and lack of resources were each reasons predicted by higher femininity and lower masculinity scores (but not by sex). This explanation aligns with more general studies finding communication differences largely a result of gender rather than binary, genital-based sex (Canary & Wahba, 2006). Despite ongoing difference-claims by violence scholars, laypersons, and professionals, there remains insufficient comparative research examining stay-reasons among men and women. Therefore, this study tested as a null hypothesis a belief that is still-prominent among scholars and clinical practitioners:

H1$_0$: Men and women differ on messages rationalizing staying in intimately violent relationships.

The test of this claim, although based on 'biologically' binary sex identification, must be studied for actual language-content themes relating to, or even conflating, gender norms. Further, to draw attention to heteronormative narratives and to avoid ongoing research-equivocation of sex and gender, victims' communication must be examined for actual demonstration of stereotypical sex-gender correspondence:

> RQ2: How do intimate partner violence rationalization messages reinforce and/or contradict gender stereotypes?

Methods

Sampling and participants

Participants were solicited via targeted network sampling in general-topic (e.g. sports, cooking, parenting, relationships) and violence-specific (e.g. support groups) internet forums; participants self-identified having experienced abusive behavior[1] from a romantic partner. Male- ($n = 156$) and female-identified ($n = 331$) victims ($N = 484$) of 159 female and 328 male perpetrators (i.e. $n = 29$ similarly- and $n = 458$ differently sexed couples[2]) completed the study. No significant between-group sexuality differences (on message-use or victimization experiences) emerged so groups were collapsed. Findings reflect all relationships in this sample. The data were largely retrospective. Only three people reported being currently 'with' their abusive partner and fewer than 2.7% ($n = 13$) of the sample were 'in' the abusive relationship less than one month prior.[3] Participants ranged from 18 to 74 years old ($M = 36.78$ years, $SD = 13.63$); $M_{\text{men}} = 43.49$ ($SD = 13.43$), $M_{\text{women}} = 33.58$ ($SD = 12.53$) years old, $t(\text{df}) = 7.95$, $p < .001$. Most people identified as White (85.8%) with 'some college' (34.7%) or bachelor's equivalent (26.3%) education.

Procedures

Online posts of this IRB-approved research included study information, a direct-to-survey hyperlink, and researcher and victim-resource contacts. Subsequent to acknowledging informed consent, participants completed the data-encrypted survey, with collector settings erasing IP addresses to maintain subject anonymity and maximize safety. An 'Exit Now' box was included on each page so participants could immediately leave the site and erase its IP record from internet histories. At the survey's end, participants again viewed information to contact the researcher and several local and national resources for support, counseling, and/or assistance. This study's results are derived from data collected for a larger project (e.g. Eckstein, 2018, 2019).

Participants responded to a 26-message checklist[4] based on statements from victims in previous research (e.g. Baly, 2010; Dunn, 2005; Eckstein, 2010) indicating reasons for staying (see Table 1). The specific language of each message was derived from the base frequency of usage of each statement (i.e. when exact verbiage identical across participants) in previous research. Further, participants were instructed to view each 'statement' as a broad 'type' (i.e. meaning exemplar) rather than indicate verbatim prior usage. Told the checklist contained 'reasons people sometimes give for why they didn't leave their partner right away or why they stayed,' victims were instructed to indicate any/all messages they used during or after their relationship. Before commencing, participants were

Table 1. Sex differences in groups communicating (or not) particular stay-messages/themes for self and others.

	Self use			Told other		
	Males	Females		Males	Females	
Messages by group	n (%)[a]	n (%)[a]	χ^2	n (%)[a]	n (%)[a]	χ^2
HOPE-NORMS	149 (95.5)	310 (93.7)	.68	107 (68.6)	242 (71.7)	1.07
He/she could still change; could get better.	133 (85.3)	285 (86.1)	.06	83 (53.2)	178 (53.8)	.01
We are trying to work things out.	114 (73.1)	225 (68.0)	1.30	78 (50.0)	170 (51.4)	.08
All relationships have problems now & then.	122 (78.2)	258 (77.9)	.00	71 (45.5)	161 (48.6)	.42
COMMITMENT	135 (86.5)	219 (66.2)	22.17***	80 (51.3)	114 (34.4)	12.55***
I made a commitment to this relationship.	134 (85.9)	208 (62.8)	26.96***	77 (49.4)	102 (30.8)	15.68***
I don't go back on promises of commitment.	111 (71.2)	138 (41.7)	36.83***	54 (34.6)	51 (15.4)	23.13***
EXCUSES	88 (56.4)	231 (69.8)	8.40**	50 (32.1)	128 (38.7)	2.00
He/she can't help it; just how he/she raised.	83 (53.2)	200 (60.4)	2.27	44 (28.2)	114 (34.4)	1.88
It was not his/her fault that he/she hurt me.	47 (30.1)	144 (43.5)	7.96**	21 (13.5)	53 (16.0)	.54
STRENGTH	126 (80.8)	237 (71.6)	4.70*	54 (34.6)	76 (23.0)	7.36**
I have to be strong one in the relationship.	107 (68.6)	186 (56.2)	6.80**	49 (31.4)	67 (20.2)	7.29**
I don't want to be perceived as weak.	78 (50.0)	163 (49.2)	.02	15 (9.6)	26 (7.9)	.43
STIGMA	95 (60.9)	259 (78.2)	16.08***	20 (12.8)	42 (12.7)	.00
I'm ashamed anyone knows what's going on.	90 (57.7)	246 (74.3)	13.70***	17 (10.9)	35 (10.6)	.01
I'm embarrassed for someone to find out.	67 (42.9)	196 (59.2)	11.29**	11 (7.1)	31 (9.4)	.72
CULPABILITY	80 (51.3)	239 (72.2)	20.54***	23 (14.7)	73 (22.1)	3.58
I sometimes feel like I caused this abuse.	75 (48.1)	218 (65.9)	13.99***	14 (9.0)	58 (17.5)	6.15*
I sometimes think the abuse is my fault.	61 (39.1)	194 (58.6)	16.18***	14 (9.0)	40 (12.1)	1.04
RESOURCES	104 (66.7)	242 (73.1)	2.14	29 (18.6)	87 (26.3)	3.46
There is no one to help me.	87 (55.8)	213 (64.4)	3.30	19 (12.2)	37 (11.2)	.10
I have nowhere else I can go.	65 (41.7)	155 (46.8)	1.14	12 (7.7)	48 (14.5)	4.55*
I can't afford to be on my own.	57 (36.5)	137 (41.4)	1.04	13 (8.3)	54 (16.3)	5.69*
RELATIONSHIP AS IDENTITY	133 (85.3)	301 (90.9)	3.53	47 (30.1)	120 (36.3)	1.77
I'd rather be with him/her than be alone.	92 (59.0)	189 (57.1)	.15	18 (11.5)	55 (16.6)	2.15
I rely on him/her.	59 (37.8)	164 (49.5)	5.87*	21 (13.5)	55 (16.6)	.80
No one else will want me; I'm damaged.	66 (42.3)	209 (63.1)	18.72***	9 (5.8)	35 (10.6)	2.98
I'd be a failure if I left the relationship.	104 (66.7)	215 (65.0)	.14	26 (16.7)	41 (12.4)	1.64
FEAR	79 (50.6)	203 (61.3)	4.97*	39 (25.0)	87 (26.3)	.09
I'm too afraid of what might do if I left.	63 (40.4)	175 (52.9)	6.62**	28 (17.9)	55 (16.6)	.13
I'm afraid of what might do to me if I leave.	58 (37.2)	176 (53.2)	10.86**	23 (14.7)	60 (18.1)	.86
He/she will kill me if I leave.	15 (9.6)	117 (35.3)	35.53***	5 (3.2)	47 (14.2)	13.44***
SACRIFICE	81 (51.9)	166 (50.2)	.13	29 (18.6)	58 (17.5)	.08
I have to stay to save him/her.	78 (50.0)	158 (47.7)	.22	23 (14.7)	50 (15.1)	.01
I have to stay to protect him/her.	51 (32.7)	88 (26.6)	1.94	19 (12.2)	25 (7.6)	2.76
LOVE – I love him/her.	120 (76.9)	246 (74.3)	.39	88 (56.4)	195 (58.9)	.27

Note. $N = 484$ participants ($n = 156$ men, $n = 331$ women). Item prompts: 'I stay with my partner because …'
[a]Scores are within-sex group percentages.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

prompted: 'Remember, you may not think these reasons anymore. But you should respond to those you did use when you were in your abusive relationship.' For each reason checked, participants then identified which they use/d for themselves and/or told/tell to others.

Results

RQ1: what reasons are used?

The possibility that specific wording or language-choice of particular statements influenced personal-identification with messages was considered. In other words, if someone did not identify with verbatim text, they may not have checked that message,

despite having used it via different wording. To account for this potential response-bias, and to facilitate broader claims about 'types' of stay-messages rather than specifically worded statements, all 26 messages were grouped into broader thematic categories (see Table 1).

Individual messages

Frequency scores of individual stay-messages showed many more reasons were used for oneself ($n = 7040$) than were communicated to others ($n = 2695$). Over 85% of the sample reported having told themselves they stayed because they 'believed that the abuser could change; things could get better.' This was also a top message communicated to others (53.6%). Other prevalent individual self-used reasons were 'all relationships have problems occasionally' (78%) and 'love for partner' (75.2%), the latter also being the most common message told to others (58.1%). Another common message told to others was that s/he was 'trying to work things out with' ones partner.

In contrast, messages least likely to be self-used included beliefs that they 'would be killed if they left,' they 'had to stay to protect their partner,' and 'it wasn't [abuser's] fault.' Least told to others were messages that they 'didn't want to be perceived as weak for leaving,' they 'were embarrassed for someone to find out,' and they 'had to stay to protect [their abuser].'

Message themes

Phi-coefficient analyses revealed overall message themes likely to be used in tandem with various self-and other-categories (see Table 2). Results showed all significant phi-correlations were positively associated in co-use except for Fear messages to others and Hope-Norms for oneself (i.e. voicing fear to others was significant, but negatively related to self-framing abuse as a normal and/or hopeful experience). People self-using Lack of Resources and/or Hope-Norms were least likely to report co-using any other message themes to a significant degree. Finally, in contrast to self-use, all themes told to others (except Hope-Norm and Relationship as Identity) were less likely to be co-used at statistically significant levels.

Most co-use associations found were between using a particular message for oneself and that same message with others. This was most notable with Fear and Sacrifice, the two most likely themes to be self- and other-used. Significant pairings of other-used themes reported in tandem included (a) Commitment used with both Love and Hope-Norms and (b) Hope-Norms used with Excuses, Love, and Relationship as Identity. For self-used messages, co-use was relatively higher among (a) Excuses used with Sacrifice and with Culpability, (b) Commitment with Strength, and (c) Lack of Resources with Fear (see Table 2).

H1$_0$: males and females will differ

Individual messages

Chi-square analyses determined sex differences in specific messages used (see Table 1). Women were more likely than men to use only for themselves messages reflecting perceptions/beliefs: (a) of 'relying on him,' (b) that 'no one else will want me; I'm damaged,' (c) that 'it wasn't his fault that he hurt me,' (d) of being 'ashamed anyone knows what's going

Table 2. Phi (φ) score likelihood associations of dual thematic category co-use.

Groups	SR_O	SA_S	SA_O	EX_S	EX_O	RE_S	RE_O	LO_S	LO_O	ST_S	ST_O	FE_S	FE_O	CU_S	CU_O	CO_S	CO_O	HN_S	HN_O	ID_S	ID_O
STRENGTH ($n_{self}=363$; $n_{other}=130$)																					
SELF USE	.28	.27	.15	.22	.15	.12	.11	.13	.05	.19	.10	.15	.13	.15	.10	.37	.19	.18	.11	.13	.16
TOLD OTHER	—	.15	.18	.06	.18	.03	.19	.12	.16	.02	.24	.10	.18	.04	.18	.23	.32	.05	.27	.08	.20
SACRIFICE ($n_{self}=247$; $n_{other}=87$)																					
SELF USE		—	.41	.36	.23	.12	.04	.24	.18	.20	-.01	.26	.11	.21	.09	.21	.17	.22	.16	.12	.10
TOLD OTHER		—	.12	.28	.04	.17	.06	.18	.05	.16	.17	.28	.12	.27	.06	.25	.07	.19		.04	.18
EXCUSE ($n_{self}=319$; $n_{other}=178$)																					
SELF USE				—	.41	.18	.07	.27	.16	.19	.08	.16	.04	.34	.14	.11	.03	.21	.22	.16	.15
TOLD OTHER				—	—	.07	.14	.17	.22	.07	.20	.15	.15	.18	.24	.14	.17	.13	.33	.13	.23
RESOURCES ($n_{self}=346$; $n_{other}=116$)																					
SELF USE						—	.31	.01	-.02	.27	.12	.35	.19	.22	.15	.11	.07	.02	.04	.21	.15
TOLD OTHER						—	-.06	.03	.12	.21	.10	.23	.11	.26	.11	.21	.01	.17	.09	.28	
LOVE ($n_{self}=366$; $n_{other}=283$)																					
SELF USE								—	.38	−.01	−.01	−.04	−.03	.19	.12	.19	.18	.31	.17	.23	.16
TOLD OTHER								—	−.01	.08	.04	.06	.14	.13	.13	.33	.15	.45	.14	.18	
STIGMA ($n_{self}=354$; $n_{other}=62$)																					
SELF USE										—	.21	.20	.07	.21	.03	.12	.08	.17	.03	.05	.11
TOLD OTHER										—	.13	.24	.06	.32	.04	.17	-.01	.16	.02	.27	
FEAR ($n_{self}=282$; $n_{other}=126$)																					
SELF USE												—	.45	.18	.13	.05	.04	.08	.04	.18	.10
TOLD OTHER												—	.08	.19	.07	.09	-.10	.10	.06	.19	
CULPABILITY ($n_{self}=319$; $n_{other}=96$)																					
SELF USE														—	.33	.10	.06	.16	.14	.26	.11
TOLD OTHER														—	.03	.17	.03	.23	.11	.29	
COMMITMENT ($n_{self}=354$; $n_{other}=194$)																					
SELF USE																—	.33	.11	.12	.22	.12
TOLD OTHER																—	.04	.33	.12	.23	
HOPE-NORMS ($n_{self}=459$; $n_{other}=349$)																					
SELF USE																		—	.22	.17	.10
TOLD OTHER																		—	.15	.36	
RELATIONSHIP AS IDENTITY ($n_{self}=434$; $n_{other}=167$)																					
SELF USE																				—	.21

Note. See Table 1 for specific messages in each group. All bolded phi-coefficient scores significant at or less than $p < .05$ level (i.e. most at $p < .001$ level).

on,' (e) of 'embarrassment for someone to find out,' (f) 'sometimes think the abuse is my fault,' and (g) of being 'too afraid of what he might do if I leave/left.' The only messages women were more likely than men to both self-use and communicate to others included perceptions/beliefs that (h) 'he will kill me if I leave,' and (i) 'sometimes I feel like I caused this abuse.' Women were more likely than men to tell others, but not report internalizing, messages that they (j) 'have nowhere else to go,' and (k) 'can't afford to be on my own.'

In contrast, men were significantly more likely than women to report both self- and other-use of statements including (a) 'I made a commitment to this relationship,' (b) 'I don't go back on promises of commitment,' and 'I have to be the strong one in the relationship.' Overall, there were significant sex differences for half of the self-used messages; for those told to others, men and women were similar on 19 out of 26 messages. Thus, in regard to individual messages, $H1_0$ was not rejected for self-messages, but was largely rejected for messages told to others.

Message themes
Among the grouped themes, results were mostly consistent with individual message findings. Chi-square analyses showed men more likely than women to self- and other-use Commitment and Strength themes. All themes that women were more likely to use than men were directed solely at self, including Excuses, Stigma, Culpability, and Fear. With the exception of two categories communicated more by men (see Table 1), there were no significant sex differences in other-used themes. Thus, combined with the individual message findings, $H1_0$ was predominantly rejected for other-messages and failed to be rejected for self-messages.

RQ2: (how) are sex/gender conflated?

Analyses
The final research question was explored through a constant comparative qualitative method (Creswell, 1998) and provides additional insight into the findings from RQ1 and $H1_0$. Emergent categories were assessed against previous research and other data collected for the project; this was followed by comparison to this study's quantitative data to determine recurring themes among the significant variables. Thus, analyses for RQ2 moved iteratively between connected themes-variables and relevant theoretical work on the nature of gender construction. Data guided the reading of theory, which reciprocally guided understanding of the thematic data.

Findings
RQ2 findings were not causally tested. Therefore, RQ2 interpretation has important implications for critical theory, but direct application to spoken communication should not be extrapolated beyond what it represents – one possible lens to understand victims' communication. Ultimately, critical analyses for RQ2 suggest sex and gender are conflated in larger narratives about men and women in intimate partner violence contexts. Although victims may not necessarily have conformed to 'gender = sex' narratives, they demonstrated conscious awareness of these narratives as they chose which reasons to communicate to others. In keeping with standard research presentation style specific to each

method, I present the qualitative findings here, with theoretical explanation of quantitative results included in the Discussion section.

Victims' internalization of altercasting

Findings from this study may indicate cultural gender biases and victims' internalization, or at least recognition, of them. The only messages females in this study were more likely to use than men all appealed to stereotypical femininity extremes. Fearing they could not physically protect themselves from murder were they to leave, lacking personal and economic resources to live independently, internalizing guilt and shame for 'failing' to end their abuse – all of these concepts embody societal understandings of femininity in intimate partner violence contexts (Wood, 2000, 2006). Interpreted from a critical perspective, the fact that these stereotypically feminine reasons were the only messages among many that women were more likely to use than men suggests the presence of a biased, binary sex-gender conflation in society at large. However, these data merely point in that direction and it is beyond the scope of this study to draw those conclusions definitively.

Men's messages further speak to this point. The only messages used more by men than women were those appealing to extremes of stereotypical masculinity: steadfastness or stoicism shown through commitment and appeals to individual strength (especially physically, as compared to female abusers). Perhaps because of a growing societal recognition that abusing *women* is not acceptable (e.g. even verbal aggression is viewed as more appropriate when *toward* males; Aloia & Solomon, 2016), some scholarship suggests male victims' stigmatization is more gendered than female victims' intimate partner violence stigma (George, 2002; Tsui, Cheung, & Leung, 2010). Certainly, research consistently shows that men are held more responsible for domestic abuse, whether as victims or perpetrators, than are women (Eckstein & Cherry, 2015; Lehmann & Santilli, 1996). The messages men used more often than women in this study, and the fact that these were the only messages men were more likely than women to use, add additional support to the argument of sex-gender expectations these men may have had communicated to them.

Without intentionally saying so, these victims' language points toward a societal bias conflating sex and gender (e.g. healthy relationships are maintained by feminine-enough women and masculine-enough men). The only sex differentials pertained to this sex-gender association; victims were otherwise similar. Put another way, men/women did not distinguish themselves biologically on non-gendered message types. Only victimization, or failure of stereotypical sociality, necessitated gender-specific justifications.

Victims' perceptions of altercasting

Denigrating norm-violators appears largely tied to conflations – both by a laic public and by professional health practitioners (Keeling & Fisher, 2015; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013) – that males and females will (or should) differ according to masculine/feminine identity roles (Lindsey & Zakahi, 2006). Certainly, not everyone internalizes societal messages. But victims in this study clearly acknowledged the presence of societal altercasting, as demonstrated in the differences between messages used with themselves versus with other people. For example, female victims' reality of not viewing selves as traditionally feminine (i.e. not using feminine self-messages) did not preclude them from

simultaneously appealing to traditional gender identity (e.g. motherhood, wife roles) in messages for others; instead, they used more resource-based (e.g. no money, fear of death) messages for themselves.

Certainly, people's awareness of social norms influences their communication, whether implicitly or consciously (Hecht, 1993). This appears to be the case even more for those whose identities a particular society stigmatizes. Knowing one will be perceived negatively usually causes a stigma recipient to react, often with explicit social encouragement to do so, by re-labeling or -framing experiences more positively (Smith & Hipper, 2010). In relationship contexts where males are assumed to masculinely exhibit relational control and power and females are assumed to femininely sacrifice to support relational others (see Canary & Wahba, 2006 for actual behaviors), intimate partner violence indicates not only their relational, but also their gender, failure. Essentially, intimate partner violence turns perceptions to: male victims lack masculinity or are too feminine (George, 2002) and female victims lack the femininity to facilitate 'enough' family harmony (Peled & Gil, 2011) and/or are doing feminine forgiveness or sacrifice 'wrong' (see Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Walzer, 2008).

Discussion

The current study focused on the messages used by men and women to communicate to themselves and others their reasons for staying in an intimately violent relationship. The results initially indicated a few differences according to participants' biological sex. However, it is too simplistic to attribute these differences solely to binary sex differences based on physiological markers like genitals, particularly in light of the fact that no sex entirely 'embodies' a particular gender identity. Indeed, results for this study showed a variety of gendered messages used for both oneself and others by both male- and female-sexed victims (RQ1). The null hypothesis that males and females would differ in the reasons they reported using was largely rejected for messages used with other people, but was not rejected for self-use ($H1_0$). In other words, reinforcing notions of communication as identity maintenance and intimate partner violence as a gender reinforcer, male and female victims in this study tended to differ significantly on gender-specific messages used publicly – a difference-finding that did not hold true for internal, self-used messages. Finally, RQ2 critically explored these differences in terms of sex and gender conflations due to societal norms. In the following sections, I consider these results via discussion of victims' communication about staying as their way of managing gendered identities and the implications of that for the CTI.

Support for CTI: messages reflect, support, & challenge gender norms

Consistent with previous sex-comparative stay-leave research, this study also showed that a majority of specific messages men and women report using are similar. $H1_0$ was rejected for other-messages, but failed to be rejected for self-messages. In other words, men and women communicated similarly to others, but when it came to internalizations, they began to separate based on sex – in largely gender-specific ways. This finding is explained by the results found for RQ2; although men and women may both act as 'just human' (as opposed to gendered) in public, their knowledge of those scripts may not translate to their

personal identities as felt on a daily basis. Their self-messages were more in line with *gendered* understandings of what it means to be a 'good' man or woman: being masculine or feminine, respectively.

In terms of the more sex-similar 'other-directed' messages found here, both men and women experiencing ongoing partner violence expressed hope in and love for their partner. This desire to 'work on things' reflects popular counseling and communication research applications; Western couples are repeatedly told by health practitioners and relationship educators (both professional and laic) that 'marriage is work' and they should 'communicate more/better' or 'work out the conflict' (Kettrey & Emery, 2010; Kidd, 1975). The CTI layers out identities as emergent, based on 'prescribed modes of appropriate and effective communication' (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p. 139). This suggests that over time, victims likely internalize these cultural messages, resulting in modern-day expectations that both men and women should maintain their relationships despite the not 'normal' or healthy nature of intimate partner violence.

CTI proposes that messages can be based at both content- and relational-levels of understanding, as the identification process involves 'both subjective and ascribed meaning' (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p. 139). As shown in this study, where victims rarely used messages independently or in solitude, people construct larger narratives whereby multiple messages are used to rationalize their decisions to others while simultaneously reinforcing their own identities in ways that avoid contradictions (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, discovering that almost all messages were used in self–other tandem – by all victims, despite sex differences – is not surprising in light of the corresponding finding that victims use many different messages together. Indeed, the fact that many more messages were self-used than were told to others supports the notion of partner violence staying/leaving as a self-contained, ongoing rumination or decision at the forefront of their lives (i.e. *emergent*, in CTI terms); the internal/external contradiction also shows intimate partner victimization is a stigmatized status (Meisenbach, 2010). Although the reality of partner violence experiences may or may not differ for differently sexed victims, it is clear that society expects them to – and that victims work to show their norm-conformity based on sex-gender role equivalence-management.

Practical implications for daily language use related to intimate partner violence

If language is an accurate external indicator of internal cognitions and emotions, the message findings in this study may say much in terms of how others in society conflate sex with gendered identity expectations – and demonstrate victims' astute awareness and management of this stereotyping. If, as Klein (2013) argued, language related to violence can be harnessed for knowledge, awareness, and institutional change, then discovering the overall similarity of experiences – except as they pertain to gender identity specifically – of male and female partner violence victims is doubly purposive. Examination of their language sheds light on not only victims' societal interactions and subsequent barriers to help-seeking in laic and professional contexts, but also implies ways to go about addressing these problems in day-to-day speech.

First, previous research showed victims of both sexes encounter a variety of practical and ideological obstacles when help-seeking or trying to leave violent romantic relationships (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; O'Doherty et al., 2016). Knowing which barriers link to

gender expectations and which are more general may allow policy-makers and practitioners to adjust systems accordingly. For example, campaigns and programming can be structured around knowing which resources are seen by victims as 'unusable' *because* of their perceived gender/sex-bias and/or which are seen as limited merely due to practical reasons (e.g. location) that apply to all-sexed victims.

Another practical way to enact change for practitioners (and theoretical/research clarity for scholars) is to simply use clear terms – 'sex' only to refer to male/female/intersexed victims and 'gender' only to refer actual roles and feminine/masculine expectations. Doing so calls attention to the difference between the terms and the heteronormative expectations for *everyone* that this misuse of 'gender' hides. This responsibility exists not only with those who work directly with victims, but with the researchers, teachers, editors, and publishers who fail to question the correct use of the term every time they encounter it. 'Gender' is currently the more popular way to refer to biological differences in research samples across many disciplines; thus, a concerted effort to include terminological accuracy has vast implications (e.g. problematizing rather than taking for granted power roles, heteronormativity, and sexism) for the subsequent ideology behind a 'mere' word. The effects would eventually be felt by victims, as intimate partner violence practitioners often eventually take their cue from researchers.

Finally, the primary self- and other-messages reported in this study were appeals to relationship ideals (i.e. what others expect of them in their relationships). If these are indeed the reasons victims perceive as the primary barriers to leaving violent relationships, then changing – through language – the stigmatization of non-conforming individuals should begin to address those victims' concerns. Hope-Norm themed messages in this study especially contrasted with the use of themes related to Fear or Lacking Resources, for example – themes that indicate victims' clear desires to leave were it not for external barriers. Because it is clear that partner violence victims are aware of cultural narratives (whether or not they personally internalize them), changing the way their identities are labeled – and thus, treated – could change violence targets' perceptions of available resources and address other barriers to their leaving abusive situations when those barriers are tied to stigma perceptions. For example, in tandem with referring to men/women by their sex and not their presumed gender, any interactions with violence victims should be careful to label them in terms of their 'receipt' of violence, not in terms of a larger narrative of oppression[1]. So, for example, where I have intentionally used the potentially problematic term 'victim' throughout this study, it is necessary for me to explicate how my use was intended. Even terms such as 'survivor' can be offensive when applied en masse to individuals with a variety of experiences and in different stages of dealing with their violence-receipt (Dunn, 2005). Thus, clarifying how we intend a particular term to be construed – although perhaps tedious – is imperative in both our research and in our interactions with those experiencing violence in its past, present, or future forms.

Limitations and Directions for future research

By looking at a non-clinical victim sample of men and women, this study initiated discovery of how gender identity, as conceptualized through language expression, shapes some, but not all, of the experiences men and women encounter in partner violence contexts. Clearly, much more remains to be done. A drawback to this study involved the use of

differing numbers of messages to comprise each themed category. For example, Love was indicated with one message, Relationship as Identity was tallied as four, and the remainder varied between two and three messages each. Knowing these variances in advance, statistical analyses dependent on baseline comparisons were avoided; tests relied on within-theme-group analyses rather than inter-theme claims. However, this category construction limited comparisons and as such, particular care must be taken not to extrapolate based on absolute frequencies in this study.

Next, this project primarily dealt with gender as illustrated via message construction. Although not necessarily problematic in research from a communication-informed identity perspective, it remains a limitation that these data were based on self-reports on relationships having occurred across a varying retrospective span of time (i.e. on abusive relationships ending *range* = 0–39 years prior) and that victims' actual gender-role identification was not measured as an identity or personality attribute. This presents an exciting route for future research. Knowing the roles femininity and masculinity play in predicting particular messages (as was done by Eckstein, 2012) would further advance understanding of sex-gender conflations in partner violence contexts. Indeed, not only stay-leave or message studies, but all violence research must begin to discriminate between sex and gender. By using 'gender' as an all-encompassing term to describe male- versus female-identified victims, scholars further institutionalize/validate the negative stereotypes that affect victims in their identity and help-seeking experiences. In other words, failing to distinguish sex from gender (ideally, via measurement, but at the very least, nominally) perpetuates the same sex-gender-power-based norms by which victims are perpetrated against.

Finally, this online-survey designated sex via participant-chosen labels including three options: Male, Female, and Other (a similar question was used for identifying partners). Despite encouragement to 'choose the sex with which you most identify' and provision of an open-ended fill-in space for alternate responses, this method may have biased victims from identifying in the fullest manner possible. Using these methods, the entire sample was comprised of people identifying solely as male or female. Both similar- and different-sexed romantic couples participated, but no effort was made beyond the initial recruitment period to obtain additionally sexually diverse participants. In descending order of attention, partner violence literature to date focuses on female victims of male perpetrators and male victims of female perpetrators, distantly trailed by work on female-lesbians' violence and minimal studies of gay male partner violence. Obviously, this reflects a heterosexual privilege focused on patriarchal models that emphasize the role of femininity in victims and masculinity in perpetrators (Bumiller, 2008). Although this traditional understanding has certainly helped bring attention to intimate partner violence as a social and public health problem, its focus on particular 'appropriate' (Dobash & Dobash, 1978) victims excludes too many others.

Conclusion

By looking at the messages men and women communicated to themselves versus spoke to others, a picture emerges whereby intimate partner violence experiences are socially framed in such a way as to create support barriers for those who do not fit practitioners' and health-care providers' understandings of appropriate or typical victims. Messages of

men and women in this study suggest that they comprehend these expectations and so work through language to realign their relational-norm-violating experiences in ways that match gender stereotypes.

Notes

1. Cognizant that 'victim' may connote oppressive, stigmatizing, and/or prescriptive attributions, I took specific care so that participants never saw the term 'victim' while participating. I nonetheless use 'victim' throughout this writing to emphasize individuals' *experiences* as *recipients* of abusive behaviors. Alternative terms (e.g., survivor, recipient) can be equally problematic (Dunn, 2005) and were limited so as to avoid essentializing this sample who experienced a variety of abuses.
2. No 'official' measure of sexuality exists, but most estimates speculate 3–4% 'homosexuality' in the current U.S. population. Although the slightly higher 6% reported here is close to national estimates, I make no generalizability claims. More importantly, identifying a partner's sex by no means indicates homo/heterosexuality, as sexuality is a fluid concept not accounted for in this study (i.e., partner's sex was not considered predictive of participant's sexuality – neither as practiced nor as identified).
3. Widely acknowledged as nebulous, the process of staying/leaving intimate partner violence relationships is an ongoing process (see Khaw & Hardesty, 2009). As such, this sample's 'representativeness' in terms of victims 'in/out' status cannot be ascertained due to population estimates' poor validity related to stay/leave status. Further, it is problematic to make claims regarding individual participants' in/out status using quantitative cross-sectional studies lacking participant-'voice' (see Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995).
4. The original checklist contained 28-items, with additional items related to children and pets. However, because only a limited subsample identified guardianship, those data are presented separately in (Eckstein, 2019).

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