A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF HOW COUPLES DESIST FROM INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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Intimate partner violence is a common and damaging experience for many couples, and therapists struggle to address it adequately (Johnson, 2008). Despite its negative effects, many violent couples stay together, with some stopping their violent behaviors. Unfortunately, we know little about the systemic factors affecting violence desistance. This study used grounded theory methods to analyze the process of desistance in formerly violent couples. A model of desistance consisting of three categories was developed, which for most couples included a (a) Turning Point, (b) Decision to Change, and (c) Doing Things Differently. Therapists are encouraged to use the model to better understand the varied and systemic nature of violence and desistance, and to make more sophisticated decisions about referral and treatment.

The World Health Organization (2002) defines Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) as “any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm” including physical aggression, psychological abuse, forced or coerced sex, and controlling behaviors (p.89). Despite the risks of IPV, many couples experiencing it remain together. Some victims stay because of limited resources, threats, or constraints, but many desire to rehabilitate the relationship (e.g. Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992; Cravens, Whiting, & Aamar, 2015; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Stith, McCollum, & Rosen, 2011). Because the consequences of IPV are prevalent, enduring, and potentially grave, it is important to understand how some couples successfully stop being violent and learn healthy ways of relating. When this occurs, it is referred to as desistance, which Walker, Bowen, and Brown (2012) define as the “causal process that culminates in and supports the termination of offending” (p. 271). Unfortunately, despite more than four decades of research, very little is understood about rates of desistance, the factors that influence it, or how it happens. This study attempts to fill the latter two gaps by examining the process of desistance in formerly violent couples. As in previous desistance research, this study is primarily concerned with the cessation of physical aggression in intact intimate relationships.

Does Desistance Happen?

Longitudinal surveys of the general population have found desistance rates between 7% and 70% in intact couples. Feld and Strauss (1989), found a 33–58% desistance rate, depending on violence frequency, after just 1 year, while Jasinski (2001), reported a rate of 70% after 5 years. While 1 year of desistance may indicate lasting change, longer studies show that desistance can be transient. Both O’Leary et al. (1989) and Aldarondo (1996) found about 30% of desisters at 18 and 24 months postbaseline, respectively, had re-offended by 36 months. This also means, however, that about 70% of offenders maintained desistance for the following 12–18 months. Regardless,
these varying rates and findings exemplify the difficulty in determining the difference between desistance and a nonviolent phase in a relationship.

What Factors Influence Desistance?

Desistance varies based on violence characteristics such as severity, frequency, and direction. Studies consistently indicate that desistance occurs more readily when violence is infrequent (e.g., less than three times per year) than when violence happens more often (Crowne, Juon, Ensminger, Bair-Merritt, & Duggan, 2012; Feld & Strauss, 1989; Johnson, 2003; Woffordt, Mihalic, & Menard, 1994). Likewise, perpetrators of severe violence (e.g., kicking, choking,) appear less likely to desist than perpetrators of minor violence (e.g., grabbing, shoving; Johnson, 2003; Quigley & Leonard, 1996; Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, & Shortt, 1996). In the only study to specifically examine the influence of violence direction, Field and Caetano (2005) found that 70% of male-to-female offenders, 59% of female-to-male offenders, and 50% of couples with mutual violent desisted after 5 years. This suggests that mutual violence may prolong desistance, which is consistent with Feld and Strauss (1989) who found that wives’ aggression predicted male-to-female violence persistence. However, these findings are limited in that they do not account for the severity, frequency, or type of mutual violence, meaning that this group could be composed of victims of severe, unidirectional violence acting once in self-defense as well as couples whose arguments routinely escalate into mutual shoving or grabbing (e.g., Johnson, 2008). Nevertheless, these findings indicate that dyadic factors influence desistance.

Demographic factors, like employment and socioeconomic status, also predict desistance, though the results are too sparse to draw definitive conclusions (e.g., Jasinski, 2001; Woffordt et al., 1994). Jasinski (2001), for example, found that being employed fewer hours per week at the second data collection predicted both IPV desistance and initiation, which suggests a curvilinear relationship. It could be that when decreased employment represents decreased stress, violence is reduced, whereas when less employment means increased stress, violence is initiated. Similarly, age is a fairly consistent predictor of desistance, though it is uncertain whether age is measuring the passage of time, maturation, or other factors (Jasinski, 2001). While risk factors for perpetration (e.g., witnessing parental violence or experiencing childhood abuse) and victimization (e.g. depression, antisocial behavior, or alcohol intake) relate inversely to desistance, the direction of the relationship and the presence of mediating factors is unknown (Field & Caetano, 2005; Kim, Laurent, Capaldi, & Feingold, 2008; O’Leary et al., 1989). For example, victim alcohol use could be either a means of coping with the violence or a vehicle for mutual violence.

How does desistance happen?

Few studies have attempted to discover mechanisms of desistance. Scott and Wolfe (2000) interviewed nine batterers who had completed a batterer intervention program and had been violence-free for at least 6 months. Their analysis suggests that these men stopped being violent when they became aware of their past abuse, came to understand their partner’s fear and affective reactions, became less dependent on the evaluations of others, took responsibility for their choices, and learned skills for conflict resolution.

Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2008) explored mechanisms of change in their grounded theory study of 27 community-recruited, female victims of IPV whose partners were no longer violent. Although these women had engaged in many activities to counteract abuse, it was not until some sort of turning point that they began shifting the power in the relationship by setting limits, building their personal power, and renegotiating the relationship. Partners went on to either coexist with one another in a violence-free relationship or to re-invest in their relationship to create new, constructive patterns of behavior.

Walker, Bowen, Brown, and Sleath (2014) interviewed 13 male perpetrators recruited from treatment programs who had desisted from violence for at least 1 year. Using thematic analysis, the authors found that desistance began after a culmination of events that triggered guilt and shame, leading to a decision to change. To maintain desistance, participants changed their lifestyle by addressing contextual issues (e.g., housing, employment), responding differently to conflict, taking responsibility for prior abusive behavior, and building support networks.
All of these studies implicate events, such as sustaining serious injury, children calling the police, or being arrested, as affecting desistance. Victims demanding change through ultimatums and boundary-setting were also common. In Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2008) some women reported handling conflict differently, which may be similar to learning new communication styles described by Scott and Wolfe (2000) and avoiding triggers noted in Walker et al. (2014). However, Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2008) do not mention increased empathy, perpetrators taking responsibility for past abuse, reduced dependency, or increased external support as mechanisms of change, as noted in the other studies. This incongruence could be due to sample differences (Wuest & Merritt-Gray was non-clinical while the others were clinical) or due to differing experiences of desistance based on gender and role (i.e., perpetrator or victim). Clearly more research is needed to understand the how partners mutually influence desistance and how the process is punctuated differently by victims and perpetrators.

Does desistance vary by type of violence?

Johnson (2008) proposes that there are four types of violence, with intimate terrorism and situational violence being most prevalent. In intimate terrorism, which is usually perpetrated by males, one partner uses violent and nonviolent tactics to coerce and control the other through threats, monitoring, psychological and physical abuse, and regulating access to resources. Coercive control is absent in situational violence, which instead erupts as arguments escalate from verbal to physical aggression. Poor communication, problem-solving deficits, and substance abuse contribute to this escalation. This does not mean that situational violence is minor, as it can be severe, chronic, and lethal. Though Johnson (2008) does not address desistance, if violence has multiple types and etiologies, it makes sense it would resolve itself in different ways, too.

Despite the praise and attention given to typologies, Capaldi and Kim (2007) have criticized typologies as being a snapshot of a dynamic phenomenon that does not account for change over time. They have proposed a dynamic developmental systems model of violence that views violence as a product of individual risk factors, context, and dyadic interaction. Stith et al. (2011) found evidence supporting a dynamic evolution of situational violence in interviews with eleven couples. In these cases, violence seemed to be the product of unique vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptations, both individually and conjointly. In other words, violence may be the product of changing individual, situational, and dyadic factors.

Together, Johnson (2008) and Capaldi and Kim (2007) suggest that due to varying types and etiologies, violence may not remit uniformly and ultimately desistance will be influenced by changes in individual, contextual, and dyadic risk factors. In sum, while desistance from violence is generally recognized, the literature is insufficient to draw firm conclusions about the most salient factors for predicting desistance. In its present state, the literature suggests that couples with unidirectional, infrequent, minor violence are more likely to desist than those with more frequent, severe, mutual violence. Additionally, desistance may be prolonged in younger couples and those with more risk factors. Mechanisms of desistance remain unclear, though individual, dyadic, and contextual factors likely contribute to it. The present study extends the literature by examining the specific mechanisms of desistance from a systemic perspective.

Systems theory contends that to understand individuals and their actions we must understand their context. In the case of IPV, systems theory suggests that simplistic causal explanations for violence (e.g., past child abuse, patriarchy), are insufficient, and that stereotypes (violence always as one perpetrator and a victim) are often incomplete. Rather, systems theory asserts that violence is a complex interplay of context and behavior, where actions are affected by social, cultural, relational, and individual influences. Systems theory has been criticized in the violence literature as suggesting that all parties are equally responsible for the violence (e.g., Rampage, 1994). However, to suggest that systemic factors are influential is not to absolve actors of their personal agency and choice. We, along with nearly all violence scholars and professionals, argue that participants within violent relationships are capable of independent choices, although these actions will be influenced by the context within they are made (e.g., Whiting & Smith, 2016). It is precisely these kinds of complex issues that would be useful to explore.
Purpose of the Study

To better understand the systemic process of desistance, we examined each partner’s role as well as the context in which desistance occurred. The primary question this study asked was: How do couples stop being violent? Subquestions included: (a) What events, experiences, and interventions lead to desistance?; (b) How do changes in individual, contextual, and dyadic factors influence desistance?; and (c) How do partners mutually influence the process of desistance? This study also explored contextual factors (e.g., violence direction, severity, and type), to identify both common and divergent mechanisms of change. Although many studies (e.g., Feld & Strauss, 1989; Walker et al., 2014) have defined desistance as the cessation of violence for a year or less, this study is focused on long-term change. As such, desistance here is defined as the process that has resulted in the cessation of intimate partner violence (IPV) for a minimum of 2 years, and IPV is defined broadly as physical acts of aggression by one partner toward another.

METHODS

We used constructivist grounded theory methodology as described by Charmaz (2006) to discover how couples desist from IPV. Grounded theory “consists of systemic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). Unlike deductive methods which analyze data to confirm theories, here data is analyzed to develop a theory. Constructivist grounded theory also espouses alertness to “conditions under which difference and distinctions arise and are maintained” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131), which fits this study’s goal to examine common and distinguishing mechanisms of change between couples.

Recruitment

Couples were primarily recruited via newspaper and listserv announcements from three mid-sized cities in the Southwest. The first author scheduled interviews with couples who met inclusion criteria, including (a) whether physical aggression had occurred as indicated by answering yes to any of the physical aggression items on the CTS2 and (b) whether it had been at least 2 years since physical aggression had happened. Prior to the interview, couples signed the informed consent and completed a demographic and screening questionnaire. To qualify for conjoint interviews, partners’ reports of violence had to be similar, both partners had to feel safe, and neither partner indicated a preference for an individual interview.

The questionnaire screened for physical and psychological violence and severity using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) and for coercive control using the Control Scale from Johnson and Leone (2005). When coercive control was present and when the violence was unidirectional, the researcher met privately with the nonviolent partner to assess their safety and comfort prior to the interview. Demographic questions pertaining to age, gender, relationship status, relationship length, sexual orientation, ethnicity/race, education level, and household income were also collected for additional contextual information that might be relevant for category development and to ensure social representativeness.

Sample Characteristics

Fifteen heterosexual couples (15 men and 15 women, n = 30 total individuals) were interviewed. Ten couples had been violence-free for 2 years and we used their interviews to develop the model. We also compared their data to three partially desisted couples who had been violence-free for six-plus months and two un-desisted couples who had experienced violence within the last 6 months.

Of the ten fully desisted couples, six were married and four were cohabitating. Couples had been together an average of 10 years, though this was skewed by two couples that had been together 26 and 31 years, respectively. Family income was also skewed with six couples reporting an income of less than $15,000 per year. Partners ranged in age from 21 to 65 with an average age of 36. Age was evenly disturbed with six partners in their 20s, six in their 30s, three in their 40s, and five in their 50s and 60s. Ten participants described their race/ethnicity as White, eight as Hispanic, and two as Indian.
Three couples reported female-to-male violence (F2M), two reported male-to-female violence (M2F), and five reported mutual violence. Five couples met criteria for severe aggression. Eight endorsed at least three items on the Control Scale historically, meaning that their partners would have been considered controlling and possibly intimate terrorists (Johnson, 2008). In three of these couples, both partners endorsed three or more items, meaning that both partners were controlling, which in Johnson’s typology is described as mutual violent control. However, most couples talked about violence exclusively in the context of conflict or as a product of substance abuse, which are hallmarks of situational violence (Johnson, 2008).

**Interviews**

Interviews were face-to-face, followed a semistructured schedule, and lasted 45–75 min. Every couple but one opted and qualified for conjoint interviews. Grand tour questions included, “Tell me about your relationship now?” “What was your relationship like when there was violence?” and “How did things change?” Although the grand tour questions were consistent across interviews, follow-up questions were added and subtracted as categories emerged and were based on responses from the couple. Follow-up questions sought detailed descriptions of the social, familial, and dyadic context; each partner’s thoughts, emotions, and ascribed meanings of events; partner’s action and reactions; and how changes in context, internal experiences, and partner interactions affected and were affected by desistance. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first author and a paid transcriptionist.

**Analysis**

Interviews and analysis happened concurrently to aid comparative analysis and category development. Analysis began after each interview with research memos, which track analytic decisions, thoughts, questions, and comments. After transcription, the researcher coded each interview line-by-line using gerunds to generate categories focused on processes and to aid identification of relationships between categories during focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). In vivo codes, which were taken from the participant’s words (like doing a gut check and living the fast life), were used when possible. The researcher wrote memos identifying dominate codes and story lines for each interview and compared those emerging from the other interviews. Categories were formed from the most explanatory and frequent codes.

During focused coding, the researcher used NVivo software to recode transcripts using these emerging categories. Axial coding and memoing were then used to explore the dimensions within a category and the connections between categories. Though Corbin and Strauss (2008) use different language, they explain this step as an examination of the conditions under which an event occurs, the responses to this event, and the result of the responses. During this phase the researcher also examined the effect of violence characteristics on categories, specifically the direction, severity, and type of violence. Through connecting categories and raising some categories to more abstract concepts, a theory began to form (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data gathering and analysis continued until the categories in the theory were mostly saturated.

Throughout the entire process—from conceptualization, though the interviews, coding, and categorizing, and until the final model was composed—the researcher used typed and hand-written memos and diagrams to compare storylines, develop categories, and map relationships. Memos were often used to rework categories and relationships until they “felt right,” reflecting the richness of the couple’s experience as shared in the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 47). The second author was a “peer debriefer” (Creswell, 2007, p. 204) to review data collection, analysis, and to assist with reflexivity, including the role of the researcher in the analytic process.

**Researcher’s Role and Bias**

Grounded theories are constructed in part through our “past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). It is important for researchers to be aware of their own histories and understandings that they bring to the data and the decisions made in analysis. As one example, the first author has worked with victims in a domestic violence shelter, perpetrators in a batterer program, and couples in private practice.
Both authors have studied and published in IPV research, and it was important to be reflexive of how these previous experiences influenced the research process (Creswell, 2007).

RESULTS

The final model shows a three-category process of desistance that generally represents these couples’ experiences with stopping violence in their relationship (see Figure 1). Desistance began with a turning point, an event paired with a “gut check,” that led to a conscious decision to change. Some couples changed together while others did not. Couples changing together engaged in deep conversations, enabling them to get on the same page. Noticing initial changes fortified the couples’ decision, leading to doing things differently. For many couples this meant ending drug and alcohol use (i.e., “giving up the fast life”). For every couple this meant focusing on self and changing conflict. The result of doing things differently was growing trust, commitment, acceptance, and satisfaction. Couples progressed into one of four stages of desistance depending on how developed these traits were.

Turning Points

For every couple there was a conscious decision to change. This decision related to a specific event that invited partners to ask: “Is this who I want to be with?” and “Where are we headed?” One male partner captured this idea with his recollection: “I had to do a real hard gut check.” When a specific event was paired with a gut check, these two concepts became the category of a turning point. It was the gut check that distinguished these turning point events from prior, similar events.

Events. Every couple pointed to a specific event as propagating desistance. The event varied by the direction of the violence. In couples with male-to-female (M2F) violence, desistance began...
after a separation. Separations generally lasted 2–3 months, though one couple split for twelve years. This distance enabled couples, especially the violent partner, to recognize their commitment and desire for the other. “We separated for a couple of months. Long enough to know that I am not happy anywhere else” said one man. “I realized what I was losing—the love of my life,” echoed a second. Some partners realized this immediately, while others first “played the field.” Wanting their partners back, men often attempted to woo them through gifts, apologizing, or other means. Even though they continued to care about their partners, the women were hesitant to allow them to return because this was not their first separation nor the first time their partners had been apologetic. As such, they cautiously looked for evidence of real change, or as discussed later, they began noticing initial changes. Noticing change and a sense that this was the last opportunity to be together distinguished these separations from prior ones. Or as one woman put it, “After you separate for three or four times, and then to get back the last time, it’s like, ‘Okay, we’re either going to stick it out or we’re not. Stop wasting each other’s time.’” It was this feeling that this was the last chance to be together that made this event more likely to instigate change.

When violence was mutual or female-to-male (F2M), desistance generally began after a shared experience, like a miscarriage or children witnessing violence. These events served as a “wake-up call” concerning the effect of violence and the direction the relationship was headed. “I could see I was hurting him... It became real,” one woman noted after her usually nonviolent partner shoved her and began crying in response to her violence. “Not that it wasn’t real before, but I could see it.” Some couples became concerned over the effects of violence on future generations. After their young daughter witnessed a violent argument, one man recalled, “I really had to stand back and just check myself on that because do I want my little Doodlebug growing up and seeing that and thinking it’s okay for her man to treat her that way?” For many couples, especially those who grew up in violent homes, these events sparked the realization that their relationship was headed down an unwanted path. “I used to see my dad roundhouse my mom to the floor,” recalled another man, “and I had to witness that, and I didn’t want that [for my unborn son].”

Individual events, like religious experiences, sparked desistance when violence was female-to-male. “When I became a Christian, I read some of the Bible and it started teaching me that I needed to be respecting more... [God] started showing me how life should be,” said one woman. A male victim recounted: “She had an experience where the Almighty touched her and she grasped onto it, and that is when the change happened.” Another woman said that while her partner fighting back was the event that precipitated desistance, being beaten by her brother a few weeks before also contributed to the process by making her more empathetic.

Although many couples pointed to a single event, when violence was severe a turning point was often preceded by several significant events. For example, one couple first embarked on change while the male partner was incarcerated, but slipped back into drugs and violence when he was released. A miscarriage resulted in another period of reflection, but violence and addiction continued. Becoming pregnant again initiated permanent change.

Gut checks. Turning points demanded that partners ask do I want this relationship and where is this relationship headed. Or as one male partner said, “I didn’t want our relationship turning out like my brothers where we are spitting at each other, throwing things at each other, cussing at each other. If we’re going to get to that point, we just need to go our separate ways.” Another said, “We knew one of us was going to end up dead... I knew that I either had to walk off from the relationship or change.” This emphasis on the direction of the relationship was especially prominent in mutually violent couples, whereas separated partners focused more on whether they wanted to be with one another. “We separated for a couple of months,” said one man, “Long enough to know that I am not happy anywhere else” When an individual experience initiated desistance, the gut check included the question am I doing what I should be doing?

Decision to Change

Turning points led to a conscious decision to change. When both partners recognized violence as a problem and were committed to improvement and to one another, they changed together. That recognition and commitment developed through deep conversations and noticing initial changes. In other relationships, partners were unable to get on the same page, leading one partner to change alone.
Changing together. Reflection on the gut check questions led partners to a series of deep conversations. These conversations enabled partners to reaffirm their commitment to the relationship and to “get on the same page” in terms of their individual and relationship goals. In these conversations couples talked mostly about the things they did not want for their relationship: abuse, violence, and a repeat of patterns from previous relationships or their family of origin. Sometimes they mentioned other relationship goals: “We go out to eat and see couples with nothing to say to each other. They were like strangers and we didn’t want to be like that.” These conversations also led couples to deepen their relationship and build trust by disclosing past abuse and other secrets.” Nonviolent partners also used these conversations to set boundaries and deliver ultimatums. “He understands that I’m not going to be okay and that we are not going to be okay if [violence happens again]” said one victim. These conversations helped couples feel closer, connected, and more committed to one another and to change.

Although deep conversations nourished connection and commitment, it was noticing initial changes in one another that cemented the decision to change together. This was especially true when violence was unidirectional. Seeing a difference in behaviors and attitudes gave nonviolent partners confidence that changes were sincere and likely to be long-standing. Some victims noticed changes in their partner’s anger: “When she would [previously] get angry, she [was a] wild, uncontrollable thing, and she stopped looking like that... You could notice in her eyes, in her words, in her actions that she wasn’t the same anymore.” Others noticed changes in jealousy: “[When he did not get jealous], I found myself thinking, ‘Whoa! I’m surprised you didn’t get mad at me. I’m very impressed.’” For others it was increased attention: “He would get up, make coffee, pull the van around, and he wouldn’t be ugly to me even though I was being ugly to him... when I came home he would be outside watering the plants and he would greet me.” Some noticed a change in demeanor: “I saw a change in the way she did things, in her business affairs, in how she dealt with people. It was like a calm came over her.” Finally, some noticed their partner making sweeping life changes, like going back to school or getting their own apartment.

In mutually violent couples, noticing initial changes was more about fueling change or building momentum, rather than deciding to stay: “When I changed, he reciprocated. He also started being good... We understood it was going to work and started putting effort toward the relationship.”

Changing alone. Though most couples changed together, some women initiated desistance by changing alone. Unlike the rest of the model, we developed changing alone using two fully desisted and one partially desisted couple. The partially desisted couple had experienced violence almost daily for several years up until 6 months prior to the interview. Because of this significant change and their fit with other couples changing alone, we opted to include their data in the category.

Couples changing alone often experienced a combination of individual and shared events, but drug addiction and mental health issues prevented the unchanging partner from having a gut check. When the changing partner was a victim, these events helped them recognize their unhappiness and their bleak future. Walking into her recently deceased mother’s house for the first time, one victim recalled, “That is when I knew, ‘we aren’t doing this anymore.’ I didn’t want to turn out like her.” At some point, these women considered leaving, but religious convictions, belief their partner could change, love for their partner, or wanting more tools for living independently prevented their departure. However, these women also recognized that they could not stay with their current circumstances, so they developed a steely resolve that they would change themselves. As one said, “I’m going to do what makes me happy now, and be damned what he thinks.”

Thankfully, most of the men who initially refused change did eventually have their own gut checks and got on the same page as their partner. However, it took “hitting rock bottom” through a series of individual and shared events to precipitate this. Their gut check centered primarily on the question where am I headed? Said one man, “I was scared I might end up like the bums in the street—passed out under a bridge. So I started thinking, ‘I gotta do something to change it or that’s my path. That is where I am going.’”

An important dynamic to note is that prior to the men’s decision to change, during the period between their wives’ decision and their decision, physical violence decreased or ended, though manipulating behavior increased. “[Even though violence had ended] the threats and the lies and the secretiveness and the prospective of divorce got much worse during that initial first year...
And then I got worse because I felt powerful. I felt empowered. I would stand my ground and I would purposefully take a step toward him when he was ranting, where before I would always cower or soothe him.” However, the men did not interfere their wives’ empowerment efforts and abided by boundaries that were set.

**Doing Things Differently**

For most couples, desisting from violence was only a piece of their story. They did not set out to end violence *per se*, but to change their entire life: to improve their relationship, to become better individuals, and to find stability. All these changes together resulted in desistance. Although couples began working toward changes in these areas somewhat concurrently, change occurred in a progression: no couple was able to improve their relationship, develop individually, or find stability while one or both partners were abusing substances and blaming one another. In other words, **giving up the fast life** was essential to **focusing on self** which was essential to **changing conflict**. The exceptions to this pattern were couples where one partner initially refused change and two very religious couples who had no need to give up a fast life. These latter two couples began changing by **focusing on self**. Victims with a refusing partner also began desistance by focusing on individual development, but they circled back to **giving up the fast life** when their partner initiated change.

**Giving up the fast life.** Almost every couple took steps to improve their stability and reduce stress. For a handful of couples increasing stability involved small things like improving grades or getting into graduate school. For two-thirds of couples, however, improving stability required giving up “the fast life” involving addictive, excessive, or binge drug and alcohol use. The fast life often had resulted in unemployment, homelessness, financial uncertainty, criminal activity, and sometimes prison sentences. Furthermore, the fast life increased couples’ susceptibility to “drama:” including friends trying to break them up by play on one or both partners’ jealousy. This instability fueled stress and conflict, including violence. When asked why the violence did not end sooner, one man replied “It was the lifestyle we were living [when we were using methamphetamines]. We start out the day checking out of a motel. Don’t know where we are going to lay down. So I’m stressed out. She’s stressed out.” Another summed it like this: “Friends. Family. Drugs.” As such, couples realized that for the violence to end and for their relationship to improve, an entire lifestyle change was needed. This involved getting clean, curbing or ending alcohol use, cutting off ties with people in the fast life, and staying home instead of going out to use. “[When you are out drinking], you take the chance on getting stopped, put in jail, have a knife pulled on you…so we quit doing that.” Most couples quit cold turkey, though a few used self-help groups.

**Focusing on self.** Prior to desisting, partners tended to over-focus on their partner by either blaming them for conflict or by obsessing over them. Couples grew past these blaming and controlling behaviors by shifting focus from their partner to their self. This change brought balance, lessened jealousy and control, and produced self-improvements that eventually led to increased couple stability. Although this shift began during the **deep conversations**, headway was not made until partners gave up the fast life. Partners began focusing on self in two ways: through empowerment and “taking out the trash.”

**Empowerment—**Partner’s empowered themselves through academic, career, and personal development. Partners went back to school, “got serious” about graduating, started new careers, resumed old careers, sought individual counseling, joined Al-Anon, started medication, began workout routines, became caregivers for nieces and granddaughters, and strengthened their religious faith. These activities developed a sense of purpose and self-efficacy as partners felt more in control of their futures and of their selves: “For the first time in my life, I felt strong and knew that I was able to take care of myself. There could be something different.” Another echoed “I am going back to school; filling my head with knowledge. That gives me peace of mind…because that is what is going to stabilize our life.” Even when only one partner engaged, hope was ignited in both partners as these undertakings often furthered shared goals. Moreover, witnessing empowerment increased partners’ trust and confidence in the changes they were seeing. Additionally, jealous partners realized that to reach their personal and financial goals, they must focus on their self and not on their partner. This freed the nonjealous partners to focus on their personal development as well.

Most couples mentioned engaging in one or two of these empowering activities, but women with partners who initially refused to change engaged in several. For example, one woman joined
Tae kwon do, started Al-Anon, fortified her religious faith, focused on her career, and built relationships with people outside her home. Unlike the men and women changing together, these women reported that their lives had revolved primarily around their partners “He would say, ‘This is a mess. This needs to be cleaned up.’ It didn’t matter what I was doing, I would just stop and try to make him happy... The whole entire house was hostage to his mood.”. As such, disentangling their lives from their partners’ through empowerment activities was essential to ending violence. These activities endowed them with confidence, which helped them set boundaries, ultimatums, and stand up to violence. One man recalled, “She was not as afraid. She would engage more in arguments vocally and then she would stand her ground. If I pushed her she would put her fists up like, ‘try it and see what happens.’”

Taking out the trash—Secondly, partners identified and remedied their contribution to violence and conflict, which one man called “taking out the trash.” This was a three-fold process in which partners looked at causes of behavior, rid themselves of those causes, and identified preferred behaviors. Essentially, this step involved taking responsibility for past behavior and taking control of present and future behavior, which was a departure from prior blaming and finger pointing.

Both violent and nonviolent partners engaged in taking out the trash. For nonviolent partners, this did not mean taking responsibility for the perpetrator’s violence, but examining their role in conflict and escalation. For example, one victim noted how using sarcasm and contempt often escalated conflict. Another said, “I was a yeller because it was the only way I could get control... I learned] ‘You don’t have to show up to every argument you are invited to.’ Do not engage. Do not raise your voice.” A third noted how his video game addiction contributed to his partner’s sense of loneliness and isolation. For violent partners, taking out the trash also included examining past experiences and personal characteristics that contributed to violence. Several women, for example, attributed their violence to an “I’ve got to get him before he gets me” mentality that resulted from their victimization in previous relationships. For these women, taking out the trash meant ridding themselves of old fears and recognizing that their new partner would not be violent. Men were more likely to attribute violence to witnessing it as a child. “I was born and raised around [violence] all the time,” said one. “I just thought it was a way of life.” These men, took out the trash by dumping old beliefs and behaviors and adopting new ones.

Partners also attributed violence to mental illness, drug and alcohol use, anger, immaturity, and spiritual warfare. They stopped using these attributions as excuses for their behavior, but took responsibility and action, by directing their treatment toward ridding their selves of anger, resentment, unforgiveness, and blame. For example, one man in a mutually violent relationship noted, “I’ve been an angry person and that is a lot of it... I just want to be happy instead of angry anymore.” This led him to Christianity, about which he said, “It’s helping me to be a better person. I go through and read the red-lettered scriptures where Jesus spoke. Trying to do things like him, though love instead of hate and anger all the time.” For some couples this was a long process. One victim recalled how in the process of ending violence, her partner would tell the same story of his victimization as a child over and over again. They were 2 years into the process of desistance before he finally began talking about his behavior. She recalled, “It was like he was saying, ‘I was a mean bastard because of the way I was born and I didn’t know any better.’ [But when he]... blame[d] himself, that is when his true growth happened.”

Changing conflict. Not surprisingly, desistance involved a change in conflict management. Changing conflict required that couples focus on their own behavior, rather than their partners,’ which was a natural step after taking out the trash. Most changes were geared toward preventing conflict or preventing escalation, rather than resolving conflict. Instead of resolving conflict, many couples adopted an “agree to disagree” mentality, which usually worked well.

Walking away—Learning to “walk away” was the most commonly cited change. Almost every couple reported that taking a break from heated arguments was important, and only one couple said it was unhelpful. “We’ve learned that if it gets too much, walk away and come back to it... If you’re going to make it work, then you’ve got to know when to walk away” said one woman. Timeouts generally lasted from a few minutes to a few hours. After the break, couples either resumed the discussion or mutually decided to drop the topic. This was less effective when one partner disappeared for hours and the conversation was never resumed.
Avoiding triggers—Many couples expressed the importance of recognizing pet peeves, insecurities, and other anger triggers. This enabled them to alter their actions to avoid conflict. One said, “Do something to one person and it doesn’t bother them, but do it to someone else and they freak out. We had to figure out who we were and who each other was and how to make it together.” Another added, “We don’t say certain things we used to. One of us will stop when we know we are about to hit a nerve.” Some stopped deliberately triggering each other, as one woman admitted, “[W]hen somebody’s mad and you’re mad at them, and you’re just like, ‘Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah.’ I’ve learned not to do that as bad.”

Compromising and accepting—Many couples learned to compromise, or as one man learned, “The main thing is somebody’s got to give.” Couples who learned to mutually compromise seemed more satisfied than couples who felt as if compromise was unidirectional or who equated compromise with “giving in.” Closely related to compromise is acceptance, when couples recognized that their partners’ core thoughts, characteristics, and behaviors were unlikely to change and thus they quit protesting them. “We agree to disagree, sometimes,” one said, “because we’re allowed to have our own opinions. . .We don’t always have to be right.” Another added: “I know his faults, but I still like him. He knows my faults, but he still likes me. That is why this relationship is sustained.” Acceptance was not simply ending their verbal protest while continuing to internally seethe. Instead acceptance seemed based on genuine, mutual appreciation. For example, one woman with a long history of medical problems noted, “When I broke my pelvis and he stayed home with me—helping me to the bathroom, wiping my butt—and I think, ‘Who would do that? Who would stay with someone like that?’” In some couples, instead of genuinely accepting one another’s behavior, they simply changed their reaction to it.

Communicating openly—Although some couples with minor violence reported a history of open, honest communication, many couples had to learn new ways of communicating, especially over conflictual subjects. “[In the past] we couldn’t talk to each other about anything we felt. Just keep it to yourself and to hell with you. . .[now I have] learned how to be open with her,” said one man. Another recounted how historically he would “bottle up” his anger and replay events over in his mind for days until he exploded. Another woman agreed: “I held stuff in. He held stuff in. It just didn’t work. You can’t hold it in and think it will get better.” These couples learned to address issues immediately and to be honest about their concerns. Some couples struggled with defensiveness, which is when walking away became important. Other couples reported that communicating openly came easily, but that it took time to build trust in their partner’s reaction.

Excluded Couples

Of the five excluded couples, four couples (three with severe, M2F violence and one with mild M2F violence) reported paths that aligned with the process herein. One couple had been violence-free for a year, two for 6 months, and the third had maintained desistance for 9 years until 2 months prior to the interview. When asked about the relapse, the couple attributed it to a disruption in the male partner’s medication. Although not included in the overall development of the model (one couple was used to develop the category Changing Alone), these couples’ experiences support it. However, for the partner that relapsed, this further illustrates the difficulty in distinguishing between permanent desistance and a period of nonviolence.

Finally, one excluded couple had experienced violence the week before (severe, F2M) and shared no characteristics with the model. Neither partner reported turning points, gut checks, or efforts to change and alcohol use was ongoing. Tactics that had worked for the desisted couples, like walking away, were only mildly effective at preventing violence.

Stages of Desistance

For most couples, the last incident of violence occurred before the decision to change. Even though violence technically ended before giving up the fast life, focusing on self, or changing conflict, these changes were essential to maintaining desistance. These changes not only supported desistance, but also increased trust, commitment, confidence, and satisfaction. Couples seemed to fall into one of four stages depending on their progress through the desistance process.

In the first stage, Pre-Desistance, violence and coercive control were ongoing and dissatisfaction seemed high. A decision to change had not happened. “I am tired of my marriage being a
wreck” said the un-desisted female perpetrator. Then when asked what needs to change for violence to end, she replied, “For [my partner] to start doing what he says he is going to do.” Once couples made the decision to change, physical violence ended and satisfaction increased, leading to the second stage, Early Desistance. The excluded couples experiencing violence in the last year fell into this stage. These couples were changing together by taking steps to give up the fast life, focus on self, and change conflict. However, there was ongoing doubt about whether violence would occur again and about long-term commitment. “Realistically, it is bound to happen again...but I know it’s not going to become a habit again” said one victim. When asked about marriage doubts, she replied “Marriage is permanent, so I want to make sure it is the right person. If he continues to progress the way he is, no, I wouldn’t be [doubtful]”. For many couples these doubts related to occasional engagement in the fast life and ongoing jealousy and control. Conflict resolution skills were also improving, but they mostly relied on walking away or avoiding conflict, rather than resolving conflict.

Mid-Destistance couples seemed significantly more satisfied than Early Desistance couples. They were committed to their relationship and confident violence would not occur again. Said one perpetrator of M2F violence, “I never loved nobody the way I love my wife. I mean I love my mama, but I love my wife in a whole different perspective. Wow, I’m over here about to start crying.” “Oh my goodness, we are so much in love...now that we know each other and get along it is like a honeymoon everyday” echoed another partner. These couples abstained completely from the fast life and reported a growing sense of stability and security due to focusing on self. Jealousy and other forms of control had ended completely. When asked about how jealousy ended, partners spoke most often about realizing their partner’s commitment. For example, one man in recalling his wife’s devotion to him while he was in prison said “I realized there ain’t nothing to be jealous about. I’m the man she wants... That just snapped in my head... She made her choice.” These couples also had made significant gains in changing conflict. They were better able to resolve conflict through discussion, though they still at times resorted to walking away or avoiding conflict. They also relied more on acceptance. These couples reported increased openness, honesty, trust, and dependence on one another. Many of these couples also experienced only minor violence.

Of the five couples who sought couples counseling from professional therapists or pastoral counselors, only one found it helpful in ending violence. Partners, regardless of their role in the
violence, commonly complained that they felt judged as if the counselor was “taking sides.” “You have to stay objective. Don’t be judgmental” urged one male victim. Moreover, when victims sought counseling sans partners, therapists often predicted dire outcomes (e.g., he’s never going to change or he’s going to start in on the kids next) or strongly encouraged the victim to leave. “All 17 [counselors] that I saw and all 10 that he saw with me, every one of them told us to divorce. Christian, non-Christian, military. Every single one [said] that he was sick, that he wasn’t going to change, that men like this don’t change.” In the couple who found counseling helpful, the pastor and his wife had themselves recovered from domestic violence, which helped the couple feel comfortable and understood.

**DISCUSSION**

**Clinical Implications**

This study is a reminder that many couples end violence. More importantly, it illuminates this process of desistance, which practitioners in a variety of settings can use to inform their work with both couples and individuals. Historically, domestic violence treatment has often taken a one-size-fits-all approach to treatment in which victims are encouraged to leave and batterers are punished. Practitioners should consider that violence in couples presents in endless varieties, and professionals should expand their interventions to include that possibility. This does not mean, of course, that every couple can recover from violence, or that professionals should not encourage separation or safety planning. But practitioners who are not open to couples remaining together, or who follow a one-size-fits-all protocol may come across as judgmental or unhelpful and drive people from treatment who need it (Cravens et al., 2015).

Safely and effectively working with couples and individuals, however, requires an understanding of when desistance is likely and when it is not. As such, Figure 1 includes complementary results from two studies that may help answer this question. In Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2008), even though perpetrators protested victims’ empowerment efforts and ultimatums, they abided by limits and permitted the new activities. Some of these couples repaired their relationship, like the Changing Alone couples in this study. For others, the violence ended, but the relationship did not improve, leading to coexistence. This differs from Merritt-Grey and Wuest (1995), where victims left when perpetrators responded to ultimatums and empowerment efforts by escalating violence. In the present study, nonchanging partners did not hinder the changing partners’ efforts, while couples changing together supported one another’s endeavors. These couples also shifted from blaming their partners to taking responsibility for their role in the relationship. In practice, this means that looking at the perpetrator’s response to the victim’s empowerment efforts and his or her ability to focus on self may be a key predictor of desistance.

This study also demonstrates that desistance relies on both individual and dyadic processes. Dyadic processes include deep conversations, getting on the same page, noticing initial changes, giving up the fast life, and changing conflict. Even empowerment, which may be more of an individual process, usually required partner support to be successful. Individual events, gut checks, and taking out the trash were the only primarily individual processes, though these often led to and were supported by deep conversations. As such, when ending violence is the goal, treatment should address both individual and dyadic processes, and the systemic relationship between them. Traditionally, domestic violence treatments have more or less ignored dyadic processes to prevent victim blaming and foster responsibility in a perpetrator. Batterer intervention programs, for example, generally dissuade participants from talking about class material with their partners. Teaching participants how to discuss class material at home, however, may facilitate deep conversations and getting on the same page. Again, this is appropriate only if the couples are working on desistance, taking responsibility for their actions and there is not a climate of intimidation or lack of safety (e.g., Johnson, 2008; Stith, McCollum, & Rosen, 2011).

This study also clarifies the role of contextual changes in desistance. For these participants, situational changes, like securing employment and housing or graduating from college, supported desistance by providing hope and stability. This implies that referring to concurrent drug treatment, addressing past trauma, or even providing employment services may facilitate desistance. Interestingly, no couples initiated desistance in response to improvements in their context. This
suggested that aiding perpetrators and victims in improving their situation may only affect desistance once they have made the decision to change. Also noteworthy is that contextual changes were initialized by a desire for self-improvement and not because partners, service providers, or others demanded it. This has significant implications for domestic violence shelters where increasing victims’ independence is a cornerstone to treatment. It may be that efforts to connect victims to jobs, schooling, and other resources is only effective if she or he is already internally motivated and committed to change. Conversely, batterer interventions, which focus almost exclusively on behavioral and internal changes, may increase their effectiveness by broadening their focus to address more contextual issues. Lastly, this study suggests that encouraging contextual changes via empowerment and focusing on self may be most helpful for partners changing alone.

Also interesting is that no couples initiated desistance based on advice from friends, family, or professionals. This is likely because participants were most often advised to end the relationship or warned that things would only worsen, which they did not find helpful. This does not mean that professionals should never explore these topics as separation can be a catalyst of desistance (as seen in this study) and victims can find these conversations helpful (Jenkins, 2009; Merritt-Grey & Wuest, 1995). However, this finding does suggest that professionals working with couples who have decided to change should relinquish a uniform response of insisting that violence will only worsen. Instead, when partners have decided to remain together and are committed to ending violence, interventions that focus on safety, foster empowerment, encourage responsibility, and develop skills may be most helpful.

Finally, none of the turning points that precipitated desistance in this study can be contrived. Clinically this does not seem like good news. However, asking gut check questions, facilitating deep conversations, and helping couples get on the same page may lead to a decision to change without a pivotal event. These questions may also help victims struggling with the leave or stay decision. Once couples have decided to change, they must give up the fast life, focus on their selves, and change how they handle conflict. In other words, addressing substance abuse, encouraging empowerment, reinforcing personal responsibility, and teaching conflict management skills should be included in treatment. For example, most of these couples found breaks important, and therapists can implement this by teaching negotiated time outs as described by Rosen, Matheson, Stith, McCollum, and Locke (2003).

Research Implications

To further develop our understanding of desistance, research is needed on how the process differs in couples who attempt change, but still remain violent, or end the relationship. Analyzing how the process varies could lead to improved prediction, intervention, and outcome. Presently efforts to predict recidivism and desistance focus on characteristics of the victim, perpetrator, or violence, though no definitive predictors have been identified. Perhaps future research should investigate the predictive ability of process factors, such as whether violence increases in response to empowerment efforts. Also, examining desistance as it unfolds using process and dyadic methods, rather than after-the-fact recollections, may better illuminate desistance’s nuances and progression. Future research could also look at desistance in couples receiving counseling, batterer intervention, and shelter services.

It would also be helpful to continue to understand the process of desistance as it relates to types of IPV. In this sample, couples were distinguished in part by the presence of coercive control (Johnson, 2008). However, the sample size and inadequate information prevented full classification of couple by type. Although the Control Scale (Johnson & Leone, 2005) indicated high control by one or both partners in most couples, almost every couple talked about violence exclusively in the context of conflict or as a product of substance abuse, which are hallmarks of situational violence (Johnson, 2008). Moreover, only two partners gave any indication of being historically fearful of their partners. Future studies should include a more comprehensive assessment of intimate terrorism that includes patterns of violence and fearfulness.

Limitations

Even though the sample was diverse in terms of direction and severity of violence, the small overall sample size and even smaller category sizes limit the dependability and transferability of
the findings. Also, this sample included no partners who had been arrested, court-ordered to treatment or who had contact with domestic violence shelters, all of which may affect the desistance process. Similarly, this sample was skewed in terms of socioeconomic status (wealthier couples might have more access to treatment) and problematic drug and alcohol use, with two-thirds of the couples reporting substance abuse. However, the key difference between couples with and without substance abuse issues was that those without skipped giving up the fast life and went straight to focusing on self. Couples without a substance abuse history also seemed farther along in the desistance process. Of the couples without substance abuse histories, only one couple experienced severe violence. Perhaps there is a missing category of severely violent couples without a history of substance abuse. If so, these couples may follow a different trajectory especially since severe violence tends to be related to intimate terrorism. Also missing from the sample were male victims changing alone. Finally, as with all desistance research, it is ultimately unclear whether these changes mark permanent cessation of violence or a long period of non-violence.

CONCLUSION

Couples can end violence and cultivate happy, healthy relationships. Although more research is needed to understand the process, it is not too early for clinicians to become more sophisticated in their understanding of the variety and severity differences in violence, and develop interventions geared toward healing and preserving relationships. This is respectful of where many couples are at, and also contributes to a safer and healthier society.

REFERENCES


