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Intimate Partner Violence in Young Adulthood: Narratives of Persistence and Desistance*

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Abstract

Prior research on patterns of intimate partner violence (IPV) has documented changes over time, but few studies have focused directly on IPV desistance processes. This analysis identifies unique features of IPV, providing a rationale for the focus on this form of behavior cessation. We develop a life-course perspective on social learning as a conceptual framework and draw on qualitative interviews ($n = 89$) elicited from a sample of young adults who participated in a larger longitudinal study (Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study). The respondents' backgrounds reflected a range of persistence and desistance from IPV perpetration. Our analyses revealed that relationship-based motivations and changes were central features of the narratives of successful desisters, whether articulated as a stand-alone theme or in tandem with other potential "hooks" for change. The analysis provides a counterpoint to individualistic views of desistance processes, highlighting ways in which social experiences foster attitude shifts and associated behavioral changes that respondents tied to this type of behavior change. The analyses of persisters and those for whom change seemed to be a work in progress provide points of contrast and highlight barriers that limit a respondent's desistance potential. We describe implications for theories of desistance as well as for IPV prevention and intervention efforts.

Keywords

intimate partner violence; desistance; young adulthood

Prior research on intimate partner violence (IPV) has most often focused on the onset and persistence of this major public health problem. The emphasis on initial causes and the recurrent nature of IPV is intuitive as this form of violence incurs heavy emotional and physical costs to victims (Bonomi et al., 2006; Coker et al., 2002), repeat victimization is

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common (Halpern et al., 2009), and criminal justice and other intervention efforts have not proven uniformly successful (Capaldi and Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Maxwell, Garner, and Fagan, 2001). Yet as continued violence after initial onset is often thought to be inevitable, studies have shown that cessation within a relationship does occur (Feld and Straus, 1989; Whitaker, Le, and Niolon, 2010), and there is evidence of even greater discontinuity across relationships (i.e., when the individual acquires a different partner) (Capaldi, Shortt, and Crosby, 2003; Timmons Fritz and Smith Slep, 2009). Furthermore, self-reports and official statistics indicate that this behavior is strongly age graded, with peaks in adolescence and young adulthood, and significant declines thereafter (Capaldi and Kim, 2007; Halpern et al., 2009). Nevertheless, as theorizing and research on IPV has in general increased exponentially in the last several decades, few studies have explored the process of desisting from this form of violent behavior (Walker, Bowen, and Brown, 2013).

In this article, we argue that IPV has some unique features meriting investigation apart from research about crime more generally (but see Felson and Lane, 2010), and furthermore, we suggest that these distinctive elements are potentially important to an understanding of desistance from this behavior. The current analysis focuses on IPV perpetration, and draws on narratives about persistence and desistance elicited from a sample ($n = 89$) of young adult men and women who had participated in a larger longitudinal study of adolescent and young adult relationship experiences (the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study [TARS]; $n = 1,072$). Recent analyses of aggregate trends in IPV perpetration relying on the TARS data support the focus of this study on the young adult period (Johnson et al., 2015). Young adulthood is a time of transition (Settersten and Ray, 2010) during which rates of IPV are relatively high but declines in prevalence are evidenced across the sample as a whole (see also Cui et al., 2013; Emery, Jolley, and Wu, 2011). In light of the limited prior research on IPV desistance, a potentially useful first step in theory building is to center on respondents' own understandings about how and why changes have occurred in this aspect of their lives (the desistance process) and about why change may have proven difficult to accomplish (persistence). Our overall objective is thus to integrate, from a conceptual standpoint, what have developed as two separate traditions (i.e., the IPV and desistance literatures). Within the area of IPV, researchers relying on qualitative methods have focused primarily on active involvement (see, e.g., Anderson and Umberson, 2001) and have not explored issues of change from the perpetrator's point of view. This study of "naturally occurring" desistance processes may also be of interest to practitioners whose objectives are to bring about changes at the individual and societal levels.

This analysis also has implications for more general theorizing about desistance processes. First, we argue that understandings about pathways into IPV are often intimately connected to understandings about pathways out. Thus, this analysis suggests the need for additional scrutiny of the often-quoted assertion that what is important for criminal onset may be irrelevant to the dynamics involved in the cessation of these same behaviors (Fagan, 1989). A second and related theme is that focusing on the unique features of IPV suggests some limitations to the well-regarded "generality of deviance" notion (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1994), particularly as applied to understanding the mechanisms involved in desistance. Thus, our analyses highlight that the narratives of IPV desistance focus heavily on

relationship-based changes that do not have an exact parallel in movement away from other forms of violence or criminal behavior. Third, as Kazemian (2012) recently noted, a key source of variation in theoretical treatments of desistance is the emphasis on external versus internal forces (Carlsson, 2013; Farrall, 2005; Laub and Sampson, 2003). The current study thus offers a new context for exploring the complex interplay of structure and agency as influences on individual-level behavior change.

We develop a *life-course perspective on social learning* as a general framework and conceptual counterpoint to the focus on external factors such as threat of jail (Fagan, 1989) and other life-event-centered conceptions of the mechanisms underlying criminal desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2003). With reference to the IPV context, we argue that the accumulation of experiences within intimate relationships may form the basis of a learning curve that is likely to be important to an understanding of the cessation of this form of behavior. Thus, even where major life events (e.g., becoming a parent) or exogenous shocks (e.g., jail) play a role, we argue that successful desistance will necessarily encompass localized relationship-level motivations and changes. In exploring this idea of a relationship learning curve and the role of other catalysts or “hooks” for change in more detail, our goal is to document specific attitudinal changes (redefinitions) and behavioral adjustments (agentic moves) respondents tie to their patterns of successful IPV desistance.

Prior Research on IPV Desistance

Early on, Feld and Straus (1989) pointed out that despite “well-entrenched beliefs about the persistence of wife assault” (1989: 144), even those studies of men arrested for such offenses frequently showed relatively low rates of recidivism (e.g., Dutton, 1988; Sherman and Berk, 1984). Feld and Straus's (1989) own survey research also revealed discontinuities in behavior across two waves of interviews, and as noted previously, prior research has pointed to even greater discontinuity in IPV when individuals change partners (Capaldi et al., 2003; Whitaker et al., 2010). A somewhat narrow range of predictors of such changes over time has been examined. For example, Whitaker, Le, and Niolon (2010) observed similar odds of continuation across gender, Caetano et al. (2005) found that minority status was associated with greater odds, and the frequency and severity of the initially observed violence has been linked to lower odds of IPV cessation (Johnson, 2003; Quigley and Leonard, 1996).

Prior research has also examined the role of transition events, but most of this research has been cross-sectional. Full-time employment is generally associated with lower odds (Zweig, 2004), cohabitation relative to marriage seems to be a more risky union status (Brown and Bulanda, 2008), and research has suggested that having children is either not systematically related to variations in IPV or is associated with higher risk (Brownridge, 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2009). In a recent longitudinal assessment of within-individual variations in IPV perpetration relying on the TARS data, Johnson et al. (2015) found that both movement into marriage and cohabitation were related to *greater* odds of reporting IPV relative to dating; additional findings include no effect of employment, a positive relationship between childbearing and IPV at the between subjects level, and no within-subjects effect. This analysis of age-related trends in IPV also illustrates that more changes occur than can be

accounted for by the experience of these transition events. Taken together, these findings provide a general background for exploring more subjective, social-psychological and relationship-level changes that may be involved in desistance or condition any effect of these transition events.

Characteristics of IPV that have Implications for Understanding IPV

Desistance Processes

Researchers have long noted significant correlations between various types of delinquency and crime (Jessor and Jessor, 1977), and the findings show that predictors across types also tend to be similar (Felson and Lane, 2010). Yet an exclusive focus on the generic “crime” at times may be limiting to theory building, to the degree that we bracket off consideration of variations in the *phenomenological* aspects of particular behavior patterns, different *social reactions* that connect to them, as well as relatively *unique etiological processes* associated with their expression. Thus, a goal of this study is to forge a clearer conceptual link between etiology and cessation, one that considers unique features of the behavior under scrutiny. As suggested at the outset, this approach suggests some possible limitations to an assumption serving as a springboard for conducting desistance research—namely that factors associated with entry into crime may be irrelevant to understanding exit processes (Fagan, 1989; Sampson and Laub, 1993).

Katz (1988) pointed out the importance of attending to the way crimes are actually experienced, and it is intuitive to expect that these “lived realities” figure into desistance processes as well. For example, Sampson and Laub (1993) noted that many of the men who participated in the Glueck study seemed to have experienced “desistance by default,” that is, without a level of intentionality that has often been described in other more recent treatments of desistance processes (Carlsson, 2013; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001). Yet the men's desistance paths and this accompanying portrait may have been influenced by the types of crimes (e.g., youthful property offenses) that many of the Glueck men had initially committed. This pattern contrasts with the extensive drug use that dominates many of the criminal portfolios of offenders described in many contemporary treatments (Mulvey, Schubert, and Chassin, 2010; Uggen and Thompson, 2003). Thus, it is unlikely that individuals addicted to crack cocaine and enmeshed in drug-oriented networks would be able to extricate themselves from this pattern and the broader lifestyle without their own awareness and resolve to change direction. Intimate partner violence provides another point of contrast as we identify some unique characteristics of IPV with implications for understanding the nature of (IPV) desistance pathways.

IPV is Likely to be Viewed as a “Negative” or as a Failure Event

Although discussions of IPV have focused on the attitudes that support these behaviors and the ways in which violence functions within relationships (i.e., as a means of controlling/dominating one's partner), within the contemporary Western context, hitting an intimate partner is not generally associated with overtly positive meanings, nor is it considered a source of status enhancement.¹ In line with this idea, research has documented low rates of endorsement of items tapping respondents' views of the acceptability of this form of

violence (Bowen et al., 2013; Copp, 2014).² Furthermore, studies have shown that IPV is linked to a range of other negative consequences, including relationship instability (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013) and depression (Johnson et al., 2014). Given our focus, the findings from the latter analysis are particularly relevant, as the results indicate that both perpetration and victimization are associated with declines in emotional well-being. In addition, gender interactions were not significant, indicating a similar effect of perpetration on variations in men's and women's self-reports of depressive symptoms. These findings likely reflect negative features of the experience itself as well as reactions of others including one's romantic partner. Thus, although gang youth may take pride in recounting battles and displaying their old injuries (Katz, 1988), and although substance use careers can include an initial period of unapologetic "hard partying," it is difficult even at the outset for individuals to position IPV perpetration either to self or others as a positive development. These negative meanings create *expectations of desistance* that we believe are integral to understanding how individuals think about and narrate changes that have occurred in this aspect of their lives.³

Relationship-Specific Precursors

Another consideration specific to IPV is that traditional risk frameworks are incomplete as explanations for this type of behavior. Recent studies have shown that *relationship-specific dynamics* are significantly related to IPV perpetration net of traditional risk factors such as family history of violence or involvement in other forms of delinquency and crime.⁴ For example, research on the young adult period has shown that feelings of anger and attempts to control the partner may tie to specific domains of contestation, such as partner infidelity/infidelity concerns, and that the use of certain negative forms of communication around such areas of conflict exacerbates risk (Giordano et al., 2015). As we describe in more detail in the analysis to follow, these broader relationship issues and behaviors not only connect to respondents' understandings about violence escalation but also are implicated in their narratives of change. Conversely, and reflecting the specific context within which this behavior occurs, some traditional features of a criminal desistance narrative may be absent, such as the frequent focus on the desirability of steering clear of negative peer influences (Warr, 1998; Wright and Cullen, 2004).

Dyadic Element

A related and relatively unique feature of IPV with implications for understanding respondents' narratives of persistence and desistance is that this behavior has a dyadic

¹We are not suggesting that the behavior is without meaning, as it can be viewed as acceptable in light of the circumstances, as accomplishing a short-term objective (got partner's attention, did not want partner to leave, or vent frustration), or as a way to recalibrate the perceived power balance within the relationship (Pence and Paymar, 2006). Meanings that continue to support the behavior are described in more detail in our discussion of the narratives of persisters.

²A key complication is that the normative climate around the use of violence within intimate relationships continues to change (Pierotti, 2013), undoubtedly reflecting the impact of applied efforts to upend previous attitudes that supported or indicated tacit acceptance of IPV.

³For example, one would not generally expect a gang member to quit the gang the day after joining the group, but there is a stronger expectation that individuals who have hit an intimate partner will refrain from doing this in the future.

⁴Felson and Lane (2010) recently argued that no specific theory of IPV was needed, as their comparison of men arrested for IPV and other types of crime showed that traditional risk factors were solid predictors of IPV offenses as for the other types. However, Felson and Lane's analyses did not include dynamics that are relatively unique to the romantic context, and indeed it would not be possible within the context of the design and comparative framework employed.

component.⁵ Because this study focuses on perpetration, individual behavior change remains the primary reference point for gauging desistance from this form of behavior. However, prior research has repeatedly shown strong correlations between IPV perpetration and victimization (Whitaker et al., 2007). Thus, individuals may connect their own use of violence to the partner's use of violence or other relationship conduct that has proven to be a source of conflict escalation. This dyadic aspect of the focal behavior creates several different opportunities for change as well as potential barriers to overcome. Individuals' paths to desistance may center on their successfully extinguishing this negative behavior (the traditional desistance path), but also it may encompass changes in relationship behaviors associated with angry partner responses, the partner's desistance from the use of violence and/or relationship behaviors that have been known to amplify conflict, both partners working jointly to accomplish desistance, or terminating the relationship—opting out of having an intimate relationship or acquiring a different partner. To be sure, in the latter instance, the individual must refrain from the use of violence in the next relationship, but in the new context, the individual may perceive that different couple-level dynamics and/or distinctive partner characteristics are in play and that these significantly facilitate or hinder the desistance process. These dyadic features suggest some limitations to the idea that IPV desistance lies only in the individual's own decision making, motivational stance, or use of agency to change life direction.

Toward a Conceptual Framework for Understanding IPV Desistance

Paternoster and Bushway's (2009; Bushway and Paternoster, 2013) recent works have provided a useful corrective to prior theorizing in the broader desistance tradition, as these researchers have highlighted the role of *negatives* as factors influencing motivation to change. This emphasis fits well with the idea that IPV is generally perceived as a negative development within relationships. Yet in our view, Paternoster and Bushway's description of the process as a whole does not capture the full range of experiences that may be involved in the IPV desistance process. Paternoster and Bushway's theory of desistance centers primarily on the individual's own mental calculations, is dominated by identity concerns (e.g., the shift from criminal to family man), and points to an “end of the line” scenario somewhat akin to the idea of reaching a “bottom,” as frequently described in self-help programs:

Just as a criminal identity emerges only slowly ... in response to perceived successes so does a break from that identity. ... As one begins to find less success and satisfaction with the criminal identity, it is likely to conjure up negative possible selves. ... However, this weakening of the criminal identity does not come about quickly, nor does it come about in response to one or two failures, but only gradually and to the linking of many failures and the attribution of those linked failures to one's identity and life as a criminal. (Bushway and Paternoster, 2013: 223)

⁵The recognition of a dyadic element does not equate to the notion that gender symmetry exists in the experience of IPV, as on average women report greater levels of fear associated with IPV victimization, as well as higher risk of injury (Campbell, 2002); thus, the meaning and impact of men's and women's acts of perpetration may be distinct.

Reflecting differences in our referents, individuals may never consider IPV an early “success” and are unlikely to develop an identity and accompanying lifestyle in which IPV is the central feature. Furthermore, research has shown that IPV desistance occurs at various levels of chronicity (Whitaker, Le, and Niolon, 2010) and may take place after one or two negative experiences or “failures.” Fagan (1989), in an early discussion of IPV, also theorized a role for aversive experiences, and he concluded from the existing research base that “spontaneous” desistance was rare. He focused more emphasis on “provocation from an external source, often a victim-initiated event, usually involving the threat of legal or social sanctions that raise the cost of battering. Only then do the socio-psychological processes of desistance begin for the batterer” (Fagan, 1989: 392). Cognitive shifts occur, but they occur as a consequence of the external threat.

These depictions suggest an inexorable movement in the direction of a chronic pattern, one that will be interrupted only by an exogenous shock or piling on of negative experiences. As a counterpoint, we outline a social learning perspective and develop this framework through our analysis of the desistance narratives of a sample of young adult respondents who had experienced violence within their relationships. This *life-course view of social learning* emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between social experiences and cognitive changes and, in turn, desistance from IPV. Such a perspective can accommodate changes that occur at various points in individuals' relationships and violence careers, and these changes may be—but are not inevitably—tied to specific external (e.g., jail) or role-based (e.g., transition to parenthood) hooks for change.

Life-Course Perspective on Social Learning

If we accept that learning definitions (favorable to the violation of law) is important to understanding crime (IPV as discussed in this study) onset (Sutherland, 1939), then it is intuitive to expect that redefinitions will be involved in the desistance process. This focus on revised definitions differs from control theories of onset and desistance (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson and Laub, 1993). From the point of view of the latter, motivation to deviate remains constant, whereas it is the degree of *control* that varies across individuals or in line with variations in life-course circumstances (e.g., marriage and employment). Most research based on principles of differential association has focused on movement *into* crime. Within this tradition, research has often centered on the attitudes and behaviors of adolescent friends (delinquent peer influences), although it is widely accepted that the family is an important context within which learning occurs (Akers and Jensen, 2003). Social learning explanations of IPV have often focused on the family of origin (witnessing parental violence and child abuse), but researchers have also investigated the norms and behavior of peer groups as a contributing factor (Arriaga and Foshee, 2004; Reed et al., 2011). Whether the focus is on adolescent or adult IPV, then, the emphasis of many learning-inspired investigations is on *carryover effects*, with less attention to the idea that romantic relationships themselves are important sites for further learning and adjustment.⁶

⁶Feminist perspectives have moved closer to the world of romantic relationships, but in focusing on ways in which male socialization and macrolevel inequalities foster IPV, tend to retain an emphasis on what is imported into the relationship by virtue of this earlier exposure (i.e., on carryover effects).

Early on, Sullivan (1953) noted that each form of social relationship represents something of a “new ballgame” from a developmental standpoint—their features, functions, and dynamics are distinct. These elements of discontinuity and contrast provide the basis for refashioning old definitions and acquiring new ones that are necessarily situated within the realities posed by the new context (Mead, 1938). Some features are relatively unique to romantic relationships, (e.g., feelings of sexual attraction and love, the normative climate around issues of fidelity and commitment, and prohibitions against hitting an intimate partner) and accordingly earlier socialization becomes outdated as a guide to action. Thus, the past (e.g., family history and gendered socialization practices) influences action but does not fully constitute it. Experience with a given partner or across several partners, then, may result in a “relationship learning curve” that is an important basis for making changes in the direction of IPV desistance. This general notion is consistent with the idea of a distinctively human capacity for reflection, including self-reflection, as well as symbolic interaction's emphasis on the development of sympathetic understanding or “taking the role of the other” (Mead, 1938; Thomas, 1923). In turn, changes in awareness and in one's “definition of the situation” form the basis for making relationship-based adjustments.

Lessons Learned—Lessons learned may encompass a heightened appreciation not only of the specific negatives surrounding the use of aggressive actions within *this* context (and accompanying strong expectations for desistance) but also of the ways in which other relationship conduct (e.g., infidelity, ways of communicating, and attempting to control partner's actions) has previously been linked to conflict and conflict escalation. Through direct experience, partner communications, and additional social exposure, then, individuals may increasingly come to appreciate that pathways into IPV may figure into pathways out. Relationship adjustments may occur within the framework of a given relationship or entail the recognition of the need to change partners, and/or more generally the criteria for selecting a partner. Thus, although the stay or leave decision has been examined primarily around the issue of victimization, these decisions to stay or leave may also prove a pathway out for those who have used violence within their relationships. At the same time, age-graded changes are occurring in the overall significance of romantic relationships, and these life-course shifts in salience and meaning may be related to an increased willingness to make further relationship-based changes (see, e.g., Carlsson, 2013; Furman and Wehner, 1997).

Specific catalysts or hooks for change may be an important part of the process and may include external catalysts (e.g., jail or the prospect of jail), role-based changes (e.g., becoming a parent), or some combination. Yet a key conceptual point is that potential catalysts are unlikely to be successful as hooks for sustained IPV desistance without an attendant “relationship learning curve” that serves as the (cognitive or perceptual) anchor for making more fundamental relationship adjustments. Thus, to borrow an observation from the political sphere, all IPV desistance is necessarily local; that is, worked through on a daily basis at the relationship level.

Current Study

In the current analysis, we focus attention on a particular type of cognitive transformation (i.e., a redefinition process) that provides the basis for agentic moves (these can be considered pathways or intermediate steps) that respondents associated with IPV desistance. The goal of the current study is to contribute to theory building in the area by 1) anchoring the idea of redefinitions within the framework of a broader life-course perspective on social learning, 2) highlighting that romantic relationships are an important site of further education (in general and in relation to IPV cessation), and 3) identifying specific redefinitions and associated agentic actions that respondents tie to this form of behavior change. Certainly, the narratives developed by respondents in an interview setting do not mirror precisely the real reason or mixture of reasons why some respondents have stopped hitting their partners and others have continued this unhealthy pattern. Thus, this examination of the IPV desistance process follows in the tradition of other qualitative studies of criminal desistance that necessarily have focused on how desisters talk about and understand behavioral changes they have made. Given the general absence of research and theorizing in this area, the in-depth interviews we conducted are useful for identifying different pathways that might be obscured by a focus on aggregate trends, specific subjective changes that would have been more difficult to identify a priori relying on established scales, and gendered aspects of the redefinition and change process.

Our analytic goal is to develop a descriptive portrait of desistance processes as reflected in these narrative accounts and to suggest that the idea of a relationship learning curve is a conceptual frame that fits well with many of their descriptions of this process. We identify specific hooks for change, as well as changes in attitudes and behavior respondents do not link to an obvious catalyst or role transition. The latter provide especially good examples of our notion that relationship experiences are likely to be an important basis for effecting changes in this form of violent behavior. The narratives of desisters are obviously of special interest as their discussions are backed up by a track record of IPV cessation. However, persisters' narratives are also useful as they reveal some differences in perspectives on areas that desisters emphasize, as well as other attitudes and world views that seem to operate as cognitive barriers to sustained behavior change. Individuals whose situations do not suggest a clear pattern of desistance or persistence make tangible the generally accepted notion of desistance as a process (Bushway et al., 2001).

Data and Methods

Data

We draw on in-depth interviews ($n = 89$) conducted with participants in the fifth wave (2011–2012) of a larger longitudinal study of adolescent and young adult romantic relationships (Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study [TARS]). The stratified random sampling strategy for the larger project included oversamples of African American and Hispanic respondents, as well as an equal number of males and females. School attendance was not a requirement for inclusion in the study, and respondents were followed even if they were incarcerated. The initial sample included 1,321 respondents, and wave V retained 77 percent ($n = 1,021$) of the respondents. The average age was 25 years at wave V. To select

individuals for the wave V qualitative interview, we drew initially on the structured data, with a goal of locating a range of male and female respondents who varied in their (apparent) patterns of violence perpetration. Our sampling strategy was based on information from the conflict tactics scale administered at each wave, and was designed to ensure some respondents who reported IPV at prior waves but not at wave V and others who reported active involvement (i.e., reported IPV at wave V). Most interviews took place in respondents' homes. We also conducted separate interviews with 50 partners of these respondents, which provided an additional vantage point for assessing the respondent's desistance claims and sometimes a more detailed or complex view of the dynamics within a particular relationship. The average interview length was 85 minutes, and the transcribed interviews were on average 52 single-spaced pages. More details about procedures, the interview guide, and coding and analysis of the qualitative data are provided in the online supporting information.⁷

Categorizing Respondents—Although information from the quantitative interviews was used as an initial screen to select respondents, two coders independently classified respondents as desisters, persisters, or a group labeled “in process or indeterminate,” relying on the more complete information gleaned from the qualitative interview. To qualify as a desister, the time since the last incident was a major consideration, and we established this for all respondents, either directly or by tying the narrative content to a major life event (e.g., “not since I was pregnant with Kenny”). However, information such as breaking up with a partner with whom violence had been a particular problem was also taken into account, as these concrete steps added weight to the respondent's desistance claims. All desisters had been free of violence for longer than 1 year, and the average was 3.2 years. The persisters were individuals who indicated that IPV was still a problem within their relationships, and some reported that they had engaged in violent acts the day or week of the interview. The mean time since the last violence for this subgroup was 2 months. The in-process group is reflective of the age patterns of IPV (Johnson et al., 2015) as during this phase of the life course, many individuals are just beginning to reduce their use of violence within intimate contexts. Thus, these respondents may have accumulated a reasonable amount of time free of violence (average 2.19 years), but in some instances, their longer narratives did not provide a solid basis to support classification as a desister.

Analysis—As a preliminary step in the analysis, we first compared the characteristics of desisters identified via quantitative information but not interviewed with those who completed the qualitative component (see tables S.1 and S.2 in the online supporting information). Desisters in the qualitative sample did not differ in many respects from the larger sample of desisters, but they were less likely to have been raised by two biological parents or to be employed full-time, and they were more likely to have children. This pattern is generally consistent with our goal of selecting to interview individuals with a higher risk profile to ensure a reasonable threshold of offending from which desistance could be determined (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Subsequently, we compared across the three

⁷Additional supporting information can be found in the listing for this article in the Wiley Online Library at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/crim.2015.53.issue-3/issuetoc>.

categories of respondents who participated in the qualitative interview (persisters, in process, desisters) along a similar range of characteristics to determine whether the subgroups varied in terms of their background and adult status characteristics. As indicated in table S.3 in the online supporting information, the groups do not differ significantly in prior IPV histories, family of origin and adult status characteristics, number of romantic relationships, neighborhood poverty, percentage arrested, depressive symptoms, or becoming a parent. This analysis thus provides an assurance that these specific aspects of respondents' personal biographies do not seem to be the underlying factors that distinguish the three subgroups.

To facilitate the qualitative analysis itself, we relied on ATLAS-ti (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Corvallis, OR) and developed increasingly refined coding schemes focused around respondents' descriptions of the dynamics associated with the IPV desistance process. To provide a basic descriptive portrait of the themes that emerged from these analyses, table 1 provides information about whether a change narrative was present and how three thematic areas that were frequently referenced (concerns about jail/arrest, parenthood, and relationship-based themes) were distributed across the levels of persistence and desistance we had identified. We also assessed how these themes clustered within a given individual's narrative, and table 1 includes the percentage of respondents in each category who incorporated multiple hooks for change into their narrative accounts.

Results

IPV as a Negative Development Within Relationships

Regardless of how the individuals we interviewed were categorized (i.e., as desisters, persisters, or in process), most respondents did not indicate that hitting partners was a positive feature of their lives and relationships:

[I]t happened so fast, like she was holding her mouth and she just got to spitting on the floor and blood was just coming out of her mouth and I'm just standing there and I'm mad, but in my mind like oh, shit, I feel bad. But I was so mad I wasn't about to tell her, like, I feel bad for hitting you. [Marta, persister]

Definitely I felt weak. I felt like a little, like to excuse my French...like a bitch. I felt like if another dude came and had seen another dude beat his girlfriend and called him a bitch, "like oh you're a bitch man, you gotta hit your girlfriend," I wouldn't even be able to say anything back. [Daniel, in process]

Other respondents made references to a relationship that contained violence as a "messed-up situation," or relied on broader terms such as "drama or "bullshit," as in "I don't want the drama—that ain't nothing but drama [Scott, desister]," "I got tired of all that drama and stuff man [Shane, in process]," or "you want drama don't bring it my way [Rachel, in process]":

I was just tired of just going through the bullshit. I was just tired. Couldn't deal with it no more. I felt like I deserved better. The arguing, the fighting, the trust issues. Everything. Everything. Everything. I'm just done with it. That shit just wears you down. If I don't trust you and you don't trust me, then what are we here for? We don't need to be together. [Kristina, persister]⁸

The use of these more generic negative references (e.g., “drama” and “bullshit”) could relate in part to the stigma surrounding the use of violence within intimate relationships—in general and in particular with respect to men's use of violence. For example, Daniel, when reflecting on his action, suggested that it made him feel weak and “like a bitch,” and John [desister] recounted how he told his mother, “I shoulda never did it, I shoulda took the high road. ... I can't believe that I would raise my hands to push a woman.”⁹ Jody [desister] incorporated a positive element along with her description of a final serious incident but nevertheless concluded with a negative: “I felt good because I was hurtin' him, but bad because my kids was there.” These generally understood and culturally reinforced understandings about the behavior that must be discarded are important to highlight as some initially available negatives (no longer hitting one's partner *is* the high road, it is not good to expose children to further violence; a man hitting a woman is “weak”) are generally in place and provide a starting point for recognizing and acting on the need for change. Accordingly, although desisters may have the most well-developed narratives, as we illustrate throughout, particularly those respondents who were classified as “in process” and sometimes even persistsers incorporated elements of a change narrative into their personal accounts.

The use of catchall terms such as “drama” also suggests a second consideration, namely, that most often individuals were referencing a whole *package of negative relationship dynamics* that included the IPV. The idea of a package is strongly suggested by Kristina's focus on arguing and trust issues, as well as on physical fights (“Everything. Everything. Everything.”). These features of the narrative accounts are potentially important not only as they provide a portrait of the relationship context within which IPV often unfolds but also because this package of relationship dynamics may figure into the desistance narrative itself (i.e., as factors in addition to violence that respondents link to the decision to break up, the desire to change to avoid further “drama,” or decreased tolerance for the partner's actions).

Dyadic Features of IPV

Another complication linked to redefinition and change processes in this area relates to the high correlations observed between self-reports of IPV perpetration and victimization, particularly in community samples. These areas of overlap are also incorporated into respondents' narratives of persistence and desistance. Thus, although we have chosen to focus on individuals who have themselves engaged in aggressive actions, most individuals coded as “perpetrators” have garnered victimization experience, and some individuals might organize their stories of change around this aspect of their experience. For example, Lauren [in process] noted that “he was beating up on me the whole time, taking all of that money. ... Now I don't have to deal with nobody's shit—if I don't want something to happen at my house, nothing happens at my house.” Some male respondents also zeroed in on the partner's rather than on their own actions, as suggested by Will [desister]: “Abby would get physical sometimes ... it hurt”; “she had a very serious anger problem.” Yet it is important to underscore that Lauren and Will both reported perpetration in addition to victimization

⁸Although this narrative would seem to support a desister story line, the details in a later partner interview revealed that the couple had reconciled and that the relationship remained highly conflictual.

⁹This statement seems to suggest that this was an isolated incident, but this respondent also reported serious violence in a prior relationship, prior to his narration of a desistance process.

experience. Other narratives more closely approximate a traditional desistance narrative (e.g., emphasizing themes of personal responsibility) but nevertheless reflect on the dyadic features of this behavior:

I've changed. I have to be firm ... I can't be lenient with you to benefit you and it's not helping me, by you being dangerous or putting me in danger. Or by me putting you in danger, that doesn't help either one of us, by me fighting you or me allowing myself to hit, that means I should just leave you ... if it's dangerous or we're not helping each other, progressing or growing as people, then we don't need to be together. It's like I was looking in a mirror. It's gotta be something in you that you have to change for yourself in order to not be so angry. You can't be happy being that angry or attacking a person. It's shocking. [Kate, desister]

Thus, although Kate's suggestions about “looking in the mirror” and recognizing that “it's gotta be something in you that you have to change for yourself” are in line with the idea of taking personal responsibility as a prerequisite for behavior change, this respondent does not bracket off the partner's role (“you being dangerous”), even as she references her own prior actions (“me putting you in danger”), and the relational implications (“we're not helping each other, we're not progressing, we don't need to be together”). Similarly, individuals who indicate that their acts of perpetration have been one sided nevertheless often link their behavior directly to partner-focused and/or relational issues (“what he said and did made me want to hit him” [Tiffany, desister]; “It was a ‘you got somebody over here’; headlock” [Devon, desister]).

Our analyses of these interviews suggest that the initial orientation toward the behavior (recognition of IPV as a negative development within relationships), context within which it unfolds (often as a package of interrelated negative dynamics), and dyadic features (partner's IPV or other behavior within the relationship, e.g., communication practices and infidelity) are integral to the lived experience of IPV. In turn, these basics are featured in narratives of change as well as in persisters' accounts.

Hooks for Change

Our analyses of the qualitative interviews revealed three prominent hooks for change: the possibility of arrest, effects of parenthood, and relationship-based motivations. Table 1 presents distributions (percentages) of respondents by gender and desistance category who developed a change narrative and hooks for change identified. Most respondents defined as desisters and in process/indeterminate developed a change story, and more than 40 percent of persisters incorporated at least some change-oriented statements. Our analysis also indicates that a relatively high percentage (two thirds of desisters and a similar percentage of in process respondents) incorporated more than one hook into their stories of change.

Specter of Jail—Some respondents incorporated mention of arrest or possible incarceration as a factor in their change narratives, and men were more likely to include this theme. Jackson, who was classified as a desister, references the possibility of jail in his narrative account:

I told her [new partner] if we're going to be in a relationship, I'm not going to deal with any kind of hitting ... the physical hitting is not something that I appreciate. You know, because it can turn into something worse ... her calling the cops on me, or me calling the cops on her. Or somebody going to jail. ... I can't even play fight because if it gets out of hand. ... I might strike you too hard, then I'm gonna look bad and you're gonna get mad at me ... [it] may end up turning into a real fight, which is never good for me. Then I get arrested, which I don't, I don't want to go to jail.

It could seem from this quote that Jackson has no experience with violence as he highlights that hitting is not something he “appreciates.” Yet in narrating his complete relationship history, Jackson indicated that he had actually injured a former partner in an instance that he suggested began with what he had considered a kind of “play fighting.” After that incident, Jackson experienced that partner's reactions (crying and upset) and his own feelings of regret over what had occurred. This respondent also indicated that the experience was sufficiently upsetting that he later sought advice from his mother who counseled him to avoid any kind of physical contact, even play fighting, in the future. Thus, Jackson's own narration seems consistent with the broader notion of a relationship learning curve, one that incorporates the specter of jail as part of a larger set of social experiences and personal reactions. Agentic moves take this beyond the level of redefinition: The respondent not only felt bad about the incident but also recounted how he had communicated this viewpoint to his new partner.

Matt [desister] provides another example of how jail can figure into a more multifaceted narrative of change. This respondent had spent the night in jail on an IPV charge, and later he completed a mandated anger management program. At the time, his partner Lindsey also filed a protective order against him. Yet the couple eventually got back together, and there has been no violence for 2 years. Thus, the entire sequence of events suggests a potentially important role for sanctions at the formal (arrest) and informal (spouse moved out) levels. Nevertheless, Matt's own narrative, although not ignoring the role of these sanctions, places even more emphasis on his desire to improve the relationship:

I think our relationship is really important to me. That's how I feel, and I think I would say it's passionate. Sometimes she doesn't agree with that. But I'm getting older and this is, I don't want to bullshit anymore. I don't want to waste time arguing. I want to go forward, not backwards.

In its broad outlines, this example is generally consistent with Fagan's (1989) notion that social psychological changes may follow the sanction threat. Thus, it is likely that Matt had time to reevaluate the importance of the relationship during the 8-month separation. However, Matt also references a more general developmental process and the experience itself as factors associated with his changing perspective. In addition, a supplemental interview with his partner Lindsey provides a sense of how IPV cessation is necessarily a more localized, relationship-based accomplishment. Matt not only wants to avoid jail and considers the relationship important but also apparently has learned to communicate more effectively with her and to walk away from disagreements (“when we do get in fights, you can see him have self-control ... instead of get loud, or the ways he's acted in the past. We just talk about it, or talk about it later.”). And although Matt's behavior has appropriately

been the primary focus of relationship-based changes, Lindsey's interview highlighted that dyadic processes may come into play. Lindsey appreciated Matt's efforts to change and indicated that she now refrained from mentioning painful aspects of Matt's childhood that she had often brought up during previous disagreements.

Thus, the desire to avoid jail, although it is a feature of a significant number of narratives, may have limitations as singular motivation and blueprint for accomplishing a pattern of sustained IPV desistance. More often, successful desisters articulated relationship goals and associated shifts in their everyday conduct within the relationship that likely increased their chances for long-term success. In contrast, Shane, whom coders labeled as “in process/indeterminate,” had previously been arrested for domestic violence on two separate occasions. Shane also expressed a desire to avoid additional jail time (“cause once you get that third one that's a felony”). Yet at a different point within his longer narrative, Shane reflected further on the possibility of jail, as well as on his romantic history: “It's not the first time I'm going to jail, I didn't even. ... [That's] how relationships end up, so I'm used to it. Like I don't care. Know what I'm saying?” These comments suggest a level of resignation not only about the possibility of jail but also about the character of romantic relationships more generally (that's how relationships end up), factors that may combine to limit Shane's desistance potential. Furthermore, Shane told the interviewer he had cheated on every one of his partners, and he had no plan to change a lifestyle that he recognized had been related to prior conflicts. Although Shane's discussion seemed to reflect an overall world view that may not serve him well as a basis for IPV desistance, the excerpts quoted next show how concerns about arrest can be negated within the context of specific high-conflict situations that have evoked what is considered a righteous response of anger and indignation (Katz, 1988):

[Y]ep and I didn't care if I went to jail, that's how mad I was oh yea, I called the police, because she needed the police, cause she almost, she went to jail, I almost went to jail too. Cause I stabbed her, I blacked out and went off on her, like I just cut her all [up]. She bust my windows out, I blanked out. [Vanessa, persister]

I was really upset and I was like, I don't give a fuck. You can leave me. You can go be with that [epithet]—You can go tell the police. [Marta, persister]

Within the desistance literature and in our own prior theorizing (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002), the concept of agency has generally been used as the centerpiece of the final decision to “go straight.” Agentic moves, then, are theorized as coming into play as they serve the novel, prosocial future. Yet individuals continually rely on agentic moves as they “adjust their actions to the exigencies of emerging situations” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 1,012). In the preceding examples, concerns about jail may be in place, but for these respondents, such concerns seem to be dwarfed by the immediacy of crashing windows (Vanessa) and recently uncovered evidence of infidelity (Marta) that respondents link to their more immediate decision making.

Parenthood: Higher Stakes—As shown in table 1, entry into parenthood was a feature of stories of change for 55.2 percent of female and 40 percent of male desisters. Thus, Cassie [desister] emphasized that she had “children now, and I know that I'm not living for

just myself.” Scott [desister] sounded a similar theme noting, “I got two kids, so got responsibilities and stuff now.” Devon [desister] indicated that he “had to change for him [his son],” and Jody [desister] narrated this idea as a dialogue with herself: “Ok you have two kids, you—you can't live for this man, you have to live for them.”

These respondents focused on new responsibilities and with them a shift in their salience hierarchies (Stryker, 1968), and they often detailed concrete steps that connected to this redefinition process (e.g., breaking up with a particular partner). Yet persisters are about as likely to have children as their desisting counterparts (see table S.3 in the online supporting information), and the general theme of parenthood as an influence on changes was mentioned by a similar percentage of respondents coded as “in process.” We also note that, in general, women were more likely to develop a parenthood-focused narrative than their male counterparts. This finding suggests the presence of strong cultural as well as personal and gender-based pressures to draw on this particular hook for change but also highlights that this is not always straightforward to accomplish. For example, Emily [in process] indicated that she “wanted better ... for me ... and for my kids”; Rachel [in process] suggested that as a mom she needed to “set an example for my kids”; and Kristina [persister] suggested the need to be “strong for my kids, I shouldn't be crying or whatever.” The subsequent excerpts provide concrete illustrations of the idea that this effect is not necessarily abrupt or automatic:

Um, right now I just now started realizing that I'm 26 years old, I do have a job, I do have kids, like I need to center more into my kids than other conflict areas ... it just seems like the conflict is right there in the middle and everything rotating around it. I'm just now getting my priorities straight to the point where I'll like, I need to put that to the side. [Jessica, in process]

I just want to get along for the sake of the child. ... Let's just raise him to become a man, you know what I mean, to make something of himself. I want to be a soccer mom. ... Not cops rolling up at 5 in the morning ... because of baby daddy drama, or mama drama. [Lauren, in process]

Many researchers are in accord about the need to conceptualize desistance as a process, but these narratives underscore that this also applies to the process of drawing on specific hooks for change. In these narrative excerpts, Jessica, who has two children, indicates that she has “just now started realizing” the need to reprioritize, and others similarly relied on the present tense, indicating that change is something they now want or at least recognize is the direction they need to pursue. Furthermore, Lauren conveys that she and her partner may have had recent discussions along these same lines (“Let's just raise him to become a man”), suggesting some limitations to conceptualizing (IPV) desistance as occurring only as a result of individual-level changes in perspective. In some instances, then, the partner's own buy-in and actions are a critical component of this form of behavior change.

As these respondents have moved into the parenting role, these narrative excerpts, like those of more obviously successful desisters, may draw on their own felt experience of the need to change, but also may be influenced by strong social and cultural expectations. For example, helping the child to “make something of himself,” being “strong for the kids,” “setting an

example,” and even referring to the typical “soccer mom” are all thematic areas that have wide use culturally. In short, although the respondents seem sincere in their narrative emphases, it is likely that they did not develop this type of narrative content independently. These themes may have been shaped through prior communications with members of their social networks (e.g., with their own parents, friends, or partners), via wider cultural understandings, as well as based on their own direct experiences with the parenting role.

Given the considerable potential of parenthood as a hook for change and the presence of these themes in many accounts, the mismatch is striking between these narrated emphases and results of prior quantitative assessments of the effect of parenthood on IPV (Johnson et al., 2015). As described previously, Johnson et al. (2015) documented a positive association between parenthood and IPV at the between-subjects level, and no significant within-subjects effect was found. In addition to the idea that there is a subgroup not easily captured via analyses of aggregate trends, we note that the age range of the sample is somewhat restricted. Accordingly, later follow-ups could reveal a downward trend across the sample as a whole. However, the narratives also highlight that having children often connects to higher levels of perceived relationship commitment, and staying together for the children's sake may compete actively with leaving for reasons of child well-being. Thus, although Kristina's relationship remains volatile, this respondent is keenly aware that leaving can entail other costs—as children potentially experience a loss of day-to-day contact with the other parent, a residential move(s), and exposure to new, uncertain romantic partnerships:

When you have a kid you always have it in your head, the right thing to do is to be with this person because the kids are by them. You want your kid to have the mother and the father around. That's the person that I was used to being with, even though we'd get into arguing and fighting, I didn't want to be with nobody else for the simple fact, OK, we got these kids ... we didn't put all this time into each other and you know he was just somebody that I was used to and I'm not the type of girl to sleep with this person that person this person or that person. [Kristina, persister]

This narrative reflects concerns about a possible negative effect of breaking up on her child, but it also shows how this is inextricably linked to Kristina's own investment in this partnership and to her view that another breakup would be inconsistent with her sense of self. Thus, in this instance, relationship considerations and parenting are narrated as related concerns, but this has not as yet translated to the level of agentic moves (i.e., affecting more basic relationship-level changes or leaving the partner). Another complication is that parents of young children in general report lower marital quality (Doss et al., 2009; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003), and disagreements about child rearing, as well as financial and time burdens, may add to relationship distress. In addition, shared children, and the attendant belief that these are “higher stakes” relationships, may sharpen the felt impact of previous sources of disagreement:

I was thinking I could just shoot him in the leg to wound him or something [laughs] ... this is terrible. I was carrying this dude's baby and you out basically looking for my replacement, so I was so angry ... I wanted to hurt him so bad. Before this incident it was just other women in his phone, and it was bullshit text, but this ... [Chloe, in process]

Relationship-Based Changes—As suggested at the outset, researchers have emphasized that desistance from crime often requires a fundamental reorganization of one's lifestyle and identity. And indeed, the focus on parenthood as a hook for change has an advantage over concerns about negative consequences such as incarceration as this attaches to a core identity, responsibilities, and conduct norms that may provide motivation and direction. Yet many respondents had apparently desisted from IPV by making somewhat more limited relationship-based changes rather than by affecting complete lifestyle makeovers. Table 1 shows that virtually all women and most men (90 percent) classified as desisters incorporated discussions of relationship-centered changes into their narratives of IPV desistance. These relationship-based themes were sometimes developed in connection with the areas explored previously (fear of arrest and parenthood) but in other instances developed as stand-alone themes. Furthermore, the themes respondents developed did not necessarily entail letting go of “bad companions” or developing completely new routines as has been emphasized in related literatures on criminal desistance and the cessation of substance abuse (Latkin et al., 1999; Wright and Cullen, 2004). In the sections that follow, we identify specific areas of redefinition and behavior change that were highlighted in the narratives of desisters and sometimes those who were in the process of making these relationship-level adjustments. The apparent learning curve within relationships often focused on three areas: 1) shifts in the meaning and desirability of the use of violence itself, 2) changes in areas that had previously proven to be pathways to serious conflicts, and 3) adjustments that centered on relationship development and partner choice.

Our analyses indicate that some respondents focused their discussions of relationship changes directly on the issue of hitting itself. Tiffany's learning curve is relatively straightforward, as she indicates that she had gradually come to realize that hitting is something that she now knows “doesn't work”:

I mean I haven't hit him for like two years, just because like *I know it doesn't work*. But as far as why I did it, it was just because I was angry ... literally this is how I felt, like the incredible hulk. There was no stopping me, I was that mad and hitting them [two previous partners] just felt like it was gonna feel good, because what they were doing and what they were saying tempted me to wanna do that. Clicked something in my mind said that I wanna hit you. [Tiffany, desister]

This consideration is pragmatic, but Tiffany's longer narrative suggested that she feared that she would never be able to sustain a long-term relationship if she did not refrain from hitting partners as had occurred in her prior and early in her current relationship. In contrast, Derrick was one of the few respondents who indicated that he actually “kinda liked” the drama, if not the “smacking and hitting part,” but he had changed his perspective, indicating that this is a view he has outgrown:

I didn't like the smacking and hitting part, but the drama, just the arguing, I kinda liked it. ... But I grew out of it though, but yeah, I liked it at the time, ya know. Just fights back and forth, I mean arguing all that, I don't know it was just exciting to me at the time, but I grew out of it though. [Derrick, desister]

Although it is intuitive to expect that the redefinition process would center primarily on changes in views about violence, it is important to underscore that discussions more frequently focused on sequences of action and patterns of communication that respondents came to appreciate had been linked to conflict escalation. Thus, desistance processes often involved changes in relationship behaviors that have been identified as strong risk factors for IPV, including infidelity and the use of negative forms of communication. Some respondents indicated that they were no longer unfaithful to the partner; in the past, this pattern had been associated with significant conflict:

I learned how to be faithful and stuff. If I do her like that, it's eventually gonna come to the light. I feel like if I do it now, she gonna find out down the line, sooner or later. ... I ain't trying to take that chance. I don't want all that drama. ... I had it before and then, and I went through it. I don't want it again, I already experienced it and I didn't like it ... I got two kids and, I mean, we done messed around. She done messed around on me back [Scott, desister]

I used to could tell how it used to make Lisa feel when I used to do it. ... It is like ok I don't want that to happen to me so I'm not gonna do it no more. ... Cause like she usually just be crying and stuff and I'd be like dang she really hurt. [Andrew, in process]

In these instances, redefinitions occurred with respect to the perceived pathways to conflict rather than focusing only on the negative effects of violence itself. Scott's narrative suggests a keen general awareness of the role of prior infidelities, and Andrew narrates the change through the idea of the beginning of feelings of empathy. Scott references responsibilities as a parent and highlights a “done it all” attitude about prior cheating, which is consistent with a redefinition process. Another variation of this type of narrative focused on decreased *tolerance* for the partner's cheating. As Jennifer [desister] put it, “that's set in stone, I'm not doing that. I'm not putting up with no more cheating from nooooo-body. I don't care who you are.”

A second frequent theme in relationship-based narratives involved changes in the ways in which respondents communicated with partners as they had apparently come to recognize that certain negative patterns of interaction had been linked to conflict escalation. This focus is consistent with many research studies tying verbal conflict to increased IPV risk (e.g., Capaldi et al., 2012; Leonard and Roberts, 1998). Yet the presence of these references within the desistance narratives reflects a heightened appreciation of these linkages and self-conscious efforts to alter earlier patterns. As Brittany [desister] put it, “I used to be so impulsive in relationships where if I was mad I was gonna tell you. If I heard something, I was gonna confront you right away and if you ignored my phone call, I'd call you back right away and leave a really nasty message.” The desisters quoted next emphasized the dyadic aspect of making changes in communication patterns:

We try to talk a lot, like if she gets mad about something like you know you gotta talk to me about it. How am I supposed to help you or make it better if we don't talk about it? So I'm big on trying to keep it talking and uh, same thing with her. [Trey, desister]

Probably my biggest thing that I've learned the last year is to be completely open and honest ... just communication ... is everything. You have to communicate what you are feeling or else things will just get crazy. Both parties obviously.
[Anna, desister]

Although these excerpts suggest effortful changes at the personal and dyadic levels, some respondents focused on changes in the ways in which they initially developed a relationship or chose an intimate partner. Although these discussions place the emphasis on the partner's role in the conflicts, they too involve a redefinition process. For example, some respondents suggested the need to develop a relationship slowly. As Ashley [in process] noted, "I just kind of jumped in, just full-fledged jumped in and didn't look or check what I was jumping into." Callie [desister] developed a similar theme ("Me and [boyfriend], I think we, we was built more like a friend, friendship first, before we even got, you know, intimate ... see how that works out before actually being real serious").

Another variation within the area of partner choice involved changes in criteria or preference for certain kinds of partners:

Abby had a very serious anger problem, and I don't have to do anything like that with Chelsie ... she understands that, and she's not the hitting type anyways, but I made it very clear that's just not gonna happen ... it was something we discussed.
[Will, desister]

I'm attracted to them by what they do at first, but then after I get with them I don't want them to do it anymore. You can look tough, dress street, still talk hood and do all that without actually doing the stuff he's doin'... You can be a retired gangster.
[Angela, in process]

He was outgoing, loud. All the things I'm not attracted to now ... well now I can understand what someone's personality will bring to a relationship. And somebody who is loud and outgoing is, I don't know, has something to prove, kind of. [Lakeia, desister]

Will not only developed a relationship with a different type of partner, but also took the extra step of communicating to his new partner that he would not tolerate hitting in this relationship. Angela had recently come to recognize that it had proven costly to have been involved with "tough-guy" men, whereas Lakeia provides a more definitive narrative of changes in criteria as this respondent indicates that all of the things she was attracted to previously are things "I'm not attracted to now." Thus, her learning curve includes an enhanced understanding regarding "what someone's personality will bring to a relationship," and how this eventually may lead to drama that she no longer wants to be a part of her romantic life.

Cognitive Barriers to Change: Narratives of Persisters—In addition to a lack of progress or specificity in relation to the areas explored earlier, analyses of the narratives of those classified as persistent, and in some instances, the in-process respondents may have incorporated *other* attitudes or world views that coexisted with the idea that IPV cessation would be a generally desirable outcome. It may be useful to consider these (cognitive)

roadblocks or barriers that are potentially limiting to a given respondent's desistance potential. Although not an exhaustive roster, next we illustrate three areas developed within the context of persisters' narratives: 1) fixed, resigned views about anger and anger management; 2) the idea that heightened emotions and even violence are a by-product of relationship seriousness; and 3) the belief that hitting back is appropriate and should be distinguished from the unprovoked use of violence against an intimate partner.

Fixed Views of Anger—A common theme throughout the narratives is a strong connection between anger and IPV (in contrast to the notion that “it's not about anger”). Yet some persisters' narratives telegraph the idea that these strong emotions are a kind of separate entity or force that directs behavior. As Marta [persister] put it, “Sometimes my anger gets the best of me and I don't know how to express it ... and my hands just move by theirself (laughs). ... They just move by theirself.” Another variation of this theme includes the idea of a gradual buildup of negative emotions that requires a release. For example, Caroline [persister] indicated that she was not surprised that she hit her partner during a particular altercation as she recognized that she “had so much built up in me.” Such perspectives do not position the individual to change current responses to conflict situations effectively and do not indicate recognition of the need to make more fundamental relationship adjustments that will alleviate concerns associated with angry reactions.

These narrative emphases would seem to support the idea of anger as an enduring personality trait, which is consistent with an individual-differences approach (Norlander and Eckhardt, 2005). However, it is important to recall that some desisters who previously held such views stressed that their emotional identities and associated behaviors had changed (e.g., Tiffany, who indicated that she used to be “like the incredible hulk,” or Lindsey, who indicated that her partner Matt “now has more self-control”). In addition, respondents coded as persisters often go on to narrate well-developed attitudes that support the use of violence under some circumstances. This finding suggests a role for cognitive processes that serve as logical underpinnings (attitudes) of these behavioral outcomes.

IPV as a Reflection of Relationship Seriousness—In the excerpt that follows, Marta develops the idea that strong emotions are a part of relationships that are serious or important, suggesting that violence may be an index or expression of these deep feelings:

A person who I don't care about, I'm not going to take my time to even, it's not going to be worth me putting my hands on—it's probably a messed up way of thinking, but this is how a lot of the world thinks ... if I don't care about you, if you not in my mind or in my heart, you can go cheat, you can do whatever you want to. ... I'm probably doing the same thing. ... I don't give a fuck. But to a person who I actually love and care about, it's like you're not 'bout to do nothing with nobody else. ... I'll kill you first (laughs). [No] I would never kill nobody. [Marta, persister]

Her expressed attitudes thus not only include a level of resignation and acceptance about how anger works (as she later put it, “if you are mad, that's what you do ... it's what you do”), but also highlight that it is within the context of relationships in which she cares deeply that she is likely to “put her hands” on an intimate partner. Although Marta knows that this is “a messed up way of thinking,” her ideas on this are relatively detailed and thoughtful.

Note also that she draws a link to the social realm (“this is how a lot of the world thinks”). Marta also outlines particular situations (hurt feelings and cheating incidents) that have more felt impact when the relationship is a serious one. Although this view is unfortunate, some research has shown that longer duration relationships and cohabiting relative to dating relationships (two indices of seriousness) are more likely to include violence. Furthermore, as suggested previously, the positive relationship between parenting and IPV may include the individual's belief that a relationship that includes a shared child is a higher stakes relationship. Thus, the higher stakes can influence these dynamics for good or for ill, as possible effects on IPV patterns. Here, even though a level of caring and investment in the relationship should be related to IPV cessation, Marta has developed the argument that these features are actually implicated in her use of violence. It is important to note that this set of attitudes is sometimes included in desisters' narratives as well, albeit as a perspective on the relationship that was eventually discarded. For example, Olivia [previously thought] “the hurt's gonna be so much when you love someone so much. I felt like it was normal for the amount of emotion that I felt. If I love him that much we will have fights on that level, which I know is poor logic, but at the time”

Legitimacy of “Hitting Back”—Marta's narrative also focuses attention on the legitimacy of hitting back in certain situations, adding to the arsenal of beliefs that would seem to be related to her status as a persister:

There's been times where people have hit me and I haven't hit them and I be like, ok, don't hit me no more. ... I'm warning you before I put my hands on you bitch, don't hit me no more and they keep hitting you and hitting you and it's just that one hit and it might hurt and it's just a spark, and then I beat your ass. I told you to stop, I let you hit me four, five, six times before I put my hands on you, so now anything that you get, you deserve. You shouldn't have did it.

Other narratives reflect more heavily on the gendered nature of IPV dynamics, stressing that men's use of violence against women is more serious and deserving of censure. However, some of the respondents classified as persisters (or in process) develop the notion that hitting back occupies a distinct territory relative to initiating an act of violence against a female partner. Doug [persister] described his viewpoint succinctly: “The simple fact is keep your hands to yourself. Don't touch me if you don't want to get hit back.” In the excerpt that follows, Jim explicitly develops the argument that if the partner's actions are sufficiently serious, this in effect “negates” the gendered aspect of the interaction:

It's just, few hits to the chest nothing, no big deal, just leave a red mark or so be gone in a hour. I told her just watch where you do it because and I do have the philosophy, if you're willing to hit like a man you're gonna get hit back like a man by a man ... it's just the way I see it. Why would you hit a guy and not think he's not gonna hit you back in a way? If you were willing [to hit] hard, try to fight like him, like a guy, you're gonna get hit like a guy. [Jim, in process]

There are numerous references within the data to the idea that hitting in general but hitting hard in particular is “hitting like a man.” Above, Jim has used this phrase to suggest a condition under which he will suspend his generally held view that hitting a female partner

is something to be avoided. However, this risky set of attitudes conveys a general readiness for violence and a lack of commitment to IPV cessation. Some female respondents made similar references:

Yeah I'm ready. Full grown man or not, you just hit me like you think I'm a man so I'm ready to take you out like a man. If I have to go in there and grab a knife and cut the fuck out of you, then I'm going to do it. I, I've never felt weak. When it comes to stuff like that I don't feel like that, like I don't feel like I'm weak, a weak person. I've always—as growing up as a kid my dad's always taught me that if a man's willing to hit you, hit him back. [Ashley, in process]

These respondents rely on similar language and phrases, yet these two examples nevertheless point to gendered meanings and identity processes. Jim, in suspending (under these conditions) the conventional view that it is wrong to hit a woman, is reverting to his earlier socialization *as a man*, whereas Ashley, who resists the idea of being considered weak, must adapt a new persona (one who is ready to take you out like a man). Thus, this territory is well-traveled for Jim, whose size, strength, and previous masculinity training are likely to disadvantage many female partners, as scholars and practitioners alike have repeatedly emphasized. Yet as someone who has a significant history of violence within the intimate context, Ashley's own readiness should not be discounted, as research has also shown that the antisocial repertoires of both partners contribute to risk for IPV and that mutually violent relationships may pose a particularly high risk of injury, especially to women (Temple et al., 2005). Finally, although the defensive rationale is used as justification for hitting someone who has initiated violence, in specific situations, this could be extended to cover “defense” against negative statements made by the partner, or fighting back against a perceived violation of trust, as narratives of onset and escalation frequently have highlighted.

Conclusion

Despite popular beliefs about the inevitability of recurrence of IPV (“once an abuser ...”), longitudinal research has documented a significant amount of desistance from this form of violent behavior. The current study is one of the first investigations of the mechanisms involved in the change process as understood and narrated by a sample of young adult male and female respondents who varied in their levels of persistence and desistance ($n = 89$). The life-course perspective on social learning we developed has implications for theorizing about criminal desistance, as well as for theory and prevention efforts focusing specifically on IPV.

Implications for Theories of Desistance

Limitations of Exclusive Focus on Transition Events—Theorizing about desistance is closely aligned with the broader life-course tradition, and consistent with this, researchers have focused heavily on a few key life events (e.g., marriage, employment, and childbearing) believed to serve as pivotal transitions and turning points (Kreager, Matsueda, and Erosheva, 2010; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993). The current analysis adds to prior work in highlighting that undergoing these transitions and the added

informal control they afford over individual conduct may be incomplete as an explanation for prosocial behavior changes. In this study, we found that experiencing a major life event such as having children did not reliably result in cessation of these negative relationship behaviors, employment circumstances were not a recurring theme in the narratives of IPV desisters, and the idea of a good marriage effect is not straightforward as an explanation for IPV.¹⁰ Few theoretical treatments of IPV desistance have been developed within the literature, but Fagan's (1989) early focus on external threats (jail and threat of jail) resonated with control theories "outside" the individual emphasis. Although the possibility of jail and the well-being of children are important concerns incorporated into many of these narrative accounts, our analyses highlighted that exposure in itself was not always necessary (jail) or sufficient (birth of a child) as a hook for change for many respondents.

Limits of Individualistic Views of "Internal" Changes—Several theoretical and empirical studies have been developed to round out our understanding of desistance mechanisms, and many of these studies have attempted to incorporate the idea of human agency and to reflect on the importance of internal, subjective changes. This research adds to our understanding of mechanism and is consistent with respondents' own descriptions of the process, whether referencing crime in general or IPV in particular. However, recent theoretical treatments may have swung the pendulum too far in conceptualizing change as primarily a result of individual assessments and decision-making processes (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). In our view, neither the idea of a constant motivation to offend held in check by the constraining influence of new roles or sanction threats nor the somewhat atomistic depiction of individuals alone in their calibrations of costs and benefits provides a complete portrait of the complex processes associated with cessation of criminal behavior. Thus, although these perspectives are clearly distinct in terms of the outside/inside emphasis, both foster a somewhat static view of human nature and adult social development and, in turn, an incomplete portrait of desistance processes.

Need for a Dynamic "Life-Course" Treatment of Social Learning—In this study, we developed a conceptual counterpoint to the preceding perspectives, stressing a continuing reciprocal relationship between a wider range of social experiences and the development of these important individual-level subjective changes (Mead, 1938). This social view of adult development and behavior change contributes beyond prior work by locating our ideas squarely within the framework of what we view as underdeveloped life-course implications of social learning theory. Starting with a core concept associated with initial onset (definitions favorable to the violation of law; Sutherland, 1939), we moved the lens forward to hypothesize that redefinitions are likely integral to an understanding of IPV desistance and, indeed, any form of desistance. This is the essence of our notion of a relationship learning curve, but the general idea of a learning curve is a potentially useful concept for exploring the process of desisting from other forms of criminal behavior. Transition events may contribute to the learning curve, but this is not inevitable nor is it the

¹⁰Aside from the somewhat tautological aspects of this line of reasoning, some research has shown that breaking up or divorce are positive steps in relation to IPV desistance (see, e.g., Wooldredge and Thistlethwaite, 2006), and duration of the relationship has also been linked to greater risk (Johnson et al., 2014). However, follow-ups that include older respondents could reveal the more traditional "good marriage effect," as well as the expected negative association with duration of the relationship.

only basis for changes in attitudes (definitions) or behaviors (agentic moves) that support the desistance process.¹¹

Need for Greater Specificity in Identifying Attitudes that Support Crime and Redefinitions that Support Desistance—Given our interests as a discipline, it is customary to focus on attitudes or viewpoints that relate directly to the dependent variable (whether the generic crime, marijuana use, or in the current context, IPV). For example, in a recent study of attitude and behavior connections, attitudes were defined as views about how “wrong” respondents believed various delinquent acts were, with the goal of assessing the temporal ordering of the frequently observed association (Rebellon et al., 2014). Although this strategy seems appropriate in light of the researchers' objectives, knowledge about definitions remains narrow. We know that delinquents hang out with other delinquents and that marijuana users have more positive views of marijuana smoking relative to their nonusing counterparts. Yet we have infrequently captured with sufficient nuance the full range of specific attitudes and broader worldviews that may support enactment of a given antisocial behavior. Following up on the life-course implications of this general idea, in this analysis, we highlighted the need for greater specificity in redefinitions or changes in meaning that may foster the kinds of behavioral shifts associated with a pattern of sustained desistance.

The importance of additional nuance and specificity is brought into bold relief given the current focus, as prior studies relying on global indices tapping the acceptability of IPV have observed uniformly low rates of endorsement of such items. Thus, we believe our analysis contributes by outlining several specific understandings (e.g., you hit me, then you deserve to get hit back; and hitting as a reflection of relationship seriousness) that may be associated with persistence, as well as shifts in such views that are described in the narratives of successful desisters. Although these definitions may be relatively specific to IPV, the need to move toward greater specificity is a general point with applicability to other crimes and contexts.

A related suggestion for future research is to step back from the dependent variable entirely—to consider the attitudes and associated behaviors that are not in themselves crime but that individuals come to recognize have an intimate connection to a given pattern of criminal behavior. An example from the current study is that although infidelity is not criminal behavior, it is a form of relationship conduct that respondents understand has proven a reliable pathway to serious relationship conflicts. Narratives of onset and escalation make frequent references to infidelity and infidelity concerns, quantitative analyses document more systematically that this is a key risk factor, and our analyses of desisters' narratives fit seamlessly with these studies as they highlighted the role of changes to these same areas of relationship conduct. The use of negative forms of communication is another relationship-centered behavior that figures heavily into initial risk of conflict escalation, and in turn

¹¹The idea of a learning curve seems akin to the general notion of an age–crime curve, but these are not the same. The age–crime curve references an overall age-related trend, but on its own, it is not revealing of processes that may underlie the observed pattern. Furthermore, the analysis revealed considerable variability in persistence and desistance within this sample of similarly aged respondents, which is consistent with the idea of distinct trajectories that may not be obvious focusing only on the aggregate age trends (Nagin and Tremblay, 2001).

recognizing the need to develop new ways of communicating around areas of disagreement is a significant theme in many desisters' narratives. Thus, redefinition processes and our more general notion of a relationship learning curve for these respondents are related not only to the end point of our inquiry (e.g., Tiffany's realization that violence "doesn't work") but also to 1) an enhanced appreciation of the importance of a romantic relationship, 2) recognition that continued infidelity or the use of provocative communications leads to unwanted relationship drama, and 3) shifts in criteria regarding what constitutes a desirable partner or the realization that a specific partnership is fundamentally unhealthy and unlikely to be successfully repaired. Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero (2012) provided another example of a recent investigation into relatively specific pathways, as this research focused on the desistance of gang members. The focal variable in this study (affiliation with other gang members) is considered important to an understanding of the initial onset and continued involvement, and the results of their investigation showed that a reduction of these social ties was integral to the process of disengaging from gang life.

Other Suggestions for Future Research on Redefinitions and Behavior

Change—In the current analysis, we suggested an important role for context-specific learning experiences (i.e., within the realm of romantic relationships) that serve as an important basis for making more concrete, forward-looking changes. However, we briefly introduced the idea that social influences beyond the romantic context also undoubtedly play a role and, thus, warrant additional research attention. For example, in a recent analysis of stay-or-leave decisions of teens in violent relationships, Copp et al. (in press) found that parents' and peers' negative evaluations about the partner were significantly related to the odds of breaking up, whereas variations in the provision of general support were not. Carlsson's (2013) recent treatment of desistance identified changes over time in cultural expectations about the behaviors associated with masculinity (i.e., pressure to provide for one's family and less reinforcement for a partying lifestyle). These changing cultural expectations may also come to include fewer social rewards for continuing to accrue sexual partners, an activity that in the past has been associated not only with peer status (Kreager and Staff, 2009) but also with relationship instability and discord (Giordano et al., 2015). These redefinitions are likely to be shaped through interaction and communication with intimate others (partners, peers, and family), as well as through broader social exposure (weaker ties and media). This call for investigations of a range of social influences on redefinitions has a parallel in previous studies that have examined multiple levels of social influence on active involvement in crime and delinquency (i.e., research on the influence of friends of friends, school level effects, or neighborhood norms).

Following up on the idea that both attitudinal and behavioral changes are needed to support a pattern of sustained desistance, another potentially important focus for future research is the situation characterized by a change in definitions but a reluctance or inability to put in place the agentic moves that respondents recognize are needed to support the desired behavior change. This point is a general one, but the IPV context provides a good illustration of it. For example, victim-focused research has highlighted factors that serve as barriers to leaving an abusive partner, but those who have perpetrated IPV may experience similar (e.g., financial concerns) or distinctive barriers to affecting change within a given

relationship or to changing relationships entirely. Finally, although we argued here that attitude change is likely to be the centerpiece of sustained IPV cessation, the idea that such cognitive changes are epiphenomenal, mere rationalizations, or perceptions that unfold after behavioral changes have been accomplished warrants additional exploration, and could be investigated more systematically relying on repeated measures and longitudinal designs.¹²

Implications for IPV Research and for Prevention and Intervention Efforts—

Applied efforts have sought to change the normative climate surrounding this form of violent behavior (a redefinition process) and have attempted to increase sanctions (i.e., consistency of arrest and prosecutorial follow-through). Although we do not have access to data across multiple cohorts, the narratives elicited from this contemporary sample of respondents are generally suggestive of a positive impact of this multilayered approach. Most respondents interviewed considered IPV a negative relationship development, and many raised the specter of arrest as an undesirable but possible outcome of continued perpetration. Nevertheless, the individuals who participated in this study had all used violence within the context of their intimate relationships, suggesting the need to continue to develop more effective ways to prevent or interrupt these negative patterns of behavior.

Need to Target More Specific and Conditional Attitudes Associated with IPV and to Address Complex Role of Gender—Given changing views about the general acceptability of this behavior, additional specificity in the content of messages may be warranted, particularly in targeting areas around which more variability remains in current attitudes. For example, in this study, hitting a partner back was not as widely disparaged as the initial use of aggression against an intimate partner. Furthermore, prevention messages currently attempt to counter the idea that IPV is in any way associated with caring or relationship seriousness; yet within the context of relatively young sample groups, 1) IPV is more common in longer duration relationships, 2) becoming sexually intimate is linked to higher risk, and 3) many of the narratives we analyzed highlighted that a relationship that includes a child is generally considered a higher stakes relationship. Thus, it is important to address the difficulties associated with moving away from relationships that include these higher levels of interdependence or enmeshment even if this is an agentic move that is likely to be associated with IPV desistance.

The current approaches to issues of gender also vary considerably. In response to early programming that emphasized only male perpetration, some prevention programs have adapted gender-neutral language and perspectives. However, it could also prove useful to address some issues of gender directly, including findings indicating relatively high rates of female perpetration. Researchers have been critical of measures of IPV such as the conflict tactics scale (Straus, 1979) as such instruments do not provide the needed context for interpreting the observed gender patterns (Anderson, 2013). However, even when relying on such limited scales, the findings have shown that violence involving a level of mutuality is often linked with greater injury risk. The current study elicited in-depth relationship history

¹²For example, Simons and Barr (2012) recently explored the effect of attitude changes on desistance relying on a longitudinal design, whereas Rebellon et al. (2014) observed a reciprocal relationship but a stronger indication that attitudes followed behavior rather than the reverse effect emphasized in this study and in Simons and Barr's study.

narratives that do provide additional context, and these data highlight that women's aggressive actions are not always viewed as trivial, playful, or based in self-defense by either women or men who participated in this study. That women who had hit partners provided well-developed narratives about IPV desistance suggests a level of perceived significance and concern about these actions, even as both male and female respondents recognized the more serious nature of men's use of aggression within their intimate relationships. Thus, the results of our analyses do not support the idea of gender symmetry, but they do suggest that female perpetration may in some instances become part of a sequence of escalation, particularly where the referent is “common couple” violence rather than the more severe type of “intimate terrorism” that scholars such as Johnson and Leone (2005) have described. Prevention materials appropriately point out that women victims experience greater fear and injury than men but highlighting that the most common response of men is to laugh could in effect draw too sharp a distinction, one that minimizes the potential role of a significant risk factor (Dobash and Dobash, 2004). The reliably high correlations between responses of the victim and perpetrator subscales of the conflict tactics scale provide additional support for this general idea (Whitaker et al., 2007).

Limits of Arrest and Incarceration Approach—The issue of official responses to this problem is challenging, as an important part of the redefinition process is to highlight that IPV is not only “wrong” but also will not be tolerated. However the idea of pinning hopes for behavior change on criminal justice contacts stands in sharp contrast to other more general critiques of the turn toward mass incarceration that often emphasize counterproductive effects on the communities, families, and children whose parents are incarcerated (Western, 2008; Wildeman, 2009). Although official responses will continue to be an important first line of defense against victimization, our analysis highlighted that IPV desistance is necessarily a relationship-based accomplishment (i.e., I don't want to go to jail, now what?). Thus, even when individuals gain a heightened appreciation that their use of aggression may be actionable, relationship-based goals and behavior changes will necessarily come into play. Policies and laws that prohibit the use of couples counseling (based on the need to protect victim safety and avoid victim blaming) or anger management (it is not about anger) are well intentioned; yet many offenders eventually return to the same relationship with little in the way of a blueprint for how to reduce destructive levels of conflict with the current or a subsequent partner. We agree with Stith and McCollum's (2011) recent call for flexibility in approaches based on initial assessments that take into account variability in risk to victims and in the dynamics that precipitated the committing offense.

Heterogeneity in Relationship Dynamics Associated with IPV—Both prevention efforts and intervention programs reflect ideas about the specific character of relationship dynamics linked to IPV but could highlight to a greater extent that considerable variability exists in these dynamics. Traditional depictions emphasize the use of violence as a means to maintain a position of power and control over one's female partner. Although this emphasis has provided a critical orienting framework, the approach remains somewhat abstract and suggests that the perpetrator's primary concern is a consolidation of power. Based on the current study results, it may prove useful (and relatable to target audiences) to localize these

discussions around the concrete contested domains that come to be associated with relationship conflict and the related communication processes that amplify (or, conversely, diminish) risk. This emphasis continues the theme that violence has meaning as a form of coercive control, but it identifies contested terrain around which such control attempts and negative emotions often revolve. To the degree that specific relationship issues have been incorporated into programming materials, often excessive jealousy is conceptualized as a general orientation of the individual, a warning sign of abuse, and an unwarranted concern of male partners. Yet many narratives of persistence and desistance include references to feelings of anger and attempts to control the partner that may have centered on actual instances of infidelity, of which male infidelity and associated concerns were a significant source of discord.¹³ These instances may be the basis for continued conflict that connects to negative communication patterns that in themselves are associated with heightened risk. The pathways to desistance referenced by interviewees (changing one's communication patterns, no longer cheating on the partner, and no longer tolerating infidelity) often related to these specific problem areas. This finding suggests the need to incorporate additional discussion of a range of relationship scenarios that may be linked with IPV.

More generally, given the way in which these incidents are narrated, it may prove useful to highlight the extent to which coercive control and IPV are reflections of relationship *vulnerabilities* and to provide tangible evidence of *failure* (to sharpen the negative portrait while forging a link to relationship issues) rather than suggesting they stem only from feelings of male *superiority* or represent only a move to cement one's overall power position. The idea of a learning curve provides a way to position such relationship experiences, even difficult or painful ones, as having meaning as opportunities for further growth as many of these naturally occurring desisters have commented on their own experiences. Relationship-centered approaches have promise because the focus is on potentially malleable risk factors. Yet the challenge is to develop such approaches while highlighting 1) significant gender disparities in the meanings and consequences of IPV and 2) the need to take responsibility for one's own actions—a basic cognitive transformation likely to be associated with successful IPV cessation or any other form of criminal desistance.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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¹³To illustrate, at wave V (relying on the full sample), when infidelity was described as a feature of a current or most recent relationship, 88 percent of the respondents reported male infidelity, whereas female infidelity was a feature in 55 percent of the relationships.

reflect the official views of the U.S. Department of Justice or National Institutes of Health. We would like to thank Rosemary Gartner, along with the anonymous reviewers, for very helpful comments and advice on earlier drafts of this article.

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Table 1
Presence of a Change Narrative and Specific Themes Referenced Across Desistance and Persistence Categories (Percentages)

Themes	Desisters			In Process or Indeterminate			Persisters		
	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female
Presence of change narrative	97.8	100.0	96.2	80.7	88.9	69.2	41.7	100.0	22.2
Hooks for Change ^a									
Specter of arrest or jail	37.8	45.0	32.0	44.0	62.5	11.1	40.0	66.7	0.0
Parenthood	46.7	40.0	52.0	44.0	18.8	88.9	40.0	33.3	50.0
Relationship based	95.6	90.0	100.0	84.0	75.0	100.0	40.0	0.0	100.0
Number of Themes Referenced ^a									
One	33.3	40.0	28.0	36.0	50.0	11.1	80.0	100.0	50.0
Two	53.3	45.0	60.0	56.0	43.8	77.8	20.0	0.0	50.0
Three	13.3	15.0	12.0	8.0	6.3	11.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
<i>N</i>	46	20	26	31	18	13	12	3	9

^aPercentages are based on the total number of respondents who reported a change narrative.

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study.