# STAY/LEAVE DECISION-MAKING IN NON-VIOLENT AND VIOLENT DATING RELATIONSHIPS

**Jennifer E. Copp**, **Peggy C. Giordano**, **Monica A. Longmore**, and **Wendy D. Manning**
Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403, (419)
372-2294

Jennifer E. Copp: jcopp@bgsu.edu

## Keywords

intimate partner violence; dating violence; stay/leave decision-making; young adulthood

Researchers have focused on intimate partner violence (IPV) as a serious social problem and a major public health concern. In addition to exploring the etiology of intimate violence, research has examined factors associated with decisions to stay with or to end violent unions. However, most studies examining stay/leave decision-making have focused on married and cohabiting couples, where the presence of children and economic concerns complicate the decision to leave. Yet recent findings from a nationally representative sample indicated that 40% of respondents experienced IPV by young adulthood (Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009). Given IPV prevalence estimates among young adults, the majority of whom are not married (e.g., CDC, 2007; Halpern et al., 2009; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001) scholars have argued that dating violence constitutes an equally important concern (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). Indeed, nationally representative data indicated that young adults are at the greatest risk of intimate partner victimization (Catalano, 2006; Berger, Wildsmith, Manlove, & Steward-Streng, 2012). Currently, little is known about factors that are associated with leaving a violent dating relationship during this period in the life course. It is important to examine such factors more systematically, as one of the most efficient methods for intervening may be to encourage young people to move on from relationships characterized by violence. However, prevention messages are likely to be more successful to the degree that they connect on some level to the 'naturally-occurring' dynamics that underlie decisions about remaining with or leaving a given partner. Designing effective prevention and intervention efforts targeting young adults should be a high priority given the high levels of prevalence of IPV during this time, and because this can potentially interrupt such negative relationship dynamics before they become firmly entrenched, chronic patterns.

The current study draws on a symbolic interactionist (SI) version of exchange theory, which emphasizes that decisions about the rewards and costs of staying in a relationship inevitably include subjective assessments. The current study focused on intimate relationship dynamics

associated with emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), and examined decision processes associated with breaking up or remaining with a focal partner. As the sample of young women and men included respondents who reported violence as well as those who did not, we explored the degree to which violence itself was significantly associated with the likelihood of breaking up, once other demographic and relationship factors were taken into account. We also determined whether other relationship factors moderated the relationship between violence and the odds of relationship termination. In addition to focusing on positive and negative relationship dynamics, the current study contributed beyond prior work in this area by examining whether levels of social support and views of the broader network (i.e., family members and friends' views about the romantic partner) were associated with these decision-making processes.

## Theoretical Framework

Social exchange theories, which focus on individuals maximizing rewards and minimizing costs (Homans, 1958), provide an initial framework within which to investigate social interaction. This perspective, however, does not typically consider the subjective meanings of these interactions to the individuals involved. Given the notion that individuals calculate costs and benefits in a relatively straightforward way, exchange theory is somewhat limited in explaining why individuals may act in an apparently unrewarding fashion. Yet according to a symbolic interactionist framework, the individual develops subjective interpretations of relationship quality, and may be deeply influenced by the perceptions of others in the immediate environment (peer/family opinions and support), and consistent with social exchange theory (e.g., Rusbult, 1983), considers 'hypotheticals' about what other possibilities may be available in the future (i.e., perceived alternatives to the current relationship).

Because of the limited scope of research on stay/leave decisions among young, unmarried couples, most of what we know has been gleaned from previous work examining adult women. Prior research has shown that married women may grapple with issues of economic dependence, the presence of children, and a reluctance to end relationships of long duration (Anderson, 2007; Lo & Sporakowski, 1989). Thus, such studies have documented that decisions to stay/leave are not based solely on the experience of violence (Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom, 2006). Evaluating costs and benefits (an underpinning of exchange theory) is undoubtedly central to decision-making, but the symbolic interactionist version of exchange highlights that this assessment is multifaceted and includes subjective or non-utilitarian elements. Subjective aspects of these relationships may be even more critical considerations in dating relationships as these unions lack the cultural/legal weight of marriage, and do not as often include economic ties. A symbolic interactionist approach provides a framework for exploring the role of inherently subjective positive and negative relationship dynamics as well as more practical considerations. In addition, a basic emphasis within SI is the ability of the individual to imaginatively reflect on the future (Mead 1934), thus recognizing that views about alternatives to the current relationship also involve subjective assessments. Beliefs about one's prospects of finding an alternative partner may nevertheless influence appraisals about a relationship's current viability. The SI perspective also focuses on the role of social definitions in the process of establishing meaning (Blumer, 1969). Accordingly, the

expressed views of significant others (e.g., parents, peers) about the romantic partner may influence the individual's own assessments about the partner and the relationship itself.

Intimate partner violence thus unfolds within a broader relationship context suggesting the need to investigate the role of these other considerations as influences on decisions to stay or leave. Indeed, because most of the research in the area has focused on individuals who report violence, few studies have considered whether violence itself is a significant predictor of relationship termination. Rather, research assumes that violence plays a key role in the decision to leave, and discussions of violence are often the centerpiece of intervention and prevention efforts. However, the symbolic interactionist framework highlights the importance of understanding the meaning of behaviors from the individual's own subjective point of view. Thus, it is possible that violence is not the primary impetus for leaving a violent relationship. This suggests the utility of examining relationships that do and do not include violence to determine whether IPV (a) is significantly related to the odds of terminating a relationship, and (b) remains a significant predictor, once other relationship considerations (i.e., a range of positive and negative relationship qualities, perceived alternatives, views of significant others) have been taken into account. To the degree that considerations other than violence are significantly related to stay/leave decisions, this would suggest the utility of designing prevention/intervention messages that move beyond discussions of the harmful nature of violent actions.

## Background

Some prior research has suggested that relationship factors are the most important predictors of women's decisions to leave violent relationships (Lo & Sporakowski, 1989; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). However, studies of dating relationships have focused primarily on providing overall descriptions of relationships, typically relying on global measures of satisfaction. Although young adult daters do not encounter the same economic, child welfare, or shared residence constraints (Anderson, 2007; Lo & Sporakowski, 1989), there may be other considerations (i.e., intimacy, relationship centrality) that act as constraints to terminating the relationship (Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2010). Given the unique context of dating relationships, young adults' relative inexperience in relationships, and developmental differences, relationship concepts (i.e., satisfaction) may not hold the same meaning for daters as compared to individuals in married or cohabiting relationships (Fincham, 2012). Furthermore, global measures of relationship satisfaction may not provide a comprehensive portrait of specific dynamics within these dating relationships. Moreover, such measures do not assess what relationships are like among those who stay as a contrast to those who leave violent relationships.

Prior examinations of the relationship characteristics associated with dating violence have focused almost exclusively on negative dynamics. In this study, we extend our focus to include both positive and negative relational dynamics. This facilitates making comparisons across violent and non-violent relationships and acknowledges the complexity of the young adult dating experience. Recent research has begun to examine a more comprehensive range of characteristics associated with dating violence (e.g., Giordano et al., 2010) and the relationship dynamics and stability associated with IPV (e.g., Katz, Carino, & Hilton, 2002).

Such investigations have provided a better understanding of the context in which violence may occur, but have not systematically explored whether these relationship dynamics influenced stay/leave decisions. Rhoades and colleagues (2010) recently moved beyond the focus on constraints (e.g., shared residence) and found support for the role of feelings of commitment and relationship adjustment for the decision to stay in a relationship with experiences of violence. This suggests the utility of a multidimensional approach to stay/leave decision-making.

## Positive Features of the Relationship

The level of "intimate self-disclosure" has been called a 'barometer' of the state of a given relationship (Jourard, 1971), and thus our analyses included a measure of self-disclosure that taps this dimension of closeness and intimacy. Our assessment of positive features also included perceptions of passionate love defined as feelings of heightened emotionality, which are arguably unique to the romantic context (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Relationships during young adulthood often do not involve the level of economic interdependence that may characterize marital unions or long-term cohabiting relationships. Yet partners during this phase of the life course may well provide certain practical or utilitarian benefits that can be considered 'positives.' Thus, a third aspect of the relationship included in our analyses of positive features is the degree to which a focal partner provides material and other practical support.

## Negative Features

Researchers consistently have found evidence of emotional abuse in conjunction with physical abuse (e.g., Arias & Pape, 1999; Campbell, 2002; Coker et al., 2002), and reviews of the literature have suggested that ridicule, put-downs and excessive control may be more detrimental to mental health than some acts of physical violence (e.g., Follingstad et al., 1990; Jouriles, Garrido, Rosenfield, & McDonald, 2009; Pico-Alfonso, 2005). In the current investigation, the objective was to determine whether these non-physical forms of abuse influenced stay/leave decision-making in general, and once the experience of physical abuse was taken into account. Our analyses extended beyond the realm of abusive actions to consider the influence of more basic problems, such as communication difficulties and verbal arguments that may characterize the relationship.

## Alternatives to the Current Relationship

As suggested by exchange theory, individuals involved in relationships subjectively evaluate a range of positive and negative dynamics, but a comprehensive assessment of the benefits of staying likely includes beliefs about the likelihood of finding a suitable alternative partner. Choice and Lamke (1999) found that daters who experienced violence intended to remain in relationships to the extent that they believed they would be better off with that partner than without the relationship. Cate and colleagues (1982) found that respondents who self-identified as 'stayers' reported fewer alternatives than those who left violent dating relationships (see also Rhoades et al., 2010).

### The Role of Social Networks

Researchers and practitioners have highlighted the association between violence and social isolation (e.g., Barnett & LaViolette, 2000; Goodman & Smyth, 2011; Stets, 1991) using studies examining access to social support and other community resources (e.g., Burke et al., 2001) or the sources of available social support (i.e., victim's family, abuser's family, and friends). Yet there has been little consideration of other ways in which social networks may influence relationship conduct, including stay/leave decisions. In this paper, we argue that perhaps even more important than the general provision of support is the potential of these network members to influence the course of the relationship through their appraisals of the individual's romantic partner. Communications of family and friends often indicate what they think of the suitability or desirability of an individual's romantic partner and whether they approve of the relationship.

### Issues of Gender

Historically the research on stay/leave decisions has focused only on women's decisions to leave violent relationships. Yet in social surveys, the percentage of men reporting violent victimization is often comparable to, or even slightly higher than, the percentage of women reporting victimization (e.g., Halpern et al., 2001; O'Keefe, 1997; Schnurr & Lohman, 2008; Straus, 2008; Straus, 2011). Researchers examining dating relationships have suggested that men, like women, make decisions about whether to terminate a relationship that includes violence (Lo & Sporakowski, 1989). As such, we examined the role of gender in the decision-making process.

## Current Investigation

Extending prior work on stay/leave decision processes, the current analyses addressed several objectives. Specifically, we analyzed the role of positive and negative relationship dynamics, perceived alternatives to the current relationship, social support, family members and friends' views about the romantic partner, and prior violence as predictors of relationship termination among a sample of young adult daters. In assessing the role of violence as a predictor, we also determined whether it was significantly related to termination once other predictors were included. We also assessed whether there was a threshold effect of IPV, such that higher levels of experience with IPV was associated with greater odds of leaving. A secondary objective was to examine whether individuals reporting IPV approached stay/leave decisions in the same or distinctive ways relative to those in non-violent relationships. Supplemental analyses explored the degree to which other relationship factors moderated the effect of violence on the odds of termination, and whether these dynamics appeared similar or distinct according to the respondent's gender.

## Methods

This study used data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), a stratified, random sample of adolescents registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio based on enrollment records from the year 2000. The sample (n = 1,321), devised by the National Opinion Research Center, drawn from 62 schools across seven school districts

over-sampled Black and Hispanic respondents. Although TARS used enrollment records as their sampling frame, school attendance was not a prerequisite for inclusion in the sample. We conducted interviews in respondents' homes using laptop computers preloaded with the survey questionnaire. While the current study primarily drew on data from the Wave 4 interview, some of the sociodemographic characteristics, including parents' education and family structure, were from the parent questionnaire administered at Wave 1.

The initial sample included 1,321 respondents. At Wave 4, we interviewed 1,092 individuals resulting in a response rate of 83%. The present analysis focused on respondents who reported on their current/most recent heterosexual dating relationship at Wave 4 (n = 700).[1]

We excluded respondents who were never in a relationship from the analyses. Attrition analyses indicated that participation at Wave 4 was not related to most focal relationship and control variables. The follow-up sample, however, was more likely to be female (53%) and slightly younger (age 15.2 in contrast to 15.3). The wave 4 interviews were conducted in 2006 when respondents were 17–24 years old. The data included measures of subjective interpretations of relationship dynamics, making TARS a particularly appropriate choice for the present study. The analyses were based on cross-sectional data. The aim of the study was to explore the association between relationship dynamics, perceived alternatives, social support, IPV, and our dependent variable relationship termination; as such we do not make causal inferences based on these associations.

## Measures

### Relationship termination

The dependent variable, a dichotomous measure of relationship termination was based on responses to the question: "Is there someone you are currently dating – that is someone you like and who likes you back," asked at the Wave 4 interview. Respondents who reported that their relationships were not intact were coded 1 on relationship termination.

### Positive relationship dynamics

We based intimate self-disclosure on a revised version of West and Zingle's (1969) self-disclosure scale. We took the mean of five items, which asked respondents about how often they talked to their partner about the following topics: "something really bad that happened;" "home and family life;" "private thoughts and feelings;" "your future;" and "being sexually exclusive." Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) (alpha = .86). Drawing on Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) passionate love scale, love was measured as the mean of the following four items: "I would rather be with X than anyone else;" "I am very attracted to X;" "the sight of X turns me on;" and "X always seems to be on my mind." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (alpha = .85). To measure respondent's reports of instrumental support from their partner, we included a four-item scale designed for the TARS study (Giordano et al., 2010), which asked how often X "lets

---

[1]Due to the small number of respondents reporting on a current or most recent same-sex dating relationship at the time of the Wave 4 interview (n = 14), we have limited our sample to respondents reporting on opposite-sex relationships.

you borrow something;" "loans or gives you money;" "gives you a present;" and "pitches in and helps you do things." Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) (alpha = .77).

### Negative relationship dynamics

An emotional/psychological abuse scale was constructed based on respondents' responses to four items assessing verbally aggressive or ridiculing behavior and control dynamics within the relationship from the conflict tactics scale (CTS) (Straus & Gelles, 1990). To tap the extent of verbal abuse, we asked respondents how often their partner, "ridiculed or criticized your values beliefs;" "put down your physical appearance;" and "put you down in front of other people." Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Additionally, respondents were asked the extent of agreement with the following statement: "X sometimes wants to control what I do." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These four items were standardized to create a summed scale (alpha = .78). Poor communication was a modified version of Powers and Hutchinson's (1979) communication apprehension scale, and was measured as the mean of the following six items: "Sometimes I don't know quite what to say to X;" "I would be uncomfortable having intimate conversations with X;" "Sometimes I find it hard to talk about my feelings with X;" "Sometimes I feel I need to watch what I say to X;" "Sometimes I find it hard to talk about sexual matters with X;" and "Sometimes I do not tell X things because he/she will get mad." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (alpha = .79). The measure of verbal conflict, designed for the TARS study (Giordano et al., 2010), was derived from the average of two questions, which asked how often the respondents and their partners "had disagreement or arguments" and "yelled or shouted at each other." Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) (alpha = .83).

### Perceived alternatives to the relationship

Alternatives was measured as the average of two questions, which asked respondents' level of agreement with the following: "I could find another girl [guy] as good as X is;" and "It's likely there are other girls [guys] I could be happy with." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (alpha = .78).

### Social support

Analyses relied on two global measures of social support. Drawing on Cernkovich and Giordano (1987), global parental support was an eleven item scale that asked respondents their extent of agreement on a range of questions including the following: "My parents often ask about what I'm doing;" "My parents give me the right amount of affection;" and "My parents trust me." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (alpha = .82). Global peer support was measured as the mean of three items asking respondents' extent of agreement with the following statements regarding their friends: "I can tell them private things and know they won't tell other people;" "They care about me;" and "My friends make me feel good about myself" (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (alpha = 82). We also included measures of social support more directly related to the relationship with their partner. Parental approval of partner was a single item, which asked respondents, "In general

what do your parents think of X?" Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disapprove*) to 5 (*strongly approve*). Peer approval of partner was assessed with the following single item: "My friends approve of my relationship with X." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Negative appraisals from network members was measured with the following single item: "Most people would think that X is not good enough for me." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### Relationship violence

Relationship violence, based on a revised version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus & Gelles, 1990), included the following four items: "thrown something at;" "pushed, shoved, or grabbed;" "slapped in the face or head with an open hand;" and "hit." Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) (alpha = .88). These questions were asked in relation to experiences with the current/most recent partner and referenced both victimization and perpetration experiences. Given the nature of the sample, this measure likely captured common couple violence as opposed to intimate terrorism (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). We used a dichotomous measure of relationship violence, in which respondents who experienced any violent behaviors were coded as experiencing violence, as well as a summed scale, which measured the frequency of violent episodes. This continuous measure of relationship violence was used to test for a threshold effect of IPV to determine whether higher levels of IPV experience resulted in increased odds of relationship termination.

### Sociodemographic, adult status, and relationship characteristics

Age, measured in years using a continuous variable, was from the Wave 4 interview. We used three dichotomous variables to measure race/ethnicity including non-Hispanic White (contrast category), non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic. Family structure, composed of dichotomous variables, indicated the household type in which respondents lived during adolescence including two biological parents (contrast category), stepfamily, single-parent family, and any "other" family type assessed at Wave 1. To control for socioeconomic status, we used the highest level of education reported in the Wave 1 parent questionnaire. Because the parent sample consisted primarily of women, this measure, referred to as "mother's education," included the following indicators: less than high school; high school (contrast category); some college; and college or more. Additionally, we included a dichotomous measure, in school, which indicated whether respondents attended school at the time of the Wave 4 interview. Three dichotomous indicators, full-time, part-time, and unemployed (contrast category) were used to account for respondents' employment status at Wave 4. Gender was a dichotomous variable with women as the contrast category. Status as a parent was measured as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent had any children. Relationship duration was measured using a single item asking respondents how long they had been with their current or most recent partners. Responses ranged from 1 (*less than a week*) to 8 (*a year or more*). A dichotomous variable, sexual intimacy, indicated whether the respondent had sex with his/her partner (1 = *yes*).

## Results

Approximately 35% of respondents reported experiencing violence in their current/most recent dating relationship. Violence included self-reports of victimization, perpetration, and mutual violence. Additionally, 38% of respondents reported a breakup at Wave 4. Rates of relationship termination were similar among those who reported IPV and those who did not totaling 39% and 38% respectively.

Bivariate and multivariate results predicting the odds of relationship termination for the full sample (n = 700) are presented in Table 1. The bivariate regression models examined the association between relationship violence, relationship dynamics, perceived alternatives, social support, control variables, and the odds of relationship termination. Model 1 displayed the results for the full model examining the association between relationship violence and relationship termination. We then estimated a series of models that included each key independent variable separately as well as the sociodemographic and relationship control variables. The associations between sociodemographic, adult status, and relationship characteristics and the outcome—relationship termination—were similar across these models. Thus for clarity/efficiency of presentation, the coefficients for the control variables were not displayed for the remainder of the full models.

Examining the role of violence in stay/leave decisions, the bivariate results and full model (model 1) showed that violence was neither significantly related to relationship termination at the bivariate level nor in the full model. Additional analyses were performed to test for a threshold effect of relationship violence (Table 1) to determine whether higher levels of IPV had a stronger effect on relationship termination. This continuous measure ranged from 8–35 and captured the frequency of violent episodes in the relationship. In both the bivariate and multivariate models, the level of relationship violence was not significantly related to relationship termination. These associations were tested at the mean, as well as at one and two standard deviations above mean violence, for the full sample (n = 700). The results did not support the notion of a threshold effect, suggesting that the frequency of violence may not be associated with stay/leave decisions.

As shown in the bivariate model (model 1), all of the positive relationship dynamics measured (self-disclosure, love, support) were associated with significantly lower odds of relationship termination. With the exception of verbal conflict, the negative relationship dynamics (emotional/psychological abuse, poor communication) were associated with significantly higher odds of termination. Additionally, the partner specific measures of social support (parental approval of partner, peer approval of partner) were negatively associated with relationship termination at both the bivariate and multivariate level. The general support indices, however, were not significantly associated with relationship instability. Finally, negative appraisals of the romantic partner were positively associated with higher odds of relationship termination.

In the full models, gender was the only sociodemographic indicator tied to relationship termination. Women consistently reported lower odds of relationship termination (not shown). In terms of relationship covariates, respondents in relationships of longer duration

and sexually intimate relationships experienced decreased odds of termination across the models (not shown). The associations between duration, sexual intimacy, and relationship termination were likely an artifact of duration; relationships of longer duration were associated with higher odds of violence likely resulting from greater exposure.

Bivariate and multivariate results predicting the odds of relationship termination for respondents who reported IPV in their current/most recent relationship (n = 245) are presented in Table 2. We found that the level of violence was not associated with relationship termination among the subgroup reporting IPV (n = 245) in the bivariate or full model (results not shown). As in the previous analyses of the entire sample, positive relationship dynamics, negative relationship dynamics, perceived alternatives, and the partner specific sources of social support were all related to relationship stability among relationships with IPV. There were a few subtle differences. Among the negative relationship dynamics, emotional/psychological abuse and poor communication were significant at the bivariate level. After the addition of control variables, both poor communication and verbal conflict were associated with higher odds of terminating the relationship among those reporting IPV. Most likely this was due to the impact of verbal conflict being suppressed by duration and race. Net of covariates, emotional abuse was associated with relationship termination in relationships with IPV.

In the full models estimating relationship termination among respondents reporting IPV, gender was not associated with relationship instability. In these models age was negatively related to relationship termination. Black respondents reported lower odds of relationship termination compared to their White and Hispanic counterparts. Respondents who were attending school at the time of the interview reported lower odds of relationship termination. Finally, sexual intimacy was negatively related to the odds of relationship termination.

In separate analyses of the full sample (n = 700), cross-product terms of each of the predictor variables with relationship violence were examined individually to determine whether the associations between violence and termination were moderated by relationship dynamics, perceived alternatives, and social support. Most of the interaction terms were not statistically significant indicating a similar effect of violence across levels of the relationship factors. One significant interaction was violence and passionate love (Table 3). At the minimum value of the love index, the effect of violence was not significantly associated with termination. The effect of violence on ending the relationship, however, was significant and positive at high levels of love. Thus, individuals were more likely to break-up when IPV was accompanied by high levels of emotionality (love). This relationship approached significance (p = .059) after the addition of controls suggesting that net of covariates, passionate love moderated the association between violence and ending the relationship. We examined whether a particular item in the passionate love scale was driving this association. We considered, for example, whether it was really the combination of a more obsessive-type love and violence that led to higher odds of relationship termination, but that was not the case.

A final set of analyses were completed to test the moderating effect of gender (not shown), and the results were not statistically significant. These results suggested similar effects of

relationship dynamics, IPV and social support on the odds of ending a violent relationship for male and female respondents. Thus, IPV has a similar effect on relationship termination for men and women.

## Discussion

This study incorporated a multidimensional approach to relationship dynamics to examine stay/leave decision-making processes among young, unmarried individuals. The results confirmed recent calls to focus greater attention on the relationship context of adolescent dating relationships (e.g., Edwards, Gidycz, & Murphy, 2011; Rhatigan & Street, 2005). Consistent with an exchange orientation, respondents who reported the receipt of more practical benefits were less likely to report termination. However, suggesting the utility of the symbolic interactionist lens, the findings indicated that more subjectively experienced features of the relationship—both positive and negative—also influenced stay/leave decisions. Symbolic interaction theory highlights further the distinctively human capacity for imaginatively reflecting on the future, and results indicated that the respondent's subjective considerations about the likelihood of finding an alternate partner were significantly related to odds of termination. Finally, findings indicated that perspectives on the relationship may well be influenced by the views of significant others as negative appraisals of the partner by parents and friends were significantly related to the odds of ending a given relationship. These findings were generally consistent with but extend prior literature that hypothesized that individuals experiencing violence in their relationships make relationship decisions in a similar manner as those involved in non-violent relationships.

Intimate partner violence refers to behaviors that cause physical, psychological, or sexual harm (Krug et al., 2002). Scholars have indicated that there is likely considerable concurrence between these behaviors—particularly physical and psychological forms of aggression. Nevertheless, these modes of abuse are seldom examined in the same studies, and when they are, they are most often included in a combined measure capturing any physical and/or psychological violence. While it is true that physical and psychological forms of abuse are related, they are not perfectly correlated with one another. Failure to distinguish between types of abuse may result in misattribution of their adverse effects. In the current study we examined the effects of physical and emotional/psychological abuse separately and found that these two distinct forms of IPV had very different consequences for stay/leave decision-making. Specifically, whereas reports of physical violence were not systematically related to relationship termination, the experience of emotional/psychological abuse did influence the decision to leave. We were also interested in examining the extent to which other problematic relationship behaviors influenced stay/leave decision-making and found that negative features of the relationship, beyond the abuse itself, were related to the odds of ending a relationship.

The finding regarding an apparent impact of parent and peer views of the partner in particular warrants additional research scrutiny as prevention messages might benefit from including a more direct role of significant others. The IPV literature, and the teen dating literature more specifically, has often speculated on the role of social support in IPV

(Banyard & Cross, 2008; Roche, Runtz, & Hunter, 1999). This study built on that research by including an examination of the association between social support and relationship termination. While the global support items were not significant predictors of relationship termination, the partner specific items were significant, suggesting that these others have a potentially important role, not just by 'being there' for the individual experiencing relationship conflicts, but by conveying specific messages of disapproval regarding the partner. It might appear that especially for parents, expressions of disapproval might be associated with rebellion, and an increased likelihood of remaining in such relationships, but this did not appear to be the case. In supplemental analyses, we also examined whether this association varied based on the age of the respondent. Recognizing that the age range was limited to the young adult period, age did not moderate this association. Nevertheless, additional research is needed on the specific tone and content of effective messages that parents and peers may provide, and effects on decision-making of younger teens.

The current study was driven in part by concerns about factors derived from more general literature about relationship maintenance. The large majority of investigations have focused on either general samples, or samples of IPV couples, to address factors related to the decision to terminate an intimate relationship (e.g., Choice & Lamke, 1999; Edwards, Gidycz, & Murphy, 2010; Lacey, Saunders, & Zhang, 2011; Lo & Sporakowski, 1989; Rhatigan & Street, 2005). Such investigations, however, failed to account for violence itself as a predictor of relationship termination. Although the negative effect of IPV on relationship maintenance was somewhat implicit in the stay/leave literature, prior research had not directly explored the effect of IPV on relationship termination. While this line of literature was useful in highlighting a number of factors associated with the decision to leave, it did not specifically address the question of whether violence itself is a significant predictor on its own. By examining relationship termination across dating relationships that do and do not include the experience of violence, this study contributed beyond prior research by providing an analysis of the role of relationship violence in stay/leave decision-making. That there was no significant association between violence and relationship termination at the bivariate level and no evidence of a threshold effect of violence based on more frequent violent episodes complicates our understanding of this problem and how it relates to relationship transitions.

The findings indicated a significant role of other relationship dynamics, perceived alternatives to the current relationship, and views of significant others. Results showed that these relationships are multidimensional, and this complexity is implicated in stay/leave decision-making. Specifically, the results indicated that violence was positively related to relationship termination for those reporting high levels of love. We speculate that for these individuals, violence may be seen as a rather serious violation of their relationship, and the combination of heightened emotionality and IPV may create a condition of greater relationship instability. Although the findings revealed that those reporting greater levels of passionate love were more likely to leave violent relationships, this does not preclude getting back together. This would be consistent with some other research on relationship 'churning' which found that reconciliations are more likely in relationships with higher levels of conflict (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013).

This study was largely exploratory and thus there were limitations. First, the index of relationship violence included in the analyses was a four-item measure and did not include serious acts such as choking and kicking. Future work should also assess injury to examine the degree to which physical harm influences stay/leave behavior. A central feature of these relationships is sexual activity, and sexual coercion is one form of IPV that may be especially salient in young adult populations. We focused on the more traditional indicators of IPV, but an important next step is a careful investigation that assesses and integrates sexual coercion. This study contributed to the literature in that it included both men and women in the analysis of stay/leave behavior. In the future, however, it is important to examine other factors, beyond gender, which may influence these relationships. In these analyses, all items were examined separately as variables. Future work could assess configurations of dynamics within the life experiences of individuals and their influence on stay/leave decisions. This study provided a cross-sectional examination of stay/leave behavior, but it is important to explore stay/leave decision-making processes longitudinally. Finally, while this study explored a range of relationship dynamics and stay/leave behavior, other relationship processes could be examined in future research. For example, broader issues of power and control, which have figured into general discussions of IPV (see Browne, 1987; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dutton, 1988), could be assessed as influences on stay/leave decisions.

People often ask, "Why do some people stay in violent relationships?" This study emphasized that many individuals who experience IPV do leave. In fact, the rate of relationship termination among the IPV subgroup was comparable to those of both the full sample, and the non-violent subgroup. Previous literature has suggested that IPV couples likely approach stay/leave decisions in a similar manner as non-violent couples (Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom, 2006). Implicit in this suggestion, and consistent with the results of the current study, is the idea that violence often may not be the impetus behind the decision to leave a relationship. Violence, like any number of other relationship features, is part of the constellation of factors that inform stay/leave decisions. Researchers have relied on external views of the seriousness and harmful nature of IPV. Yet the SI perspective highlights the need to gauge the individual's own subjective interpretations. Thus it appears that a full range of other relationship dynamics, perceived alternatives, and views of family and friends figure heavily in the decision-making process for both the full sample and the IPV subgroup. These relationships persist across gender and, with a few exceptions, regardless of the experience of violence.

This study highlighted the notion that violence does not happen in isolation from other relationship dynamics. Most prevention and intervention efforts focused on relationship violence center on characteristics and signs of the abuse itself, as well as stressing the need to leave a violent relationship or potentially violent relationship as early as possible. Although these are well-intentioned programmatic goals, the research results documented here are important in broadening the focus of these discussions. The results suggest that a singular focus on abuse may not be as useful in fostering critical examinations of potentially damaging relationships as compared with discussions of a full range of negative or unhealthy patterns within the dating context. Since these other features may be damaging to individuals, even absent a pattern of physical abuse, tailoring messages more broadly has the

potential to assist young people across a broader spectrum who may be involved in non-violent but unhealthy relationships as well as those who have experienced physical abuse.

Second, the findings about the role of significant others provide a hopeful counterpoint to discussions that stress the isolation of abuse victims. The results indicate that expressions of disapproval from friends and parents are related to breaking up with a given partner. This information could also be incorporated into prevention/intervention messages, as individuals may believe that expressing an opinion is unlikely to be related to young adults' decisions. This also suggests the need for intimate others to be relatively specific about their concerns, as against the general strategy of being supportive. As the results documented, general provisions of support were not related to the odds of breaking up.

## Acknowledgments

## References

Anderson KL. Who gets out? Gender as structure and the dissolution of violent heterosexual relationships. Gender and Society. 2007; 21(2):173–201.

Arias I, Pape KT. Psychological abuse: Implications for adjustment and commitment to leave violent partners. Violence and Victims. 1999; 14(1):55–67. [PubMed: 10397626]

Arias I, Samios M, O'Leary KD. Prevalence and correlates of physical aggression during courtship. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 1987; 2(1):82–90.

Arnett, JJ. Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2004.

Banyard VL, Cross C. Consequences of teen dating violence: Understanding intervening variables in ecological context. Violence Against Women. 2008; 14(9):998–1013. [PubMed: 18703772]

Barnett, OW.; LaViolette, AD. It could happen to anyone: Why battered women stay. New York, NY: Sage Publishing; 2000.

Burke JG, Gielen AC, McDonnell KA, O'Campo P, Maman S. The process of ending abuse in intimate relationships: A qualitative exploration of the transtheoretical model. Violence Against Women. 2001; 7:1144–1163.

Campbell JC. Health consequences of intimate partner violence. Lancet. 2002; 359:1331–1336. [PubMed: 11965295]

Cate RM, Henton JM, Koval J, Christopher FS, Lloyd S. Premarital abuse: A social psychological perspective. Journal of Family Issues. 1982; 3(1):79–90.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance—United States. MMWR. 2007; 57(SS#4) 2008.

Cernkovich SA, Giordano PC. Family relationships and delinquency. Criminology. 1987; 25(2):295–321.

Choice P, Lamke LK. Stay/leave decision-making processes in abusive dating relationships. Personal Relationships. 1999; 6:351–367.

DeMaris A. Till discord do us part: The role of physical and verbal conflict in union disruption. Journal of Marriage and Family. 2000; 62(3):683–692.

Dobash, RE.; Dobash, RP. Violent men and violent contexts. In: Dobash, RE.; Dobash, RP., editors. Rethinking violence against women. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1998. p. 141-168.

Edwards KM, Gidycz CA, Murphy MJ. College women's stay/leave decisions in abusive dating relationships: A prospective analysis of an expanded investment model. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 2010; 26(7):1446–1462. [PubMed: 20522885]

Fincham, FD. Challenges in charting the course of romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood. In: Booth, A.; Brown, SL.; Landale, NS.; Manning, WD.; McHale, SM., editors. Early Adulthood in a Family Context. 2012. p. 2National Symposium on Family Issues

Follingstad DR, Rutledge LL, Berg BJ, Hause ES, Polek DS. The role of emotional abuse in physically abusive relationships. Journal of Family Violence. 1990; 5:107–119.

Follingstad DR, Brennan AF, Hause ES, Polk DS, Rutledge LL. Factors moderating physical and psychological symptoms of battered women. Journal of Family Violence. 1991; 6:81–95.

Giordano PC, Cernkovich SA, Pugh MD. Friendships and delinquency. American Journal of Sociology. 1986; 91(5):1170–1202.

Giordano, PC.; Copp, JE.; Manning, WD.; Longmore, MA.; Mack, J. Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University; Bowling Green OH: 2012. Intimate partner violence in young adulthood: A symbolic interactionist perspective on power, control, and anger.

Giordano PC, Soto D, Manning WD, Longmore MA. The characteristics of romantic relationships associated with teen dating violence. Social Science Research. 2010; 39:863–874. [PubMed: 21037934]

Goodman LA, Smyth KF. A call for a social network-oriented approach to services for survivors of intimate partner violence. Psychology of Violence. 2011; 1(2):79–92.

Halpern CT, Oslak SG, Young ML, Martin SL, Kupper LL. Partner violence among adolescents in opposite-sex romantic relationships: Findings from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health. American Journal of Public Health. 2001; 91:1679–1685. [PubMed: 11574335]

Halpern CT, Spriggs AL, Martin SL, Kupper LL. Patterns of intimate partner violence victimization from adolescence to young adulthood in a nationally representative sample. Journal of Adolescent Health. 2009; 45(5):508–516. [PubMed: 19837358]

Halpern-Meekin S, Manning WD, Giordano PC, Longmore MA. Relationship churning in emerging adulthood: On/off relationships and sex with an ex. Journal of Adolescent Research. 2013; 28(2):166–188. [PubMed: 24535913]

Hatfield E, Sprecher S. Measuring passionate love in intimate relationships. Journal of Adolescence. 1986; 4(3):467–482.

Homans GC. Social Behavior as Exchange. American Journal of Sociology. 1958; 63(6):597–606.

Jourard, SM. Self-disclosure: An experimental analysis of the transparent self. Oxford, UK: John Wiley; 1971.

Katz J, Carino A, Hilton A. Perceived verbal conflict behaviors associated with physical aggression and sexual coercion in dating relationships: A gender-sensitive analysis. Violence and Victims. 2002; 17:93–109. [PubMed: 11991160]

Krug, EG.; Dahlberg, LL.; Mercy, JA.; Zwi, AB.; Lozano, R. The world report on violence and health. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2002.

Lacey KK, Saunders DG, Zhang L. A comparison of women of color and non-hispanic white women on factors related to leaving a violent relationship. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 2011; 26(5):1036–1055. [PubMed: 21362686]

Lo W, Sporakowski MJ. The continuation of violent dating relationships among college students. Journal of College Student Development. 1989; 30:432–439.

O'Keefe M. Predictors of dating violence among high school students. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 1997; 12(4):546–568.

Rhatigan DL, Axsom DK. Using the investment model to understand battered women's commitment to abusive relationships. Journal of Family Violence. 2006; 21(2):153–162.

Rhatigan DL, Street AE. The impact of intimate partner violence on decisions to leave dating relationships: A test of the investment model. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 2005; 20(12):1580–1597. [PubMed: 16246918]

Rhatigan DL, Street AE, Axsom DK. A critical review of theories to explain violent relationship termination: Implications for research and intervention. Clinical Psychology Review. 2006; 26(3): 321–345. [PubMed: 16343720]

Roche DN, Runtz MG, Hunter MA. Adult attachment: A mediator between child sexual abuse and later psychological adjustment. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 1999; 14:184–207.

Rusbult CE, Martz JM. Remaining in an abusive relationship: An investment model analysis of nonvoluntary dependence. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. 1995; 21(6):558–571.

Schnurr M, Lohman B. How much does school matter? An examination of adolescent dating violence perpetration. Journal of Youth Adolescence. 2008; 37:266–283.

Silverman JG, Raj A, Mucci LA, Hathaway JE. Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality. The Journal of the American Medical Association. 2001; 286(5):572–579. [PubMed: 11476659]

Stets JE. Cohabiting and marital aggression: The role of social isolation. Journal of Marriage and Family. 1991; 53(3):669–680.

Straus MA. Dominance and symmetry in partner violence by male and female university students in 32 nations. Children and Youth Services Review. 2008; 30(3):252–275.

Straus MA. Gender symmetry and mutuality in perpetration of clinical-level partner violence: Empirical evidence and implications for prevention and treatment. Aggression and Violent Behavior. 2011; 16(4):279–288.

Straus, MA.; Gelles, RJ. Physical violence in American families. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers; 1990.

West LW, Zingle HW. A self-disclosure inventory for adolescents. Psychological Reports. 1969; 24:439–445. [PubMed: 5809036]

**Table 1**

Logistic Regression Coefficients and Odds Ratios Predicting Relationship Termination (N=700),[a]

| Predictor | Bivariate | | | Model 1 | | | Full Models | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | exp(b) | SE | b | exp(b) | SE | b | exp(b) | SE |
| Relationship Violence (dichotomous) | 0.11 | 1.12 | 0.16 | 0.32 | 1.38 | 0.18 | 0.32 | 1.38 | 0.18 |
| Relationship Violence ("threshold test") | −0.00 | 1.00 | 0.02 | | | | 0.01 | 1.01 | 0.03 |
| Positive Relationship Dynamics | | | | | | | | | |
| Intimate Self-disclosure | −0.62*** | 0.536 | 0.10 | | | | −0.48*** | 0.62 | 0.11 |
| Passionate Love | −0.83*** | 0.437 | 0.11 | | | | −0.75*** | 0.47 | 0.12 |
| Instrumental Support | −0.99*** | 0.37 | 0.11 | | | | −0.94*** | 0.39 | 0.12 |
| Negative Relationship Dynamics | | | | | | | | | |
| Emotional/Psychological Abuse | 0.08** | 1.081 | 0.03 | | | | 0.10*** | 1.11 | 0.03 |
| Poor Communication | 0.79*** | 2.213 | 0.12 | | | | 0.74*** | 2.10 | 0.12 |
| Verbal Conflict | −0.00 | 0.996 | 0.08 | | | | 0.26** | 1.30 | 0.10 |
| Perceived Relationship Alternatives | | | | | | | | | |
| Alternatives | 0.54*** | 1.722 | 0.08 | | | | 0.54*** | 1.71 | 0.09 |
| Social Support | | | | | | | | | |
| Global Parental Support | −0.06 | 0.938 | 0.24 | | | | −0.17 | 0.84 | 0.26 |
| Global Peer Support | −0.18 | 0.832 | 0.12 | | | | −0.18 | 0.83 | 0.13 |
| Parental Approval of partner | −0.26*** | 0.769 | 0.07 | | | | −0.31*** | 0.73 | 0.08 |
| Peer Approval of partner | −0.60*** | 0.547 | 0.09 | | | | −0.66*** | 0.52 | 0.09 |
| Negative Appraisals | 0.63*** | 1.87 | 0.08 | | | | 0.69*** | 1.99 | 0.08 |
| Sociodemographic Characteristics | | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | −0.59*** | 0.55 | 0.16 | −0.42* | 0.66 | 0.17 | -- | -- | -- |
| Age | −0.07 | 0.93 | 0.04 | −0.07 | 0.93 | 0.05 | -- | -- | -- |
| Race/Ethnicity (White) | | | | | | | | | |
| Black | −0.39* | 0.68 | 0.19 | −0.33 | 0.72 | 0.22 | -- | -- | -- |
| Hispanic | −0.37 | 0.69 | 0.29 | −0.46 | 0.63 | 0.31 | -- | -- | -- |
| Family Structure (two bio) | | | | | | | -- | -- | -- |

| Predictor | Bivariate | | | Model 1 | | | Full Models[a] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | exp(b) | SE | b | exp(b) | SE | b | exp(b) | SE |
| Single Parent | −0.21 | 0.81 | 0.20 | −0.09 | 0.92 | 0.22 | -- | -- | -- |
| Step-parent | −0.20 | 0.82 | 0.26 | −0.10 | 0.90 | 0.27 | -- | -- | -- |
| 'Other' Family | −0.47 | 0.62 | 0.27 | −0.31 | 0.73 | 0.30 | -- | -- | -- |
| Mother's Education (high school) | | | | | | | | | |
| Less than High School | 0.20 | 1.22 | 0.29 | 0.27 | 1.30 | 0.31 | -- | -- | -- |
| Some College | 0.26 | 1.30 | 0.20 | 0.22 | 1.24 | 0.21 | -- | -- | -- |
| College or More | 0.37 | 1.45 | 0.21 | 0.27 | 1.32 | 0.23 | -- | -- | -- |
| Adult Status Characteristics | | | | | | | | | |
| In School | −0.09 | 0.92 | 0.16 | −0.34 | 0.71 | 0.20 | -- | -- | -- |
| Employment Status (unemployed) | | | | | | | | | |
| Part-time | 0.15 | 1.17 | 0.19 | 0.17 | 1.19 | 0.21 | -- | -- | -- |
| Full-time | 0.19 | 1.21 | 0.20 | 0.19 | 1.21 | 0.22 | -- | -- | -- |
| Parent | −0.41 | 0.67 | 0.22 | −0.05 | 0.95 | 0.25 | -- | -- | -- |
| Relationship Characteristics | | | | | | | | | |
| Duration | −0.24*** | 0.79 | 0.04 | −0.20*** | 0.82 | 0.05 | -- | -- | -- |
| Sexual Intimacy | −0.69*** | 0.50 | 0.17 | −0.41* | 0.66 | 0.19 | -- | -- | -- |

[a] Full Models include controls for sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, race/ethnicity, family structure, mother's education), adult status characteristics (attending school, employment status, parent), and relationship characteristics (duration, sexual intimacy).

*
  p < .05;

**
  p < .01;

***
  p < .001

**Table 2**

Logistic Regression Coefficients and Odds Ratios Predicting Relationship Termination (N=245).[a]

| Predictor | Bivariate | | | Full Model | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | exp(b) | SE | b | exp(b) | SE |
| **Positive Relationship Dynamics** | | | | | | |
| Intimate Self-disclosure | −0.46** | 0.63 | 0.16 | −0.45* | 0.64 | 0.19 |
| Passionate Love | −0.48** | 0.619 | 0.18 | −0.55** | 0.58 | 0.21 |
| Instrumental Support | −0.83*** | 0.437 | 0.18 | −0.81*** | 0.45 | 0.20 |
| **Negative Relationship Dynamics** | | | | | | |
| Emotional/Psychological Abuse | 0.09* | 1.092 | 0.16 | 0.08 | 1.08 | 0.04 |
| Poor Communication | 0.61** | 1.842 | 0.20 | 0.56* | 1.76 | 0.23 |
| Verbal Conflict | 0.12 | 1.122 | 0.14 | 0.39* | 1.48 | 0.17 |
| **Perceived Relationship Alternatives** | | | | | | |
| Alternatives | 0.41** | 1.511 | 0.15 | 0.54** | 1.71 | 0.17 |
| **Social Support** | | | | | | |
| Global Parental Support | 0.18 | 0.938 | 0.37 | 0.14 | 1.15 | 0.41 |
| Global Peer Support | −0.05 | 0.832 | 0.19 | 0.09 | 1.09 | 0.24 |
| Parental Approval of Partner | −0.31** | 0.735 | 0.12 | −0.40** | 0.67 | 0.13 |
| Peer Approval | −0.56*** | 0.573 | 0.14 | −0.65*** | 0.52 | 0.16 |
| Negative Appraisals | 0.55*** | 1.729 | 0.13 | 0.70*** | 2.02 | 0.16 |

[a] Full Models include controls for sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, race/ethnicity, family structure, mother's education), adult status characteristics (attending school, employment status, parent), and relationship characteristics (duration, sexual intimacy).

*
 p < .05;

**
 p <.01;

***
 p <.001

**Table 3**

Logistic Regression Coefficients and Odds Ratios Predicting Relationship Termination: A Test of the Moderating Effect of Passionate Love (N=700).[a]

| Predictor | Bivariate | | | Full Model | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | exp(b) | SE | b | exp(b) | SE |
| Relationship Violence (dichotomous) | 0.11 | 1.12 | 0.17 | 0.26 | 1.30 | 0.18 |
| Passionate Love[c] | −1.01*** | 0.36 | 0.14 | −0.90*** | 0.41 | 0.15 |
| Anyviolence * Passionate Love[c] | 0.53* | 1.70 | 0.23 | 0.45^ | 1.57 | 0.24 |

[a]Full Model includes controls for sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, race/ethnicity, family structure, mother's education), adult status characteristics (attending school, employment status, parent), and relationship characteristics (duration, sexual intimacy).

[c]Passionate Love is centered

*
p < .05;

**
p < .01;

***
p < .001