



“Meet me at the hill where we used to park”: Interpersonal processes associated with victim recantation

Amy E. Bonomi^{a,*}, Rashmi Gangamma^a, Chris R. Locke^b, Heather Katafiasz^a, David Martin^c

^aThe Ohio State University, United States

^bAuburn University, United States

^cKing County Prosecuting Attorney, United States

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ABSTRACT

Our study used live telephone conversations between domestic violence perpetrators and victims to answer novel questions about how and why victims arrive at their decision to recant and/or refuse prosecution efforts. From October 2008 to June 2011, we conducted a qualitative study involving 25 heterosexual couples, where the male perpetrator was being held in a Detention Facility (in the U.S.) for felony-level domestic violence and made telephone calls to his female victim during the pre-prosecution period. We used 30–192 min of conversational data *for each couple* to examine: 1) interpersonal processes associated with the victim's intention to recant; and 2) the couple's construction of the recantation plan once the victim intended to recant. We used constructivist grounded theory to guide data analysis, which allowed for the construction of a novel recantation framework, while acknowledging the underlying coercive interpersonal dynamic. Our results showed that consistently across couples, a victim's recantation intention was foremost influenced by the perpetrator's appeals to the victim's sympathy through descriptions of his suffering from mental and physical problems, intolerable jail conditions, and life without her. The intention was solidified by the perpetrator's minimization of the abuse, and the couple invoking images of life without each other. Once the victim arrived at her decision to recant, the couple constructed the recantation plan by redefining the abuse event to protect the perpetrator, blaming the State for the couple's separation, and exchanging specific instructions on what should be said or done. Our findings advance scientific knowledge through identifying, in the context of ongoing interactions, strategies perpetrators used—sympathy appeals and minimization—to successfully persuade their victim and strategies the couple used to preserve their relationship. Practitioners must double their efforts to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, and efforts made to link victims to trusted advocates who can help them defend against perpetrators' sophisticated techniques.

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Introduction

In the United States, twenty-five percent of women across nationally representative samples experience domestic violence in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), with many enlisting the support of police to stop abuse (Brookoff, O'Brien, Cook, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Durose et al., 2005; Houry et al., 2004). For cases that reach the court system, a high proportion of victims recant and/or refuse prosecution efforts (Berliner, 2003; Camacho

& Alarid, 2008; Dutton, Goodman, & Bennett, 1999; Goodman, Bennett, & Dutton, 1999; Hare, 2006; Rogers, 1998). While rigorous research studies describing the percentage of victims who recant are lacking, reports suggest that as many as 80 percent of victims recant (Meier, 2006).

Prosecutors and advocates have known for many years that witness tampering is a significant problem in domestic violence cases, and that victims recant and/or refuse prosecution due, in part, to perpetrators' threats of retaliation (Bennett, Goodman, & Dutton, 1999; Ellison, 2002; Hart, 1993; Meier, 2006). As recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court, “This particular type of crime is notoriously susceptible to intimidation or coercion of the victim to ensure she does not testify at trial” (*Davis v. Washington*, 126 S.Ct. 2266, 165 L.Ed.2d 224, 2006). Research using victim reports or case files indeed partially links victim recantation to threats and fear of

* Corresponding author. The Ohio State University, Human Development and Family Science, 1787 Neil Avenue, 151 Campbell Hall, Columbus, Ohio 43210, United States. Tel.: +1 614 292 4753.

E-mail address: bonomi.1@osu.edu (A.E. Bonomi).

retaliation (Cretney & Davis, 1997; Inspectorate, 1998; Meier, 2006; Zoellner et al., 2000).

Research has also correlated victim non-participation in the prosecution process with financial dependence on the perpetrator (Camacho & Alarid, 2008; Ellison, 2002; Hart, 1993), the victim's belief that the crime is not severe enough to warrant prosecution (Hare, 2006), the victim's problems with substance abuse (Goodman et al., 1999), and the victim's perceptions of poor criminal justice response (such as the use of mutual charge and dual arrest policies) and poor access to advocates and other social support systems (Bui, 2001; Cox, 2000; Ellison, 2002; Hart, 1993). It has also been well-documented that domestic violence victims suffer elevated rates of clinically-identified depression and anxiety (Bonomi et al., 2009; Hegarty, Gunn, Chondros, & Small, 2004) and other psychological vulnerability (Koepsell, Kernic, & Holt, 2006), which could compromise their efforts of following through with prosecution.

Still yet, other factors may motivate victims to recant and/or refuse other types of efforts intended to protect them. Roberts, Wolfer, and Mele (2008) found that victims were most likely to drop protection orders if concrete (e.g., divorce/separation) or promised change (e.g., the perpetrator said he would change) occurred, suggesting that victims' emotional attachments to their perpetrator may motivate their decisions. This is not at odds with a sizable body of literature linking emotional needs and attachments with continued involvement in abusive relationships (Allison, Bartholomew, Maysless, & Dutton, 2008; Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Bartle & Rosen, 1994). However, in spite of emotional attachments that serve to maintain victims' connection with their abuser over time, having access to tangible support such as victim assistance workers and the availability of videotaped testimonies (Dawson & Dinovitzer, 2001; Goodman et al., 1999), as well as the presence of children in the home (Goodman et al., 1999), have been shown to enhance victim participation in prosecution efforts against their perpetrator.

Despite important existing information on why victims recant and/or refuse prosecution efforts, prior research is somewhat limited because it focuses on data assembled retrospectively from case files and victim interviews. Little is known about how the victim's decision-making process unfolds in real time through interaction with their perpetrator—what seems to motivate victims in the moment to change their stance towards prosecution efforts? Such information is critically important to identify intervention points to prevent future violence and injury to victims and their children (Bonomi et al., 2009, 2006; Coker et al., 2002; Kernic, Wolf, & Holt, 2000; Kernic et al., 2002, 2003; McFarlane, Groff, O'Brien, & Watson, 2003; McFarlane, Groff, O'Brien, & Watson, 2005). The present study used a novel methodological approach of accessing and analyzing audio-taped telephone conversations between domestic violence perpetrators and their victim, taped during the pre-prosecution period, to determine processes associated with victim recantation. Our study is the first, to date, to use telephone conversations between domestic violence perpetrators and victims, unfolding in real time, to answer novel questions about how and why victims arrive at their decision to recant and/or refuse prosecution efforts.

Methods

Study procedures were approved by The Ohio State University's Institutional Review Board. Subjects included 25 heterosexual couples, in which the male perpetrator was being held at a Detention Facility in Washington State for a *felony-level* domestic violence offense (e.g., assault, violation of a no contact order, unlawful imprisonment) and made telephone calls from the Facility to his victim. In 2005, the Facility began routinely audio-recording

telephone conversations of detainees to increase jail safety. All parties are aware they are being recorded through an automated message at the beginning of each call. The legality of audio-taping telephone calls made from Washington State detention facilities was upheld in a Washington State Supreme Court decision (*State v. Modica*: 164 Wash.2d. 186 P. 3d 1062, Wash. July 10, 2008, NO. 79767-6). The prosecution division has authority to release the audio-tapes for research purposes; tapes from 25 couples involved in *felony-level* domestic violence were provided to the study team for analysis. As the study involved secondary, public-record data, subjects were not required to provide informed consent.

The sample size was determined to achieve data saturation, where no new themes were identified (Charmaz, 2000). Qualitative research is designed to generate in-depth themes rather than to achieve generalizability (Giacomini & Cook, 2000). We used 30–192 min of conversational data for each couple, taped during the pre-prosecution period, to explore two research questions:

- 1) Interpersonal processes associated with the victim's intention to recant, including what the couple was discussing before and after it became clear that the victim would recant her story; and
- 2) How the couple constructed the recantation plan once it was clear that the victim intended to recant.

Data analysis occurred from October 2008 through June 2011 in an iterative and robust fashion, with extensive tests of credibility, a hallmark of rigorous qualitative research (Giacomini & Cook, 2000). We used constructivist grounded theory to guide data analysis, which allowed for the construction of a novel recantation framework (Charmaz, 2000), while simultaneously acknowledging the underlying coercive interpersonal dynamic (Dutton et al., 1999) whereby perpetrators manipulated conversations to influence victim recantation. The analytic steps were as follows:

- From October 2008 to December 2008, the study team (AB, RG, CL, and HK) met weekly to listen to the audio-recordings and compile notes about the conversations.
- From January 2009 to July 2009, five trained research assistants transcribed the audio-recordings of *ten couples*, where it was clear the victim intended to recant. The study team continued meeting weekly to review transcripts against the audio-tapes and to discuss emerging themes;
- From July 2009 to October 2009, AB and RG used the transcripts to write in-depth narrative summaries for the ten couples that addressed our two research questions, namely, themes related to what couples were discussing before and after it became clear the victim intended to recant and how couples then constructed the recantation plan. The summaries were reviewed iteratively with the study team and revised. Unlike many qualitative studies that involve structured interviews to solicit themes, we were working with couples' raw, unstructured narratives; we therefore wrote narrative summaries (Comfort, Grinstead, McCartney, Bourgois, & Knight, 2005) of what couples were discussing instead of breaking the data into "code-able parts" to ensure continuity and integrity of the couples' narratives. Through November 2010, the preliminary findings were presented at six professional meetings and discussed with the prosecutor (DM) to test credibility of the study team's interpretations.
- From this process, a theoretical framework was constructed and tested from September 2010 to June 2011. This involved extensive re-engagement with the data from the *original ten couples*, by re-reading transcripts and re-organizing earlier themes. AB and RG then reviewed the audio-tapes of *an additional 15 couples* to confirm theoretical saturation. The victim's intent to recant occurred in *seven of the 15 additional couples*

and were added to the sample. In the remaining eight couples, the conversations provided to the study team were between the perpetrator and someone other than the primary victim ($n = 4$), were not audible or were administratively incomplete ($n = 3$), or involved calls with the victim after a plea bargain had been reached ($n = 1$).

- Of the 17 couples where recantation occurred (the *original ten couples* plus the *seven additional couples*), the racial/ethnic make-up was as follows: five involved African American partners, four involved Caucasian partners, and eight involved mixed race couples or couples of unknown racial background. While information about socioeconomic status was not formally available, most couples discussed financial struggles such as not having enough money for food and not being able to pay bills. As noted earlier, the violence in these couples was classified as felony-level; victims sustained severe physical assault resulting in broken bones, lacerations and contusions. Several victims had been physically strangled to the point where they lost consciousness, and two had been kidnapped/unlawfully imprisoned.

Results

Fig. 1 presents the conceptual framework that emerged from our analysis of the data to answer our two research questions (processes associated with the victim's intention to recant and the couple's construction of the recantation plan). The following sections describe how couples moved through the recantation process depicted in Fig. 1. In advance of presenting our in-depth results, in Fig. 1, as the couple "started" their conversations (*segment 1*), the victim and perpetrator were acting as separate "individuals" in an effort to get their perspectives (e.g., on what happened during the abuse event) acknowledged and validated. In contrast, by the "end," that is in late conversations where recantation was identified as the strategy the victim would use in court, the victim and perpetrator assumed the role of "couple" united against the judicial process (*segment 5*). We labeled the segments in Fig. 1 with numerical values to aid readers in moving through the various sections. However, as will be described, couples did not necessarily move through the phases linearly; for example, while resistance of each other's accounts of what happened during the

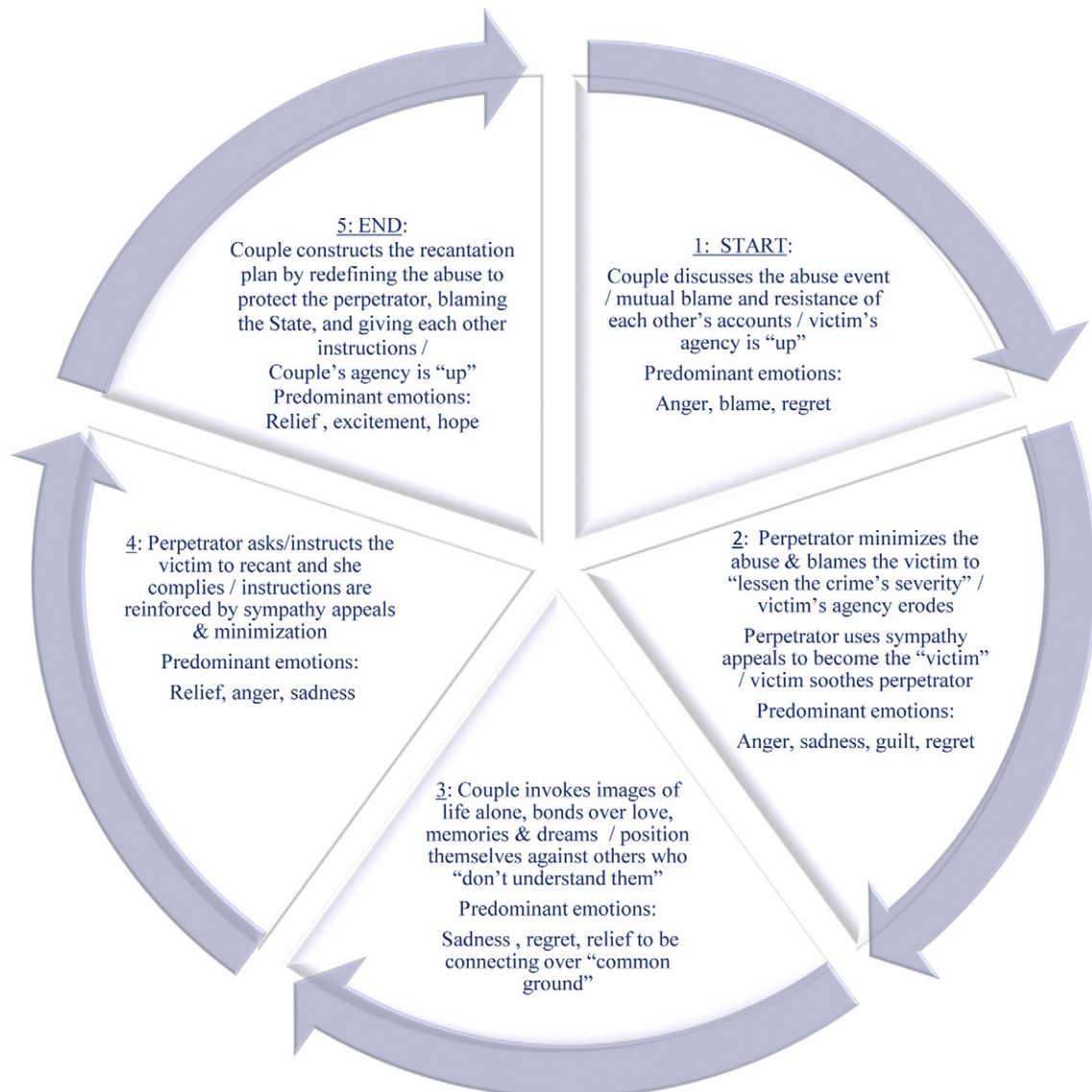


Fig. 1. : Recantation Process.

abuse event is listed in segment 1, the couple might have continually resisted each other's accounts in some fashion up until their final construction of the recantation plan.

Research question 1: processes associated with the victim's intention to recant

The processes associated with a victim's intent to recant did not unfold linearly. Starting at the top of Fig. 1, *segment 1*, the couple's early conversations typically included an argument about what transpired during the abuse event and/or what led up to it. In these early conversations, perpetrators and victims tended to both express anger and blame and resisted each other's accounts of what happened. Initially, victims exercised agency by "telling the truth about what happened" and even calling the perpetrator an "abuser." However, the victim's agency was fleeting, with her story soon unraveling in response to three processes that were also associated with her intention to recant (Fig. 1, *segments 2 and 3*): the perpetrator's minimization of the abuse event; the perpetrator's appeals to her sympathy; and the couple's expressed need to keep their relationship and family intact. Minimization of the abuse and appealing to the victim's sympathy occurred early in the couples' conversations, but importantly, these strategies also continued in various forms throughout the conversations, even after the victim indicated her intention to recant. The couple's expressed need to keep the relationship and family intact typically came after heated resistance of each other's accounts of what happened during the abuse event.

Minimization of the abuse event

While perpetrators' minimization of the abuse event did not serve as the tipping point for prompting victims to recant their story, repeated use of minimization effectively served to lessen the victim's perceptions of the severity of the crime (Hare, 2006) and wear down the victim's agency (Fig. 1, *segment 2*). Minimization of the abuse event included several important aspects well documented in the literature (Pence & Paymar, 1993): not allowing the victim to talk about the abuse; resisting responsibility (V: "They think my cheek is broken; P: I'm really sorry, but I didn't even do anything"); denying the credibility of the victim's story ("I didn't push you like you think I pushed you"); and reminding the victim that she was to blame for the violence.

One victim discussed the severe abuse and injuries she sustained:

"You basically socked me in my stomach a few times, you strangled me to the point I could not breathe and fell to the floor ... You spit in my face three times and held me down ... the lacerations on my neck and the broken finger and the fact that you socked me so damn hard that I could not breathe and I basically have pains in my chest and my ribs even today ... I have been totally abused ..."

The perpetrator responded with denying the credibility of her story and reminding her that she played an important role in instigating the violence; in essence, the perpetrator positioned himself as the "victim" in the violent encounter:

"Do you realize that before anything happens, I just try to go and you don't allow that? I came in peace. I didn't say anything. You were drinking."

In another couple where the victim suffered suffocation and a severe bite to her face, the perpetrator repeatedly reminded the victim he was being charged with a "felony assault," interspersed with questions about whether the victim felt he deserved the

felony charge. Like the previous example, here the perpetrator also positioned himself as a "victim," in this case to the judicial process. The perpetrator's repetitious angry questioning served to wear down the victim until she admitted that he didn't deserve the felony charge.

Perpetrator's appeals to the Victim's sympathy

Of all processes associated with the victim's intention to recant, most significant were the perpetrator's appeals to the victim's sympathy through descriptions of his suffering. Even victims who were "holding their own" against the perpetrator's resistance of responsibility were vulnerable to the perpetrator's accounts of personal suffering. Following such accounts, victims who seemed intent on following through with prosecution efforts began to change their stance, moving from a space of anger and resistance to sadness, guilt and regret and attempted to soothe the perpetrator (Fig. 1, *segment 2*).

In describing suffering, perpetrators expressed an *increase in depression and anxiety symptoms*, which reversed the roles in the couple's relationship, with the perpetrator becoming a "victim" of his suffering and the victim becoming his caretaker. In one case, the victim initially refused to help the perpetrator and even threatened to talk to the police about previous incidents of violence. However, her stance softened when the perpetrator became increasingly anxious and threatened suicide. He screamed: "You're making me go crazy ... They're telling me they're gonna' press charges then, damn ... You wanna' see a motherfucker suicidal?" His panic was evident as the victim continued to threaten him with pressing charges. Finally, he asked in a distressed tone: "Can I say goodbye? Can I say something? Nobody loves me though, right?" This was a crucial point where the victim's tone changed drastically; she sounded concerned he may actually do something to himself. The remaining conversations revolved around the victim trying to assuage the perpetrator's anxiety and promising to do her best to help him get out of jail.

Similar interactions were observed when perpetrators described *jail conditions as intolerable*. When one perpetrator offered: "I broke down, had an anxiety attack and they put me in the psych ward ... I just freaked out, wakin' up every day in the same hole, without being able to talk to my family," the victim soothed him with "Awe, awe, I'm thinkin' about you." In another, the only time the victim comforted the perpetrator was when he described suffering in jail:

P: "You don't know how it feels ... I just wanna' get out of here (repeats this numerous times) ... I don't know if I can do another day here."

V: "Why? What's so bad?"

P: "It's horrible ... (the) people ... I don't know if I should call you again or what."

V: "Call me whenever you can ... whenever you feel like it."

Other powerful appeals to the victim's sympathy involved describing suffering *due to life without the victim and their children*. One perpetrator began a call distraught, telling the victim "Oh my god, I love you. I haven't been able to call you." He then immediately instructed the victim to recant: "I'm goin' to the Supreme Court ... you gotta' be there ... you gotta' sit up front and tell them that what you wrote in the (police) report was a lie." The victim responded: "Uh huh, I will." He continued the sympathy appeal with "Oh my god, let me talk to my son ... hi, baby ... I don't wanna' be here."

Most perpetrators and victims repeatedly invoked their roles as partners and parents to remind each other of what they stood to lose if prosecution moved forward. One perpetrator reminded the victim that their child was crying: "Cause her daddy ain't here. She's sad her daddy's gone. That's all that is. She's sensing her daddy ain't there. She's sensing something is wrong."

Couple invoking images of life without each other

The victim's recantation intention was also associated with the couple invoking images of life without each other and bonding over love, dreams and memories. As shown in Fig. 1, segment 3, the couple invoking images of life without each other and bonding over shared similarities typically occurred after the couple had argued about what happened during the abuse event and after the perpetrator utilized sympathy appeals; however, for some couples images of life without each other were invoked early on in the conversations. When reminding each other of life alone and/or bonding over love, dreams and memories, both the perpetrator and victim tended to express sadness and regret, but also relief that they were connecting over common ground.

In one couple, the victim played the couple's "theme song;" the song's refrain (Stay or leave/I want you not to go/But you did) reinforced the tenuousness of their relationship posed by the perpetrator's jail time. In response, the perpetrator cried and invoked an image of their earlier connection: "There is our song (sniffling, crying) ... it reminds me of our time at the spa." The victim added: "I could feel your spirit moving with the song." Similarly, other couples invoked images of special places they used to meet to share romantic moments (e.g., "Meet me at the hill where we used to park"), symbolizing a desire to meet each other halfway during the telephone conversations in an effort to get the perpetrator out of jail to resume their in-person connection. Still yet, other couples used religious imagery to solidify their connection:

"Listen to me, this is your husband talking to you ... the Buddha [religious reference] said we both need to listen to each other, right? That's really important to me ... because I'm hurting right now [sympathy appeal] ... I'm hurting right now because we don't listen to each other ... but if we start listening to each other ... from this point on, I'd like ask that we start acting like husband and wife" [image of solid connection]. The victim agreed that they should heed Buddha's advice and listen to each other.

In some couples, the need to keep their relationship and family intact was discussed in the context of others' opposition of their relationship. Couples believed that they shared a unique bond not understood by others. For instance, in one couple, where their families explicitly stated displeasure over the relationship, the perpetrator used this to reinforce his dedication to the victim and their family: "She (his mom) was like, 'don't be calling (the victim) ... do you want to be with her?' ... I was like, fuck yeah, she's got my fucking daughter." When the victim suggested they get tattoos of their full name on each other's neck to prove their commitment, he said: "If I get a tattoo with your name, my mom is gonna' kick my ass. My grandma, my family is gonna' kick my ass.... I'll get your name, as long as you get my name."

While concerns about children were apparent in most couples, in only one couple did the victim's perception of their child's response to the perpetrator's arrest serve as the tipping point for recanting. Soon after a meeting between the couple, their child, and their attorneys, the victim said defiantly and tearfully: "That was really hard for me ... It wasn't hard for me seeing you, no. It was hard for me when (the couple's child) started crying." Their child's acute stress responses, including nightmares and incessant crying, ultimately influenced the victim to drop charges in the hope of continuing the perpetrator's parental role.

Research question 2: constructing the recantation plan

Again, while the process within couples did not unfold linearly, once couples processed the early phases of anger over differing accounts of what happened, sympathy appeals, and bonding over love, dreams and memories, the victim moved into a place of

stating her intention to recant (Fig. 1, segments 4 and 5). Typically, the victim's recantation decision was prompted by the perpetrator asking or instructing them to recant. When it was clear the victim intended to recant, both members of the couple tended to express relief and renewed energy as they went about constructing the recantation plan; as well, in some couples, hope of better times in the future was an expressed feeling. Importantly, for many couples in this phase, both members of the couple moved from foremost representing themselves as "individuals" and instead representing themselves as a "united couple." Three strategies were typically used in constructing the plan (Fig. 1, segment 5): redefining the abuse event to protect the perpetrator; blaming the State for the couple's separation; and exchanging specific instructions on what should be said or done in court or when interacting with other legal representatives or family members and friends before the perpetrator's appearance in court. In this final phase, the couple's agency was "up" as they worked together on the various strategies to get the perpetrator out of jail.

Redefining the abuse narrative

By the time the victim intended to recant, the perpetrator's repetitious minimization of the abuse event and resistance of responsibility influenced the victim into adopting a modified account of what happened. Re-defining the abuse narrative during the recantation plan construction was a continuation of minimizing the severe violence and injuries that the victim sustained and redefining their roles in the violent dispute. In one couple, what started as the victim accusing the perpetrator of attempting to drive her car off the road was re-framed to indicate that neither remembered what really occurred; the initiative to falsify the report was taken by the victim:

V: "No one really knows what happened anyway, it was all kind of a blur. I don't know what happened."

P: "I know, I don't know either, (deep sigh) it's not looking good."

V: "Well, I don't know if you really committed a crime ... you just put your hand on the (steering) wheel and pulled me back on the road ... I almost got hit by the one car and you pulled me back ... nothing wrong with that really."

Blaming the State

Couples typically perceived the State as a common enemy by the time the victim intended to recant, a persecuting agency that did not recognize the specialness of their relationship. In the arrest aftermath, the couples resolved to preserve their special connection; recantation was an important step towards this preservation. One victim exemplified blaming the State in breaking up the couple's relationship:

"I told the judge we don't want it ... they're ruining people's lives. (The) domestic violence advocate called me ... she said the whole case is totally unfair and ... I told her what happened and she said that no contact order is totally ... not fair because we didn't want it, we do not want it ... we want to be together and have a family, we have children."

In another couple, as the perpetrator and victim were constructing the recantation plan, the perpetrator enthusiastically suggested "We'll blow her (the prosecutor) up tomorrow ...," to which the victim responded by engaging in discussion about what they will say in court.

While our data did not consistently show that victims questioned the credibility of the justice system response, one victim

involved with her perpetrator for nearly twenty years vocalized her anger and disappointment in the judicial system: “*You get a slap on the wrist, that’s it and then you’re out (of jail).*”

Exchanging instructions on what should be said or done

Perpetrators and victims both offered instructions on what should be said or done in court or in the pre-prosecution period. The instructions were an extension of the couple’s collective “minimization of the abuse event” to protect the perpetrator by redefining what happened to protect the perpetrator. *Perpetrators offered specific instructions* on what the victim should say or do, reinforced with proclamations of care for the victim and sympathy appeals. In one couple, the perpetrator instructed the victim to say she lied to police so that she would serve jail time instead of him; he used a sympathy appeal by reminding the victim that she would only do a few days in jail whereas he faced 60–90 days “*in the hole.*”

P: “*But you’ve just gotta’ say ... what you wrote on, in the statement is a lie, that you’re just mad at me ‘cause you thought I was cheatin’ on you with your cousin. If you say that—*”

V: (laughing) “*Okay.*”

P: “*If you say that, they’ll automatically let me go.*”

V: “*Okay.*”

P: “*Alright?*”

V: “*Uh-huh.*”

P: “*You know I love you?*”

V: “*Mmm ...*”

P: “*Cause like, you know, but they might give you five or ten days (i.e., give you five or ten days in jail if you said you lied to police), but that’s better than me doing sixty to ninety days.*”

V: Me?!

P: “*Yeah but they, but they, babe, that’s better than me doing sixty to ninety days ... I just spent five days in the hole. You can’t do five days for me? Would you rather me sit in here for sixty to ninety?*”

Victims added their own instructions to protect the perpetrator, including providing specific instructions about what the perpetrator should say in court to lessen his sentence. Typically, this included instructing the perpetrator to tell the judge that he had been drunk during his violent outburst and that he needed anger management classes to rehabilitate:

“*Be like, up front, be like ‘I was out of control drunk, I was in a blackout. I would not have, I would’ve never done something like that’ ... you need to tell the judge that you do need (anger management) ... so he lets you the fuck out of there ...*”

Discussion

Our results support what is well known among prosecutors and victim advocates: Witness tampering is a significant problem in domestic violence cases. We used telephone conversations recorded in real time, and a rigorous analysis (Giacomini & Cook, 2000), to answer novel research questions on interpersonal processes associated with a victim’s intention to recant. A victim’s recantation intention was influenced by the perpetrator’s minimization of the abuse and appeals to her sympathy through descriptions of his suffering from mental and physical problems, intolerable jail conditions, and life without her. The intention was further solidified by the couple invoking images of life without each other and bonding over love, dreams and memories. Once the victim arrived at her decision to recant, the couple constructed the recantation plan by redefining the abuse event to protect the perpetrator,

blaming the State for the couple’s separation, and exchanging specific instructions on what should be said or done.

Direct threats were rarely used to influence victims; in only one couple did the perpetrator directly threaten the victim: “*If you go against me on this one, it’s gonna’ be the worst mistake you ever make in your whole life.*” While the threat of further violence may have been present in all couples, the detained perpetrators in our study used other sophisticated strategies to persuade their victim, namely, minimization (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2002; Pence & Paymar, 1993) and descriptions of their suffering; these strategies successfully triggered sadness, guilt and sympathy in their victim, which served to strengthen the case for changing her story to protect him. In spite of perpetrators’ persuasion, our results also point to the victim’s expressed desire to keep the relationship intact, and strategies the couple used to shape the recantation plan; for example, by blaming the State, the couple assumed the united role as “victim” against an “unfair judicial process.”

The goal of qualitative research is not generalizability, but rather, in-depth examination of a particular phenomenon, in our study, recantation processes in couples with felony-level domestic violence offenses. Our findings therefore reflect recantation processes in couples with severe rather than less severe offenses; it is possible that different recantation processes play out in couples with less severe violence. As well, we did not have access to telephone conversations involving couples where the victim did not recant. Because we did not have access to couples where the victim did not recant, we are unable to comment on the differences in interpersonal processes in those couples versus the couples we studied. With additional resources, future studies must recruit couples where the victim did not recant to critically examine whether differences in interactional patterns exist and how these differences inform clinical practice. With our sample of recanting couples, because we were not working with a pre-defined set of interviewer-driven questions (as is typically done in qualitative research) to guide couples’ conversations, we analyzed the couples’ conversations as they unfolded naturally. While it is possible that others listening to the couples’ conversations might identify slight variations on the themes depending on the lens through which the data are viewed, we used a rigorous, iterative analysis to identify comprehensive and nuanced interpretations of the data.

Our conceptual model presented in Fig. 1—developed from our in-depth analysis of couples’ conversations—does not include contextual factors previously shown through victim interviews and case file reviews to be associated with recantation, including financial stress, children, substance abuse, disillusionment with the judicial system, and concrete and promised changes (Bui, 2001; Camacho & Alarid, 2008; Ellison, 2002; Hart, 1993; Roberts et al., 2008). Rather, our constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000), using live conversational data, allowed for the construction of a novel recantation framework that addressed real time (versus retrospectively-ascertained) processes associated with a victim’s intention to recant. Nonetheless, the recantation processes identified in our conceptual model must be considered within the larger context of the couple’s relational situation, including those factors previously shown to be associated with victim non-participation in the prosecution process. For example, while the principal factors associated with victim recantation identified in our study included minimization, sympathy appeals, and the couple’s shared desire to stay together, many couples discussed financial troubles—a factor previously shown to motivate victims to recant (Camacho & Alarid, 2008; Ellison, 2002; Hart, 1993). These financial troubles were not discussed in relation to recantation, but could have been a motivating factor for the victim taking her story back; interviews with victims would be needed to answer this question specifically. As well, many couples in our

sample had children; while only one victim identified her child's needs as the primary motivation for recanting, other victims could have been internally processing their children's needs and may have acted to recant accordingly. Of note, our results are at odds with prior studies showing that children in the home motivate victims' participation in prosecution (Goodman et al., 1999). Finally, with the exception of one victim, across our sample victims did not express disillusionment with the judicial system; the disillusioned victim had been involved with her perpetrator for nearly twenty years and expressed frustration that her perpetrator simply got a "slap on the wrist" each time he perpetrated severe violence. Disillusionment with the judicial process could be explored further with a sample comprising couples with extended violence histories.

Prior research has shown that connecting domestic violence victims to tangible support is associated with their participation in the prosecution process (Dawson & Dinovitzer, 2001; Goodman et al., 1999). While we did not set out to explore the role of formal or informal support in influencing victim recantation behavior, we did observe that when the victims in our sample were in the presence of supportive others (friends and/or family members) while talking to their perpetrator, their agency and resistance to their perpetrator appeared to be "up." This was the case for several victims whose family members and/or friends were present during a portion of their conversations; while the presence of others did not ultimately stop the victims in our sample from recanting, when others were present, victims were better able to resist the persuasion of the perpetrator.

In conceptualizing violent couples, others have suggested that basic intimacy needs reinforce abusive patterns (Allison et al., 2008; Bartholomew & Allison, 2006; Bartle & Rosen, 1994). Roberts et al. (2008) extended this concept to victim behavior related to dropping protection orders; their study found that victims were most likely to drop protection orders if a concrete behavioral change or promises occurred, suggesting that victims' emotional attachments to their perpetrator may motivate their decisions (Roberts et al., 2008). Our study found that the abusive interpersonal dynamic that existed before the arrest continued while perpetrators were in detention; perpetrators continued to use abusive strategies well-documented in the literature (e.g., minimization) (Allison et al., 2008; Dutton et al., 1999; Pence & Paymar, 1993) along with other sophisticated emotional manipulation (e.g., sympathy appeals) to erode victim's agency and achieve their goal of getting out of jail. Like the Roberts et al. (2008) study and prior studies focused on the connection between emotional/intimacy needs and abuse patterns (Allison et al., 2008), the victims and perpetrators in our study were motivated by emotional attachment to each other. Namely, the couples invoking images of life alone and bonding over love, memories and dreams in the face of severe, felony-level violence illustrate their basic emotional attachment to each other (Fig. 1, segment 3).

Our findings significantly advance scientific knowledge through identifying, in the context of ongoing interactions, specific strategies perpetrators used—sympathy appeals and minimization—to successfully persuade their victim and strategies the couple used to preserve their relationship. While others have noted the need to focus on both perpetrator abuse tactics and victim's corresponding emotions and behaviors (Smith et al., 1995, 1999), our study points specifically to the need for recantation frameworks that recognize both the abusive behavioral tactics used by perpetrators and two other critical relationship processes:

- 1) The needs and desires of the victim (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007) in maintaining the violent relationship, even though the relationship would possibly be deemed by others (e.g., friends,

family members, law enforcement) as "harmful" and "unhealthy." Recognition of the victim's needs and desires ensures the victim's agency is acknowledged in determining the outcome of these relationships;

- 2) The interplay of emotions between members of violent couples. The perpetrator's use of sympathy appeals through descriptions of his suffering from mental and physical problems, intolerable jail conditions, and impending life without the victim and their children were highly successful in manipulating the victim's emotional state—shifting her from a place of maintaining her agency in moving forward with prosecution to resuming caretaking of the perpetrator. The sympathy appeals used by perpetrators were typically accompanied by displays of their distressed emotional state (e.g., anxious and sad), which augmented the appeal's power over the victim's emotional state; upon hearing the perpetrator's distressed plea for help, the victim responded by helping to lessen his anxiety.

An expanded conceptualization of recantation would inform comprehensive training of judges, law enforcement personnel, victim advocates, and other clinically-oriented professionals (e.g., physicians, nurses, social workers) to recognize, beyond threats, the complex interpersonal processes—including sympathy appeals and minimization—that serve to keep violent relationships intact. Our proposed conceptualization is not at odds with the training that is currently done in some law enforcement and clinical settings, whereby service providers are instructed to put aside their own biases about what they believe the victim "should do" and instead focus on the victim's needs and desires. More specifically, our findings point to the importance of providing supportive assistance to victims (Dawson & Dinovitzer, 2001; Goodman et al., 1999), including having a trusted victim advocate or similar representative work with victims early on and throughout the criminal justice process to prevent and defend against the sophisticated techniques that perpetrators used in our study. Fig. 1 could be used to help victims identify, for example, their susceptibility to guilt responses to the perpetrator's sympathy appeals. Finally, our results suggest, in part, that recantation is a byproduct of the actions of sophisticated perpetrators; sometimes practitioners working with cases where a victim recants treat the case less seriously, when our results showing highly sophisticated manipulation strategies (e.g., sympathy appeals) suggest that practitioners should double their efforts to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

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