



## Desistance from intimate partner violence: A critical review



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### ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that a significant proportion of men who have been violent towards their partners desist from such violent behaviors; yet, research examining desistance from intimate partner violence (IPV) is limited. This omission is surprising given that an understanding of desistance processes is required to inform evidence-based IPV interventions. In this critical review of the empirical literature, eligible studies included 15 publications, identified through electronic databases and hand searches of bibliographies that directly investigated the cessation of physical violence against an intimate partner, by heterosexual men. No single theory was identified that explains desistance from IPV. However, empirical studies reveal that the severity and frequency of violence is associated with desistance, with those using moderate levels of violence being more likely to desist than those who engage in severe violence. Typology research suggests differences in individual characteristics (e.g., low psychopathology and impulsivity) can distinguish desisters from persisters. In addition, the nature of the dyad within which the violence occurs is also influential in desistance processes. It is concluded that much more research is needed to inform practice and in particular to examine the role of protective factors in mitigating risk and enabling individuals to desist from IPV.

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### 1. Introduction

Desistance is a term that refers to the cessation of offending that might follow intervention or happen spontaneously (Fagan, 1989). Theories outlining the facilitation of how behavior change can be facilitated underpin the philosophies of current evidence-based practices (EBP) in a variety of fields including medicine, psychiatry, psychology, social work, marriage, family therapy (Thyer, 2004), and criminology (Petrosini, Boruch, Soydan, Duggan, & Sanchez-Meca, 2001). There is undoubtedly an escalating call for evidence-based intervention within criminal justice (MacKenzie, 2000, 2005), and this holds true in relation to intimate partner violence (IPV; Corvo, Dutton, & Wan-Yi, 2008). However, current IPV rehabilitation models do not incorporate an understanding of desistance focusing instead on a feminist framework and a gendered analysis of power that challenges the patriarchal attitudes and beliefs of men who condone IPV (Bowen, 2011). It seems that such an omission is a fundamental error given the existing evidence that suggests that current program theories may be flawed (Bowen, Gilchrist, & Beech, 2005), as numerous studies, reviews and meta-analysis report little or no positive effect of IPV programs on violent behaviors (Dutton & Corvo, 2006). Controversy, therefore, remains about the efficacy of intervention programs (for a review see Witte, Lohr, Parker, & Hamberger, 2007). The aim of this review is to determine what is known about desistance from IPV and how such knowledge may contribute to facilitating behavior change

within tertiary interventions focusing on eliminating/reducing IPV behaviors.

Desistance is a difficult concept to define. No single definition currently dominates, whether in research that has examined general offending, violence, or IPV. Desistance is generally not regarded as the termination of, or point at which, criminal activity has ceased, but the causal process that culminates in and supports the termination of offending. It, therefore, needs to be considered as a dynamic, rather than static process that gradually unfolds over time (see Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001; Kazemian, 2007; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 2003). It is difficult to conceptualize desistance from IPV, as there is little agreement as to how long someone needs to have stopped using violence in a relationship for true desistance to be achieved. Shorter periods may only be indicative of offending free lulls as opposed to a genuine and permanent change in behavior. Across the literature, follow-up periods and methods of capturing data differ, for example, from 6 months no reported partner violence based on partner report (Scott & Wolfe, 2000); 1 year based on self-report (Johnson, 2003); 18 months based on self and partner reports (Gordis, Margolin, & Vickerman, 2005); 2 years based on self and partner reports (Quigley & Leonard, 1996); and 3 years based on partner and self reports (Woffordt, Mihalic, & Menard, 1994). Feld and Straus (1989) considered that if a husband assaults his wife and then does not do so again for a year, this is clinically meaningful and constitutes desistance, even if he then assaults her at some later time.

The concept of desistance has drawn more attention in the criminological literature and is starting to gain some press in the psychological

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literature. However, the focus has been mainly in relation to delinquent and antisocial behavior. Some research has examined desistance from violence and only a small amount of attention has been given to examining this process in relation to IPV, with no research available that has examined desistance from IPV over longer time periods or the lifespan. These shorter time frames may not identify factors that are related to the maintenance of, and a permanent change to, a non-violent identity and may be problematic if violence is cyclical, i.e., a recurring battering cycle where periods of loving and non-violent behavior is observed (Walker, 2009). Little is known about what constitutes a reasonable time lag to qualify as desistance, and shorter time-frames may be a cause for concern, as Dunford (1992) has provided evidence that violent recidivism of an intimate can occur 24 months after the reference event. Wofford et al. (1994) have suggested the term 'suspension' is more appropriate for data that do not cover the life span. This term is more indicative of the fact that the process involved is not static but dynamic; and until that end of life data are gathered retrospectively no guarantee can be made that this process/change of behavior is permanent. This factor, however, is not helpful from a research and development point of view as time constraints and practical considerations mean that end of life data collection is rarely achievable.

IPV includes physical violence (which varies from pushing, slapping, and hitting, for example) as well as psychological/emotional, financial, and sexual abuse/aggression; all of which have severe impact on the victim (Jordan, Campbell, & Follingstad, 2010). Desistance from IPV is defined by a cessation of these types of violence and results from changes in the use of aggression and violence over time. However, several longitudinal studies argue that typically aggression is stable over time (e.g., Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987; Haapasalo & Tremblay, 1994). The average correlation between early childhood aggression and later aggression is .63 (Olweus, 1979), which is as high as the stability of intelligence over time (Loeber & Hay, 1997). Early aggression has been found to be predictive of later violence, such as frequent fighting at 18, assault of partners, and convictions for violent offenses at 32 (Farrington, 1994). Studies have also demonstrated the persistence and stability of violence within relationships. For example, of 272 couples, 31% reported using violence pre-marriage, 27% at 18 months and 25% at 30 months, and probability analysis indicated that the likelihood of physical aggression continuing at 30 months (where violence had been reported 1 month prior to marriage and 18 months after marriage) was .59 (O'Leary et al., 1989). In another study, a higher persistence rate of 75% among aggressive men 1 to 2 years in to marriage was observed (Quigley & Leonard, 1996). In the US, from a nationally representative sample over 5 years, an IPV recurrence rate was found to be 37% for the White population, 52% for the Black, and 58% for the Hispanic (Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGrath, 2005), although prior to this, another national survey had reported a 33% rate of persistence, also over 5 years (Jasinski, 2001). Whilst these studies reveal many individuals persist with violence they also demonstrate that some individuals desist, which questions the stability of aggression over time. For example, Quigley and Leonard (1996) found 23.9% of their sample desisted from IPV over a three-year period. Research suggests, then, that both persistence and desistance are likely within any given sample.

Identifying the risk factors associated with IPV has been a key component of psychological research. It is typically acknowledged that IPV is a result of interplay between a range of risk factors and markers (Bowen, 2011). To understand this phenomenon and to incorporate the vast range of risk factors that have been identified, complex multivariate models are required, for example, the nested ecological theory (Dutton, 1985). This is an ecological framework that operates across four different analytical levels (i.e., from social-cultural variables to within individual characteristics). The broadest is the macrosystem that includes socio-cultural risk factors, such as gender role beliefs (Stith et al., 2000) and patriarchy (Archer, 2006).

The next is the exosystem, which links the family to broader culture and includes risk factors such as age (Pan & Neidig, 1994), socioeconomic resource, and education (Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998). The microsystem follows and this encapsulates risk factors for IPV that result due to the characteristics of individuals and families e.g., exposure to parental violence (Stith et al., 2000), attachment styles (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994) and previous violence (Weisz, Tolman, & Saunders, 2000). Finally is the ontogenetic level that includes risk factors found within an individual e.g., alcohol abuse/use (McMurrin & Gilchrist, 2008), pro-violence attitudes (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004), and borderline and antisocial personality disorders (Ross & Babcock, 2009). In the U.K., treatment underpinned by this model (e.g., The Integrated Domestic Abuse Project and Community Domestic Violence Programme), therefore, focuses on eliminating or managing these risk factors. Treatment targets include changing attitudes supporting IPV, reducing anger and managing depression.

While research has focused extensively on risk factors, little attention had been given to protective factors that if present could reduce the possibility of IPV. Protective factors are those influences that increase the likelihood of desistance. However, there is fundamental disagreement as to what constitutes a protective factor (Farrell & Flannery, 2006). Research generally tends to conceptualize risk and protective factors as opposite extremes that sit along a continuum and so in some studies protective factors are simply the opposite of risk factors (e.g., Wikström & Loeber, 2000). Such an approach rests on an arbitrary distinction, and while this type of conceptualization may explain group differences between those who are violent to their partners and those who are not, it is more difficult to see how based on this distinction protective factors play a role in the desistance process. Sameroff and Fiese (2000) argue that protective factors thus defined, should be known as 'promotive factors,' as they promote a positive outcome regardless of the presence of risk or not.

Desistance research is fairly new compared to research on onset and persistence, and although models have been developed to account for the cessation of offending, few have been empirically tested and several questions remain unanswered (Kazemian, 2007). Early explanatory models broadly fell in to three categories but these have been examined in relation to general offending (particularly delinquency). These groups are criminal propensity (i.e., internal and maturational factors), informal social control (social processes such as employment and marriage), and subjective change (the role of agency); however, it is now widely accepted that an integrated approach is likely to be a more realistic way to explain desistance (Healy, 2010). Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes, and Muir (2004) proposed an integrated framework that acknowledged the role of background factors, structure, and agency. Characteristics like age and propensity increase/decrease the likelihood of offending but an interaction of these characteristics with social contexts promote or hinder desistance. However, the final element in this integrated framework is agency and the conceptualization that individuals go through a process of choice that is socially situated and subjectively interpreted. Bottoms et al. concluded that focusing on any of these elements in isolation will only ever provide a partial understanding of the desistance process.

## 2. Review criteria for selection

Empirical studies written in English that have examined desistance from IPV were identified through electronic databases, including Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, MEDLINE and PsycINFO. Key words describing intimate partner violence and desistance were used to search titles, abstracts and within the texts of articles; these search terms included 'desistance', 'intimate partner violence', 'domestic violence' and 'cessation'. The time frame from 1980 to 2011 was selected. Additionally, hand searches of bibliographies were conducted to identify any other relevant articles missed in the

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