Informal Social Reactions to College Women’s Disclosure of Intimate Partner Violence: Associations With Psychological and Relational Variables

Katie M. Edwards,1 Christina M. Dardis,2 Kateryna M. Sylaska,1 and Christine A. Gidycz2

Abstract
This researchers assessed informal (e.g., friends, family) social reactions to college women’s (N = 139) disclosure of intimate partner violence (IPV) within their current romantic relationships and associated psychological (i.e., posttraumatic stress symptoms [PTSS] and global psychological distress symptoms) and relational (i.e., intentions to leave the abusive relationship) variables. Women completed confidential surveys, which assessed current partner abuse, psychological and relational variables, and three types of social reactions from informal supports to disclosure of IPV: positive (e.g., believing, validating the victim), negative (e.g., disbelieving, blaming the victim), and leaving (i.e., being told to end the relationship) reactions. At the bivariate level, negative social reactions to women’s disclosure were related to increases in global psychological distress, PTSS, and leaving intentions; positive social reactions to disclosure related only to increases in PTSS; and

1University of New Hampshire, Durham, USA
2Ohio University, Athens, USA

Corresponding Author:
Katie M. Edwards, Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire, 10 Library Way, Durham, NH 03824, USA.
Email: katie.edwards@unh.edu
being told to leave the relationship related to increases in PTSS and leaving intentions. In the regression analyses, after controlling for abuse severity, negative social reactions were significantly related to global psychological distress and PTSS, and being told to leave significantly related to leaving intentions and PTSS. Mechanisms for these relationships and implications are discussed.

**Keywords**

dating violence, intimate partner violence, social reactions, disclosure, social support, psychological distress

Intimate partner violence (IPV), in the form of physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse, occurs at alarmingly high rates in our society, especially among adolescents and young adults (Edwards, Desai, Gidycz, & VanWynsberghe, 2009; U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001), and is associated with a myriad of deleterious psychological consequences (for a review see Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Although a large body of research has focused on the psychological consequences of IPV, as well as women’s leaving processes in abusive relationships, less research has focused on the disclosure of IPV and social reactions to this disclosure. Furthermore, the extent to which social reactions to disclosure of IPV relate to psychological distress and leaving processes in abusive relationships are understudied. The purpose of the current study was to explore these gaps in the literature using a sample of college women currently in abusive relationships who disclosed experiences of IPV to informal supports (e.g., friends, family). Informal supports’ social reactions to IPV disclosures were chosen as the focus of this study given that informal supports are far more common recipients of college students’ IPV disclosure than formal supports (e.g., police, doctors), and research also documents that there are differences in informal and formal supports' social reactions to IPV disclosure (see Sylaska & Edwards, 2013, for a review).

Social reactions to disclosure are defined as the ways in which informal supports respond both verbally and nonverbally to victims’ disclosures and are generally divided into categories of positive (e.g., believing, validating the victims’ experiences) and negative (e.g., disbelieving, blaming the victim) reactions (see Ullman, 1999, 2010, for reviews), and have been studied predominantly among sexual assault victims, although more recently social reactions have been studied in conjunction with IPV disclosure. Social ecological theories have been used to explain how and why social reactions to
disclosure relate to both victims’ psychological adjustment (e.g., Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009; Ullman, 2010) and their leaving processes in abusive relationships (e.g., Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005; Sylaska & Edwards, 2013). Specifically, these theories assert that informal supports’ responses to victims’ disclosures are believed to impact the attributions and meaning victims ascribe to their experiences as well as victims’ coping behaviors, which subsequently affects victims’ psychosocial adjustment. More recently, some researchers (e.g., DePrince, Welton-Mitchell, & Srinivas, 2013; Sullivan, Schroeder, Dudley, & Dixon, 2010) have proposed that the relationships between victim distress and IPV social reactions may be bi-directional, such that IPV victims with high levels of maladaptive coping and psychological distress may elicit negative social reactions from disclosure recipients.

In support of these theoretical conceptualizations, research with IPV victims generally finds that psychological distress increases as negative social reactions increase and that positive social reactions are either unrelated or inversely related to psychological distress (DePrince et al., 2013; Flicker, Cerulli, Swogger, & Talbot, 2012; Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Levendosky et al., 2004; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Moe, 2007). Moreover, research with IPV victims has found that negative social reactions positively relate to victims’ reports of self-blame (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Moe, 2007), and Sullivan et al. (2010) found that victims’ coping strategies related to social reactions (i.e., social support coping predicted positive social reactions to IPV disclosure, whereas avoidance coping predicted negative social reactions to IPV disclosure).

In addition to more general positive and negative social reactions, specific to the IPV literature is the social reaction of being told to leave the abuser, which preliminary research documents is a common social reaction to young women’s disclosure of IPV (Edwards, Dardis, & Gidycz, 2012; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Trotter & Allen, 2009), with rates as high as 71.9% in a sample of women obtaining legal action for IPV (Kocot & Goodman, 2003). Interestingly, research suggests that being told to leave is interpreted by some victims to be a positive and helpful and others as negative and unhelpful, the latter of which may be among women who indeed do not want to terminate their abusive relationships (Edwards et al., 2012; Trotter & Allen, 2009). Moreover, Flicker et al. (2012) found that being told to leave an abusive relationship by a confidant was unrelated to depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, whereas Kocot and Goodman (2003) found that being told to leave an abusive partner was positively related to depression and PTSD symptoms. Clearly, the relationships between IPV disclosure, social reactions in which the victim is told to leave, and recovery and mental...
health processes are complex, which underscores the need for further research on how being told to leave the abuser relates to women’s psychological well-being.

In addition to their associations with psychological distress, social reactions to disclosure of IPV are hypothesized to impact women’s leaving processes in abusive relationships (Liang et al., 2005), such that social support leads to increases in an IPV victim’s self-esteem and mastery, which could lead to the victim terminating the abusive relationship (Nurius, Furrey, & Berliner, 1992). In support of this assertion, a qualitative study conducted by Fanslow and Robinson (2010) found that women from the general community with histories of IPV reported that positive social reactions helped women terminate abusive relationships, whereas nonsupportive individuals hindered women’s ability to terminate abusive relationships. Edwards et al., (2012) found that, among a sample of college women in abusive relationships, women who disclosed abuse to others were more likely than nondisclosers to be thinking about ending the relationship. However, Edwards et al. (2012) did not explore specific social reactions in relation to leaving intentions, and no other studies have explored the relationship between positive and negative social reactions to IPV disclosure and the leaving process.

There is no published study to date with college women that has assessed how informal support providers’ reactions to disclosure of IPV relate to psychological distress and intentions to end one’s abusive relationship. Most research to date has drawn upon middle- and older-age samples of women seeking formal help from shelters, medical centers, and police, which may not be generalizable to younger samples of women seeking informal help (see Sylaska & Edwards, 2013, for a discussion). Moreover, most research studies on IPV disclosure to date included either women who have already terminated the abusive relationship or mixed samples (i.e., women currently or formerly in abusive relationships), which do not allow for an understanding of how social reactions relate to intentions to end an abusive relationship. This is important given that approximately 75% of college women tell someone about the abuse they are experiencing while still in the relationship (Edwards et al., 2012).

To build on these identified gaps in the literature, the researchers utilized a sample of college women currently in abusive relationships who disclosed the abuse to an informal support (e.g., friends, family). The specific aims of the study were to (a) assess the bivariate relationships among informal support providers’ social reactions to disclosure (i.e., positive, negative, and leaving reactions) and psychological distress (i.e., global psychological distress and posttraumatic stress symptoms [PTSS]), and leaving intentions in the victims and (b) to determine which informal support providers’ social
reactions were the most robust correlates of psychological distress and leaving intentions among victims, while controlling for abuse frequency/severity. We hypothesized that higher levels of informal support providers’ negative social reactions would be associated with higher levels of global psychological distress and PTSS, whereas informal support providers’ positive social reactions would be negatively (or nonsignificantly) associated with global psychological distress and PTSS. Given the conflicting relationships in the literature regarding leaving reactions and psychological distress and the dearth of literature on how social reactions relate to intentions to end the relationship, we ventured no directional a priori hypotheses for these relationships.

Method

Participants

Participants were 139 college women currently in heterosexual relationships characterized by IPV that had been disclosed to an informal support; these women were selected from a screening sample of 1,028 women. The sample was largely young (M = 18.83 years old; SD = 1.11, range = 18-24), and consistent with the demographics of the university, 90.6% of the participants self-identified as Caucasian, 4.3% as African American, 2.2% as Asian American, 1.4% as Latino/Hispanic, and 1.4% as multiracial or other. Approximately, 28.8% reported annual family incomes that were $50,000 or less; 41.7% reported their annual family incomes were between $50,000 to $100,000; and 29.5% reported their annual family incomes were above $100,000. The length women reported being in a relationship with their current partner ranged from less than 1 month to 5 years (M = 16.86 months, SD = 14.00).

Measures

Current partner abuse. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) was used to identify women currently in relationships where they had experienced physical (12 items; e.g., “pushed or shoved me”), sexual (7 items; e.g., “made me have sex without a condom”), and/or psychological (4 items; e.g., “called me fat or ugly”) IPV victimization by their current partner. Only the severe psychological abuse items of the CTS2, as identified by Straus et al. (1996), were used given criticisms that the moderate psychological abuse items (e.g., “yelled at me”) may reflect normative arguing rather than psychological abuse (Edwards
et al., 2009). In addition, given that the CTS2 does not include items to assess harassment or controlling behaviors, the Harassment subscale (4 items; e.g., “My partner harassed me over the telephone”) and selected items from the Emotional Abuse subscale (e.g., 5 items; “My partner tried to convince my friends, family, or children that I was crazy”) from the Composite Abuse Scale (CAS; Hegarty, Sheehan, & Schonfeld, 1999) were used to create a more inclusive measurement of IPV. Response options on the CTS2 range from 0 (never) to 6 (more than 20 times), and the scale anchors of the CAS were modified to be congruent with the scale anchors of the CTS2. Women who endorsed any items on the CTS2 or CAS subscales discussed above were considered to be in an abusive relationship. Both the CTS2 and the CAS possess good psychometric properties (Hegarty, 2005; Hegarty et al., 1999; Straus et al., 1996). Items were summed across all subscales to produce a composite measure of abuse frequency/severity, which served as a control variable in the multivariate regression analyses.

**Disclosure of IPV.** Following the completion of the CTS2 and CAS, women were asked to review their responses to these measures and indicate the most severe/upsetting incident of IPV victimization with their current partners, similar to previous research on social reactions to sexual assault disclosure (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Ullman, 1996; Ullman, Townsend, Filipas, & Starzynski, 2007). Women were then asked if they disclosed this IPV incident and if so, whom they told. Only women who disclosed IPV to informal supports were included in the current article.

**Social reactions to disclosure.** There is no existing measure used systematically to assess social reactions to disclosure of IPV. Thus, we used the 48-item Social Reactions Questionnaire (SRQ; Ullman, 2000), which was originally designed to measure social reactions to disclosure of sexual assault. Consistent with Sullivan et al.’s (2010) adaptation of the SRQ to study social reactions to IPV disclosure among women, we modified items when necessary to reflect social reactions to disclosure of partner abuse (e.g., “wanted to seek revenge on the perpetrator” was reworded to “wanted to seek revenge on your partner”). In addition, we included 11 of the 12 items created by Mitchell and Hodson (1983) to assess social reactions to disclosure of IPV in their sample of battered women; in our study, one item was excluded because it was identical to one of Ullman’s (2000) SRQ items (i.e., “encouraged you to seek counseling”). Finally, a single item (“encouraged you to leave your partner”) was added by the researchers given that the literature suggests that being told to leave their partner/relationship is a common response experienced by IPV disclosers (Edwards et al., 2012; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993),
and research has not yet explored how this social reaction relates to psychological and relational variables among college women. For all items, participants were instructed to answer with regard to the frequency they received each of the specific social reactions (ranging from “never” [0] to “always” [4]) from informal supports following the most upsetting/severe incident of partner abuse they disclosed.

A principal components exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using an orthogonal rotation (varimax) of the 59 social reaction items was conducted specific to this sample. From analysis of eigenvalues and the scree plot, two primary components emerged explaining a substantial portion of the variance (42%) in social reactions items. The two factors represent positive (8 items, e.g., “told you it was not your fault,” “provided information and discussed options”) and negative (12 items, e.g., “told you that you were to blame or shameful because of this experience” “was so upset that he/she needed reassurance from you”) social reactions, and are similar to the EFA results with the SRQ obtained in Sullivan et al.’s (2010) study of social reactions to IPV disclosure. Thirty-one items were excluded because they did not have a factor loading greater than or equal to .55 or had a cross-loading greater than .30; items were also excluded if the average inter-item correlation on the other items loading on the factor was greater than .50 (Clark & Watson, 1995). Subscales were created by calculating a mean score for each factor. Internal consistencies (Cronbach’s α) for the positive social reactions subscale was .85, and .86 for the negative social reactions subscale. We did not include the researcher-created “leave” item (i.e., “encouraged you to leave your partner”) in the principal components analysis described above given that we were interested in this as a distinct social reactions variable to examine in relation to psychological and relational variables. Thus, there were three social reaction variables used in the current analyses: positive social reactions, negative social reactions, and leaving social reactions. Additional support for the positive, negative, and leaving social reactions subscales comes from qualitative research with victims of IPV supporting these distinctions (see Sylaska & Edwards, 2013, for a review) as well as interviews with female sexual assault survivors (Ullman, 2000).

PTSS. The Impact of Events Scale–Revised (IES-R; Weiss & Marmar, 1997) was used to assess PTSS associated with what participant’s identified as the most severe/upsetting incident of IPV. The IES-R includes three subscales: Intrusion (e.g., “Other things kept making me think about it”), Avoidance (“I tried not to think about it”), and Hyperarousal (“I was jumpy and easily startled”) that are consistent with the diagnostic criteria of PTSD. For each of the 22 items, participants rate how often they have experienced each symptom in
the previous 7 days on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). A composite score was calculated by summing across all 22 items, with higher scores indicative of greater PTSS. The IES-R has good reliability and validity (Briere, 1997; Sundin & Horowitz, 2002; Weiss & Marmar, 1997). The internal consistency (Cronbach’s α) in the current study was .96.

**Global psychological distress.** Current level of global psychological distress was assessed using the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis, 1993), an abbreviated version of the Symptom Checklist–90 (Derogatis, 1977). The BSI assesses psychological symptoms across multiple domains, including Anxiety (e.g., “feeling fearful”), Depression (e.g., “feeling blue”), Somatization (e.g., “faintness or dizziness”), Obsession-Compulsion (e.g., “difficulty making decisions”), Hostility (e.g., “feeling easily annoyed or irritated”), Interpersonal Sensitivity (e.g., “feeling inferior to others”), Phobic Anxiety (e.g., “feeling afraid in open spaces”), Paranoid Ideation (e.g., “feeling that most people can’t be trusted”), and Psychoticism (e.g., “the idea that someone else can control your thoughts”). For each of the 53 items, participants rate how often they have experienced each symptom in the previous 7 days on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). The nine symptom domains are summed to create an overall measure of global psychological distress. The BSI possesses strong psychometric properties (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983), and the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the current sample was .96.

**Leaving intentions.** Intentions to leave one’s current partner were assessed by three questions (i.e., “I intend to leave my partner,” “I will try to leave my partner,” “I plan to leave my partner”) created for the current study based on Ajzen’s (1991) recommendations for measuring behavioral intent and previous research regarding leaving an abusive relationship conducted by Byrne and Arias (2004). Response options for the three items were on a 7-point scale and ranged from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). Internal consistency for the items was good (Cronbach α coefficient = .97).

**Procedures**

These data come from a larger, longitudinal study assessing women’s stay/leave decisions in abusive dating relationships (Edwards, Murphy, & Gidycz, 2014). Participants were recruited through introductory psychology courses at a medium-size, Midwestern, public university and received course credit for their participation. To participate in the study, women were required to be
Edwards et al.

at least 18 years of age and currently in a dating relationship. Given the small number of women reporting a current same-sex relationship, only women in heterosexual relationships (e.g., female-identified participant reported being in a relationship with a male-identified individual) were included in the analyses. The description of the study provided to potential participants was “An Examination of Dating Relationships.” The group-testing sessions began with informed consent, followed by survey completion and debriefing. All research was conducted in compliance with the university’s Institutional Review Board.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Means and standard deviations for continuous variables of interest are displayed in Table 1. Although a number of variables were nonnormally distributed, data transformations did not notably improve the distributions. Moreover, we conducted the inferential analyses with both transformed and untransformed variables, and given that the pattern of results were identical, we present the results with the untransformed data herein.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total abuse</td>
<td>12.24</td>
<td>17.31</td>
<td>1.00-101.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive social reactions</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0-3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative social reactions</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0-2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling victim to leave</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0-4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological distress</td>
<td>47.20</td>
<td>32.36</td>
<td>3.00-155.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSS symptoms</td>
<td>13.17</td>
<td>16.78</td>
<td>0-72.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving intentions</td>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>3.00-21.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. PTSS = posttraumatic stress symptoms. Alphabetical superscripts denote scale anchors: 

a0 (never) to 4 (always).

b0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely).

c1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely).
Results (displayed in Table 2) showed that negative social reactions to women’s disclosure related to increases in global psychological distress, PTSS, and leaving intentions; positive social reactions to disclosure related only to increases in PTSS; and being told to leave the relationship related to increases in PTSS and leaving intentions. Moreover, positive social reactions were significantly positively related to both negative social reactions and being told to leave the relationship; and negative social reactions were related positively to being told to leave the relationship.

Multivariate analyses. Next, three hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted (Table 3). The criterion variables for each of the different regression analyses were global psychological distress, PTSS, and leaving intentions. For each regression, the frequency/severity of IPV in one’s current relationship was entered in the first block to control for the effects of IPV on psychological and relational variables. In the second block, positive social reactions, negative social reactions, and being told to leave were entered into the regression.

The first block of the regression analysis for global psychological distress was nonsignificant, $F(1, 136) = 2.25, p > .05$. However, the second block was significant, $F(4, 133) = 3.92, p = .005$, and accounted for 10.5% of the variance in global psychological distress. In the presence of other predictors, negative social reactions demonstrated a significant and positive association with global psychological distress ($\beta = .29, p = .003, r^2 = .063$).
In the regression analysis for PTSS, the first block was significant, $F(1, 137) = 9.80, p = .002$, accounting for 6.7% of the variance in PTSS scores. IPV frequency/severity was associated with PTSS. The second block was significant, $F(4, 134) = 12.45, p < .001$, and accounted for a total of 27.1% of the variance in PTSS. In the presence of other predictors, IPV frequency/severity ($\beta = .19, p = .011, r^2 = .036$), negative social reactions ($\beta = .28, p = .001, r^2 = .059$), and telling the victim to leave ($\beta = .44, p < .001, r^2 = .120$) demonstrated significant and positive associations with PTSS.

In the regression analysis for intentions to leave one’s partner, the first block of the regression was significant, $F(1, 137) = 14.61, p < .001$, and explained 9.6% of the variance. IPV frequency/severity was significantly associated with increased intentions of ending one’s relationship. The second block of the regression was also significant, $F(4, 134) = 11.70, p < .001$, and accounted for a total of 25.9% of the variance in intentions to leave one’s partner. In the presence of other predictors, IPV frequency/severity ($\beta = .25, p = .001, r^2 = .062$) and telling the victim to leave her partner emerged as significant correlates of women’s reports of their actual intentions to leave their partners ($\beta = .44, p < .001, r^2 = .120$).

**Discussion**

The current study sought to understand better how social reactions to disclosure of IPV relate to psychological distress and leaving intentions among college women currently in abusive relationships. At the bivariate level, as
hypothesized, negative social reactions were related to increases in psychological distress, and positive social reactions were unrelated to psychological distress (with the exception of a weak, albeit significant relationship with PTSS), which is consistent with previous research in the IPV literature with samples of help-seeking women (e.g., Flicker et al., 2012; Goodkind et al., 2003). Extending this research were the bivariate findings that women who reported higher levels of negative social reactions were more likely to report intentions to end their abusive relationships. Moreover, being told to leave the relationship was unrelated to global psychological distress and positively related to PTSS and leaving intentions. In the regression analyses, however, positive social reactions were unrelated to psychological and relational variables; negative social reactions were related to global psychological distress and PTSS, and being told to leave the relationship was significantly related to leaving intentions and PTSS.

One reason that negative social reactions may be the most salient correlate of PTSS and global psychological distress is that such negative reactions could impact how victims think about and make sense of the IPV experience(s) (e.g., increases in self-blame), which could lead to an exacerbation of psychological symptoms. It is also possible that women with higher levels of PTSS and global psychological distress may have elicited more negative social reactions. However, due to the cross-sectional nature of the current study, it is impossible to disentangle the temporal sequence of negative social reactions and PTSS and global distress.

However, recent longitudinal research predicting social reactions from PTSD over a 12-month interim indicated that PTSD at baseline was a significant predictor of negative social reactions received over the following year (DePrince et al., 2013). DePrince and colleauges (2013) hypothesized that recipients of disclosure from IPV victims with high levels of arousal and avoidance symptoms may respond negatively to IPV disclosures as a method to cope with their own negative affect as a mechanism to avoid secondary traumatization. This relationship may be even more pronounced for recipients of disclosure from IPV victims who engage in avoidant coping strategies, which is consistent with previous IPV disclosure work with women (Sullivan et al., 2010).

In our study, positive social reactions were unrelated to global psychological distress and PTSS in most bivariate and all regression analyses, and this finding is consistent with previous research that this social reaction has little effect on women’s adjustment (e.g., Flicker et al., 2012; Goodkind et al., 2003). It could be that women who disclose experiences of IPV do so because they expect positive or helpful reactions. Because these positive reactions are expected, they thus could have little impact on recovery, whereas women
who disclose experiences of IPV are likely not doing so in anticipation of negative or unhelpful social reactions, which could thus lead to detrimental impacts than positive social reactions. Moreover, Sullivan et al. (2010) found that women receiving more positive social reactions engaged in more social support coping. Thus it could be that women who have lower levels of distress are engaging in more social support coping, which in turn could relate to positive social reactions. Again, however, given the cross-sectional nature and the preclusion of a measure of coping in our study, we do not know the extent to which the victim’s distress at the time of disclosure (as opposed to more generalized levels of distress) as well as a victim’s coping strategies influenced the social reactions of the recipients of the disclosure.

In addition to examining positive and negative social reactions, the current researchers also examined the social reaction of being told to end the abusive relationship. Similar to positive social reactions, being told to leave was unrelated to global psychological distress. It is possible that global psychological distress (which encompasses a range of anxiety, mood, somatoform, psychotic, and maladaptive personality symptoms) is too broad of a psychological construct to be impacted by a social reaction as specific as being told to leave one’s relationship. On the contrary, negative social reactions, which were positively related to global psychological distress, encompass a range of social reactions that, although specific to the IPV disclosure, could also be indicative of generally unsupportive and critical relationships that we might expect to have a larger impact on global psychological distress (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012).

Although being told to leave one’s abusive relationship was unrelated to global psychological distress, this social reaction was positively related to PTSS in bivariate and regression analyses. Given that PTSS in the current study was assessed in direct relation to the IPV experience, it is likely that informal supports that are exposed to victims’ high level of distress directly related to the IPV would be more likely to encourage them to terminate the relationship.

Findings also showed that being told to end the relationship by an informal support predicted women’s actual intentions to leave their abusive partners. It is possible that women in an abusive relationship may have not thought about leaving until an informal support suggested they leave following disclosure. However, given that disclosure is often conceptualized as part of the leaving process (e.g., Liang et al., 2005), it seems more likely that as women begin to recognize the problems with their relationships, they seek help, and their informal supports who are aware of both the abuse and their ambivalence about the relationship may be more likely to respond with encouragement to leave. It is important to keep in mind that at the bivariate level,
abuse frequency and PTSS were positively related to women’s actual leaving intentions, suggesting that women in more abusive relationships and women experiencing more IPV-related PTSS symptoms reported greater intentions to end their relationships. Along these lines, it is possible that for women experiencing more severe abuse and associated distress, the recipients of their disclosures would be more likely to tell them to end the relationship than women experiencing less severe abuse and associated distress, which in turn may increase women’s intentions to actually terminate their abusive relationships.

As demonstrated in this study, there are complex relationships among IPV disclosure, psychological variables, and intentions to end an abusive relationship. Moreover, previous research has found mixed results regarding the associations between being told to leave a relationship and psychological outcomes (Flicker et al., 2012; Kocot & Goodman, 2003). Along these lines, there is no clear consensus in the literature regarding the extent to which being told to leave is helpful/positive or unhelpful/negative to women who disclose IPV experiences, but it likely depends to some extent on women’s general readiness to end an abusive relationship. Most women in this study reported generally low levels of readiness to leave, as demonstrated by their general disagreement with items assessing actual intentions to end one’s relationship. Thus it is likely that for women who are thinking or planning to leave, being encouraged to leave during an act of disclosure would be considered helpful/positive, whereas for women who are not thinking about leaving, this type of social reaction could be considered unhelpful/negative. This is consistent with qualitative research indicating that, among individuals who desired to leave their partners, being told to leave was seen as helpful advice, whereas among individuals who did not desire to leave, being told to leave was seen as unhelpful advice (Edwards et al., 2012).

Despite the information obtained from the current study, there are several limitations that should be mentioned. First, the sample was demographically homogeneous and the sample size was relatively small, which impacts the generalizability of the findings. Some of the nonsignificant findings could also be due to a lack of power to detect significant effects. Thus, future research could benefit from larger samples and the inclusion of more diverse college students as well as young adults who are not in college. Along these lines, research examining IPV disclosure processes among sexual-minority individuals are especially needed (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014).

Second, the current study utilized a cross-sectional design, precluding temporal connections among variables (e.g., whether negative social reactions lead to greater PTSS, or greater PTSS leads to negative social reactions, or both). It is possible that women who had higher levels of psychological
distress may have perceived reactions as being more negative than someone with less distress may have perceived that same reaction. Our understanding of these complex processes would be greatly enhanced through the utilization of prospective and longitudinal methodologies.

Third, although the CTS2 is the most commonly used measure of IPV, it does not provide data on the motives, contexts, or outcomes associated with IPV, which may in fact impact social reactions to IPV disclosures (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013). In addition, we asked participants to respond to the social reactions questions with regard to the most severe/upsetting incident of abuse. While this is consistent with prior studies assessing social reactions (e.g., Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Ullman, 1996; Ullman et al., 2007), it is possible that women disclosed other less severe or less upsetting incidents of abuse and received different social reactions which also impact their psychological well-being and intentions to leave their abusive partner.

Fourth, we did not assess specific contextual or relational factors of the disclosure, which may impact social reactions received, as well as how victims’ own readiness to leave may interact with perceptions of social reactions. Thus, it will be important for future research to examine the context of when a victim is told to leave, including her own readiness for change, from whom she is receiving the advice (e.g., type and quality of the relationship), the context in which the advice is given (i.e., solicited or unsolicited), the way in which the advice is presented (e.g., as a suggestion, accompanied by pressure to act in a certain way), and the impact that being told to leave has on psychosocial recovery and leaving processes (see Sylaska & Edwards, 2013, for a more detailed discussion). In a similar vein, recovery, disclosure, and leaving processes associated with IPV experiences have historically been studied in isolation from one another, despite evidence, including results from the current study, that these processes are interconnected. Future research would benefit from theoretical and empirical scholarship that attempts to highlight similar and differentiating factors associated with these processes.

Fifth, previous research suggests that coping strategies are related to IPV survivors’ psychosocial recovery (e.g., problem-focused coping, Clements & Sawhney, 2000; social support, Kocot & Goodman, 2003), leaving processes in relationships characterized by IPV (Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom, 2006), and social reactions to IPV disclosure (Kocot & Goodman, 2003; Sullivan et al., 2010). The fact that we did not include a measure of coping in our study is a limitation, and future research would benefit from the inclusion of coping measures to create more nuanced models of these interconnected variables.

Sixth, we acknowledge that IPV and social reactions to IPV are not the only factors that impact women’s readiness to terminate dating relationships (see Rhatigan et al., 2006, for a review). Future research would benefit from
including variables in addition to social reactions to IPV in understanding the multitude of factors facilitating or hindering women’s termination of abusive relationships.

Seventh, our measurement of social reactions to IPV disclosure was based largely on a measure developed to assess social reactions to sexual assault, which has been previously used to examine IPV disclosure by other researchers (e.g., DePrince et al., 2013; Sullivan et al., 2010). Although there is overlap in social reactions to both IPV and sexual assault (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013; Ullman, 2010), there may also be important differences such as admonitions to leave the relationship (i.e., sexual assault victims may not be in a relationship with the perpetrator), or perceived seriousness of the abuse (e.g., physical abuse is perceived as more serious than sexual abuse; Edwards, Dardis, Kelly, & Gidycz, 2014). Thus, future work needs to be done to measure comprehensively and inclusively social reactions to IPV disclosure through continued measure development and refinement, including expanding upon current social reactions measures to examine global social reactions (i.e., did the victim receive predominantly positive or predominantly negative social reactions across supporters) and other reactions that might be more relevant to situations of partner violence that are not assessed by Ullman’s (2000) measure (e.g., engagement with the perpetrator, expectations for future behavior). Along these lines, we only had one question to assess the social reaction of being told to leave. Future research could benefit from further development of a measure of this specific type of social reaction, especially in light that it is a common reaction (Edwards et al., 2012; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Trotter & Allen, 2009) and presumably could be said and received in different ways (e.g., “you better leave him” [threatening] or “what would be some of the benefits to leaving him?” [encouraging introspection]).

Although continued research is needed to explore more specifically the role of social reactions to disclosure on victims’ psychological well-being and intentions to leave an abusive relationship, the current study provides some implications for education and programming efforts on college campuses. First, findings from the current study suggest that, due to the relationship between leaving reactions and leaving intentions, opening discourse about the possibility of leaving abusive relationships may positively impact abused women’s readiness and ability to break free from the abuse. Furthermore, although positive social reactions have not been related to enhanced psychological functioning, negative social reactions have consistently been related to poorer psychological functioning among victims of interpersonal violence (including IPV and sexual assault). Thus, education must continue to decrease victim avoidance and lack of support, by informing confidants that they need not feel immobilized by the victim’s distress, as they are not being called upon
to solve the situation, but simply to listen and provide support. Although some IPV programming includes modules on how to help a friend, the extent to which this information actually impacts social reactions to IPV disclosure is unknown (see Sylaska & Edwards, 2013, for a discussion). As our knowledge about the relationships among social reactions to disclosure, victims’ psychological well-being, and leaving processes continues to increase, this will aid in our ability to tailor programming and advocacy efforts to best promote IPV victims’ psychosocial recovery.

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**References**


**Author Biographies**

**Katie M. Edwards**, PhD, is an assistant professor of psychology and women’s studies at the University of New Hampshire, Durham. Specific research interests include predictors and correlates of intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization and perpetration, leaving processes in relationships characterized by IPV, disclosure of IPV experiences and social reactions to these disclosures, and ethics of IPV research. She is committed to using research to inform policy and practice that promotes social and community change.

**Christina M. Dardis**, MS, is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Psychology at Ohio University. Specific research interests include sexual assault (SA) acknowledgment and disclosure of SA and IPV experiences and social reactions to these disclosures, stalking and the use of technology to perpetrate IPV, and predictors and correlates of IPV victimization and perpetration.

**Kateryna M. Sylaska**, MA, is a graduate student in social psychology at the University of New Hampshire. Her primary research interests include informal social supports’ responses to intimate partner violence, factors associated with disclosure of partner violence for individuals in same-sex relationships, and the intersection of norms regarding gender and sexuality in the perception of and responses to partner violence.

**Christine A. Gidycz**, PhD is a Professor of Psychology and Director of Clinical Training at Ohio University. Research interests include the evaluation of sexual assault prevention and risk reduction programs, and correlates, predictors and consequences of various forms of violence. Her work has been funded through the Centers for Disease Control and the Ohio Department of Health. She has served on various state and national panels that address violence-related issues.