Disclosure of Intimate Partner Violence to Informal Social Support Network Members: A Review of the Literature

Kateryna M. Sylaska and Katie M. Edwards

Abstract
This article presents a review of the published literature to date on rates, experiences, and correlates of victims’ disclosure of or help seeking for intimate partner violence to informal social support network members (e.g., friends, family, classmates, and coworkers). Research indicates that the majority of individuals disclose to at least one informal support and that victims’ disclosure is associated with a number of demographic (e.g., victims’ sex, age, race), intrapersonal (e.g., victims’ feelings of shame/embarrassment, perception of control over abuse), and situational (e.g., violence frequency and severity, if abuse is witnessed) factors. Following disclosure, victims experience a wide range of positive (e.g., believing the victim’s reports, validating the victim’s experiences) and negative (e.g., disbelieving, blaming the victim) social reactions, with positive reactions rated as the most common and most helpful forms of support by victims. Finally, a review of psychological correlates associated with reactions to disclosure indicates that positive social reactions are associated with more psychological health benefits and fewer negative health symptoms, whereas negative social reactions were associated with increased negative psychological health symptoms. Future research methodologies and implications for violence prevention, intervention, and policy are discussed.

Keywords
disclosure, help seeking, informal support, social support, partner violence

Key Points of the Research Review
- The majority of victims of IPV disclose to at least one informal support (e.g., friend, family member, classmate, coworker, and neighbor).
- Victims who are female, White, younger, of higher SES, attach anger/jealousy motives to the violence, feel less shame or fear regarding the violence, experience psychological or stalking-related IPV, experience greater severity and frequency of IPV, or have someone witness the violence are more likely to disclose.
- Friends and female family members are the most utilized informal support and generally considered the most helpful/supportive.
- Victims report that the most helpful reaction following disclosure is emotional support; the least helpful reactions are expressing disbelief and blaming the victim.
- Informal supports’ reactions to disclosure vary both within each supporter and across the victim’s support network.
- Disclosure (and social support received following disclosure) is associated with victims’ better mental health.

Intimate partner violence (IPV), often classified by type—physical violence (i.e., the threat or the use of force on one’s partner to cause harm or death), sexual violence (i.e., the threat of or the use of force to engage a partner in sexual activity without consent, attempted or completed sexual act without consent, or abusive sexual contact), and psychological violence (i.e., using threats, actions, or coercive tactics which cause trauma or emotional harm to a partner; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002)—is a serious problem for individuals across the life span. Prevalence rates of physical IPV range from 12% to 60% (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; Miller, 2011; Perry & Fomuth, 2005; Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000), 5%–17% for sexual IPV (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011; Tjaden & Theonnes, 2000), and 29%–75% for psychological IPV (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011; Halpern et al., 2001; Straus & Sweet, 1992). Further, research has documented consistently the devastating psychological, physical, interpersonal, and occupational effects IPV has on the victim, his or her friends and family, and the society in general.

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or more of the IPV victims disclose their experiences of abuse to informal supports, while 40%–84% of the IPV victims disclose their experiences of abuse to formal supports (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Coker et al., 2002; Dunham & Senn, 2000; Edwards, Dardis, & Gidycz, 2012; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Levendosky et al., 2004; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000). Additionally, although literature has documented the link between the general atmosphere of social support in a victim’s environment for buffering some of the negative effects of IPV, an additional area of inquiry has concerned the specific effect of social support and reactions provided to a victim following the disclosure of IPV. An integrated understanding of the experiences and the consequences of IPV disclosure could have important implications for informing intervention and educational systems in reducing the negative effects of IPV.

The current review examines the rates and forms of IPV disclosure, factors associated with the victims’ disclosure, the characteristics and process of disclosure, social reactions associated with disclosure, and the psychological correlates of disclosure. For the purposes of this review, a victim’s disclosure involves any conversation, where the victim provides information regarding the abuse occurring in the relationship to another individual. Although the literature employs various terms to describe the recipients of victims’ disclosure (e.g., helper, informal sources, and social supporter), the current review will use the term “informal supports” when referring to these individuals.

Method

For the current review, we identified any and all published articles pertaining to disclosure or help-seeking behavior by IPV victims to informal supports (e.g., family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors) through a comprehensive search of relevant social science databases. Articles were included if analyses included results reflecting only informal forms of support or provided separate analyses for informal disclosure (i.e., articles combining analyses of formal and informal help-seeking findings were excluded). Articles that discussed general informal social support (having persons in one’s life that one feels comfortable talking to, spending time with, etc.) were not included; only articles that discussed informal social support following disclosure or articles directly related to the victims’ IPV experiences were utilized for the current review. Articles that included forms of violence other than IPV (e.g., sexual assault or another violent crime perpetrated by someone other than a romantic partner) were included only if analyses for IPV-specific disclosure were presented separately. Finally, articles were included regardless of the participants’ gender, age, race, or sexual orientation of the victim/discloser. From the literature search, we identified 41 articles published between 1983 and 2012 (see Table 1 for a list of all studies, sample characteristics, and key findings).

Although a similar review of disclosure to formal sources (e.g., counselors, law enforcement officers, legal representatives, medical care providers) would be beneficial to our understanding of IPV outcomes, it is outside the domain of the current review given that formal disclosure is qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from informal disclosure. For example, although 75% or more of the IPV victims disclose their experiences of abuse to an informal support (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Coker et al., 2002; Dunham & Senn, 2000; Edwards, Dardis, & Gidycz, 2012; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Levendosky et al., 2004; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000), 40%–84% of the IPV victims disclose their experiences of abuse to formal supports (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). Furthermore, of those who disclose IPV, 58% disclose exclusively to informal supports, whereas only 6% disclose exclusively to formal supports (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). Moreover, research has documented that there are different psychosocial symptoms (e.g., better mental health was associated with informal support but had no relationship with formal support) and motivations to disclose (e.g., injury is associated with increased disclosure to formal supports but not informal supports; Belknap, Melton, Denny, Fleury-Steiner, & Sullivan, 2009; Leone, Johnson, & Cohan, 2007; Moe, 2007) associated with formal and informal disclosure of IPV.

Theoretical Frameworks of IPV Disclosure

Prior to a discussion of correlates and outcomes associated with disclosure to informal supports, a brief review of theories applied to general disclosure of IPV (to formal and informal supports) is beneficial. Although much of the published literature on disclosure of IPV has been atheoretical, some studies have included guiding theoretical frameworks predicated in social psychological theories. Based on similarities among these frameworks, three overarching groups of theories emerged from the literature review, an ecological model or the symbolic interactionist role theory (i.e., an incorporation of the role of individual, relational, and environmental factors in a complex exchange influencing disclosure; Alaggia, Regehr, & Jenney, 2012; Mead, 1934; see also Bosch & Bergen 2006), feminist-inspired theories or survivor theory (i.e., in contrast to learned helplessness theory, victims actively engage in help-seeking efforts, and the gendered context of disclosure is considered; Gandolf & Fisher, 1988), and process models or the transtheoretical model of change (i.e., victims seek to reduce violence or end a relationship through behavior, such as help seeking and disclosure, as awareness of violence increases; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984).

Even within these three overarching frameworks, there is considerable overlap. For example, both the ecological/symbolic interactionist and feminist/survivor theoretical frameworks examine the roles of different levels of internal (e.g., individual factors, gender) and external (e.g., environmental, sociopolitical) factors related to the disclosure process; both the feminist/survivor and process/transtheoretical frameworks focus on victims as survivors or active agents within the disclosure and help-seeking efforts; and both the ecological/symbolic interactionist and process/transtheoretical frameworks credit the complexity of disclosure for victims (i.e., with regard to the...
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<th>Key Findings Regarding Disclosure</th>
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| Ansara & Hindin (2010) | 1,231 Men and women, in Canadian national survey                                       | • women more likely than men to disclose to ISs;  
• more severe forms of violence were associated with increased disclosure;  
• disclosure more common to family and friends/neighbors than coworkers;                                                                                       | Victim gender  
Severity and Frequency of Violence  
Characteristics of IS |
| Ashley & Foshee (2005) | 354 High school students reporting IPV                                                | • victims more likely to seek help from informal than formal supports;  
• friends are most common IS sought for help by victims;  
• visible minority women, younger women, and low SES women less likely to seek help;  
• women reporting fearing for their life or sustaining physical injuries were more likely to seek help;  
• as the number of violent incidents increased, help-seeking likelihood increased;                                                               | Characteristics of IS                               |
| Barrett & St. Pierre (2011) | 922 Community women from a Canadian national survey                                      | • half of respondents engaged in helping behavior;  
• emotional support most common form of support provided, followed by formal and instrumental support;  
• women, younger participants, witnessing IPV as a child, experiencing IPV, and having higher perceptions of IPV prevalence were related to increased likelihood of helping | Victim Race  
Victim Age  
Victim SES  
Frequency of Violence  
Victims’ Feelings or Fear |
| Beebe et al. (2008)     | 6,010 Community men and women from a national survey who reported knowing a victim of IPV | • family and friends more likely to know about IPV than other ISs;  
• after controlling for demographic, relational, and violence factors, higher levels of IS were associated with better mental health;  
• females more likely to disclose to ISs;  
• attaching an angry/jealous motive to IPV associated with disclosure;  
• more likely to disclose when IPV is witnessed;  
• friends most common IS.                                                                                                                                         | Characteristics of IS  
Social Reactions to Disclosure  
Characteristics of IS  
Psychological Correlates Associated With Disclosure  
Victim Gender  
Meaning Attached to Violence  
IPV is Witnessed |
| Bellknap et al. (2009)  | 158 Victims recruited through prosecutors’ offices                                     | • friends/neighbors and mothers rated as most supportive ISs.  
• most supportive responses were emotional support, tangible/instrumental support;  
• providing emotional and instrumental support associated with increased access of resources and less long-term abuse;  
• meaning attached to violence for victims.                                                                                                                       | Characteristics of IS  
Meaning Attached to Violence  
Victims’ Feelings or Fear |
| Black et al. (2008)     | 57 Men and women urban high school students                                             | • male friends/neighbors most likely sought IS, followed by male relatives, male relatives, and female friends;  
• men found friends and family most helpful;                                                                                                                     | Characteristics of IS  
Social Reactions to Disclosure  
Characteristics of IS  
Social Reactions to Disclosure |
<p>| Bosch &amp; Bergen (2006)   | 56 Rural community women survivors of IPV                                              |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                   |
| Douglas &amp; Hines (2011)  | 302 Help-seeking community male victims of IPV                                         |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                   |</p>
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<td>Dunham &amp; Senn (2000)</td>
<td>306 Undergraduate college women</td>
<td>• friends were the most frequently cited IS;</td>
<td>Victim Race</td>
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<td>• over one third indicated minimization of their IPV experiences during first disclosure;</td>
<td>Victim age</td>
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<td>• disclosure most likely to occur shortly following IPV incident;</td>
<td>Type of Violence</td>
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<td>• not disclosing IPV associated with perception that their IPV experiences were &quot;no big deal&quot; and concern for ISs' reactions;</td>
<td>Severity and Frequency of Violence</td>
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<td>• female friend most common IS reported;</td>
<td>Psychological Correlates Associated With Disclosure</td>
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<td>• friends rated most helpful IS;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• most helpful reaction was providing emotional support;</td>
<td>Psychological Correlates Associated With Disclosure</td>
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<td>• students were most likely to disclose to friends;</td>
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<td>• over one third indicated minimization of their IPV experiences during first disclosure;</td>
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<td>Edwards et al. (2012)</td>
<td>44 College women reporting at least 1 incident of IPV</td>
<td>• students were most likely to disclose to friends;</td>
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<td>• over one third indicated minimization of their IPV experiences during first disclosure;</td>
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<td>• over one third indicated minimization of their IPV experiences during first disclosure;</td>
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<td>Fanslow &amp; Robinson (2010)</td>
<td>956 Community women from New Zealand</td>
<td>• majority disclosed to family and/or friends;</td>
<td>Victim Gender</td>
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<td>• over one third reported that no one tried to provide support (included nondisclosers);</td>
<td>Characteristics of IS</td>
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<td>• helpful responses reported following half to two thirds of disclosures;</td>
<td>Victim Race</td>
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<td>Victim Race</td>
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<td>Flicker et al. (2011)</td>
<td>1756 Community women</td>
<td>• African American and Hispanic women less likely to seek help from friends than White women (but no differences in seeking help from family);</td>
<td>Characteristics of the Disclosure Process</td>
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<td>• older women less likely to seek help from family, but not friends;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• help most likely sought by stalking IPV victims and least likely for sexual IPV victims;</td>
<td>Characteristics of the Disclosure Process</td>
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<td>• greater severity of physical abuse associated with increased help seeking;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• increased frequency of IPV associated with utilization of more ISs;</td>
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<td>• satisfaction with support was unrelated or inversely related to the number of ISs;</td>
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<td>Fortin et al. (2012)</td>
<td>233 Young community couples</td>
<td>• increased help seeking was associated with a reduction in psychological distress for women, but not for men;</td>
<td>Characteristics of IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodkind et al. (2003)</td>
<td>137 Community women recruited upon exiting a DV shelter</td>
<td>• negative reactions to disclosure experienced less frequently than positive reactions;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>Jackson et al. (2000)</td>
<td>373 Men and women high school seniors</td>
<td>• negative reactions more common when ISs are also threatened by perpetrator;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>Kaukinen (2004)</td>
<td>334 Women from NVAWS</td>
<td>• more negative reactions related to lower quality of life;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim &amp; Lee (2011)</td>
<td>123 Women recruited from IPV counseling agencies in Korea</td>
<td>• more tangible support related to fewer depressive symptoms;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• men were less likely to disclose than women;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• friends are most commonly utilized IS;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• white women more likely to seek help from ISs than minority women;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• low rates of disclosure to ISs (15%);</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>• increased likelihood of disclosure to ISs associated with higher income, being separated or divorced from the perpetrator, and higher levels of child abuse by the perpetrator;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<th>Key Findings Regarding Disclosure</th>
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<td>Latta &amp; Goodman (2011)</td>
<td>18 Community women and men with a close relationship to an IPV victim</td>
<td>• main theme of ISs “struggling to define their role”; • ISs cycle through 3 phases: become aware of the IPV; developing a narrative of the victims’ experiences and making meaning of it; and taking action; • process of providing support is often characterized by difficulty and frustration; • ISs try to balance their own views with what they believe the victim is ready to hear;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lempert (1997)</td>
<td>32 Community women and men, repeated victims of IPV</td>
<td>• victims sought help from ISs to provide for their personal safety and a new perspective and problem-solving methods when their own efforts to reduce violence did not work; • initially met with negative reactions following initial disclosures; • victims report feeling caught between the perpetrator’s perceptions/expectations and their ISs’ perspectives/expectations; • emotional support (and allowing the victim to engage in her or his own process) rated as most helpful;</td>
<td>Characteristics of IS</td>
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<td>Leone et al. (2007)</td>
<td>497 Community women reporting at least 1 incident of IPV in last 12 months</td>
<td>• younger participants were more likely to disclose to family (no relationship for friends/neighbors); • access to money and perceived social support associated with increased likelihood to disclose to family; • victims of intimate terrorism were less likely to disclose to friends/neighbors than victims of situational couple violence;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
</tr>
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<td>Levendosky et al. (2004)</td>
<td>203 Community women in the third trimester of pregnancy</td>
<td>• IPV victims talked about their IPV more frequently with ISs when levels of emotional and practical support were higher and IPV was more severe; • victims were more likely to have ISs who were also victims of IPV (less support was received from ISs who were also IPV victims); • all forms of support were associated with lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-esteem;</td>
<td>Characteristics of IS</td>
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<td>Mahlstedt &amp; Keeny (1993)</td>
<td>130 Women victims of physical IPV</td>
<td>• embarrassment and feeling that IPV should be kept private were motivations for nondisclosure; • friends more common IS, followed by sisters, mothers, and brothers; • friends and mothers viewed as most helpful and directive; • least helpful responses reported from fathers and brothers;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>McClennen et al. (2002)</td>
<td>63 Self-identifying gay men</td>
<td>• most victims sought help from friends; • friends were perceived as the most helpful support;</td>
<td>Social Reactions to Disclosure</td>
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<td>Merrill &amp; Wolfe (2000)</td>
<td>52 Self-identifying gay men who had sought formal assistance for IPV</td>
<td>• victims’ friends (not those shared with the perpetrator) were most commonly sought IS; • victims’ friends rated as most helpful IS (followed by their family); • partners’ friends, partners’ family, and neighbors were rated as the most unhelpful ISs;</td>
<td>Psychological Correlates Associated With Disclosure</td>
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| Mitchell & Hodson (1983)  | 60 Community women recruited from DV shelters               | • greater contact with friends/family (unaccompanied by partner) associated with more empathic and less avoidant responses from friends;  
                                  |                                             | • increased IPV severity associated with more nonsupportive responses from friends;  
                                  |                                             | • more avoidant responses from friends associated with greater levels of depression and lower levels of mastery and self-esteem;  
                                  |                                             | • more empathic responses associated with higher levels of self-esteem;                                                                 |
| Moe (2007)                | 19 Community women recruited from a DV shelter              | • informal disclosure to friends/family among the most common and initial strategies utilized by victims;  
                                  |                                             | • conditional support (help given “with strings attached”) was rated very unhelpful by victims;  
                                  |                                             | • unconditional and empathic support associated with feeling empowered to resist IPV; otherwise, victims more likely to internalize and engage in self-blame; |
| Molidor & Tolman (1998)   | 631 High school students                                    | • no reported gender differences in likelihood of disclosing to IS;  
                                  |                                             | • victims most likely to disclose to a friend;  
                                  |                                             | • 10% had strong suspicions or knowledge of a neighbor’s IPV in the past 2 years; half provided victims with a place to stay during times of violence  
                                  |                                             | • providing a place to stay was associated with the IS having children, and providing a place for the child of the victim to stay (for child abuse by IPV perpetrator);  
                                  |                                             | • gender, race, income, and other demographic factors unrelated to providing help;                                                                 |
| Paquin (1994)             | 650 Community women and men                                 | • friends most commonly utilized IS; 65% rated them as helpful  
                                  |                                             | • about a third sought help from family members; 57% rated them as helpful  
                                  |                                             | • the provision of practical (especially providing a place to stay) and emotional support were cited as a particularly helpful responses;  
                                  |                                             | • negative reactions were common and inhibited victims from leaving the relationship;                                                                 |
| Renzetti (1988)           | 100 Self-identifying lesbian women                          | • victims most commonly sought IS from friends, followed by family members, and neighbors;  
                                  |                                             | • victims frequently encounter negative reactions from friends and family;  
                                  |                                             | • avoidant responses from friends reported as a factor leading victims to stay in the relationship;                                                                 |
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| Rizo & Macy (2011)   | Review of 7 qualitative and 20 quantitative studies on Hispanic IPV victims’ help seeking | - Hispanic women were less likely than White or Black victims to seek help from ISs; immigrant Hispanic women were the least likely;  
- factors contributing to nondisclosure among Hispanic women were language barriers, strong ties to one’s family, religion, and culture-defined gender role norms;  
- ISs commonly rated as unhelpful;  
- many victims reported receiving unsatisfactory levels of support or barriers to seeking support when needed (e.g., abusive family, controlling behavior by perpetrator, lack of trust in others, and self-isolation);  
- female friends and mothers most common form of IS;  
- female friends generally cited as very helpful;  
- almost half of the sample disclosed to a coworker or supervisor;  
- reasons for disclosure included support seeking, advice seeking, expressing feelings, seeking legal protection/safety, explaining behavior; reasons for nondisclosure included feelings of embarrassment or not trusting coworkers;  
- disclosers generally found disclosure helpful;  
- about one fourth of women reported fully positive reactions to disclosure; remainder experienced mixed reactions both within individual ISs and across their network of ISs;  
- four primary themes emerged regarding reactions to help seeking: safety (e.g., encourage to leave, call police), emotional support, input (e.g., advice), and aid (e.g., practical or tangible support);  
- most participants disclosed to a friend;  
- mix of positive and negative reactions to disclosure was common;  
- nondisclosure or negative reactions was associated with staying in the relationship;  
- victims reported being told to leave their partner, without providing any more concrete advice/support, as unhelpful;  
- least likely to disclose following sexual IPV;  
- most likely to disclose following psychological IPV;  
- victims cite denial of IPV occurrence, family rejection, shame, self-blame, and homophobia/heterosexism as factors inhibiting disclosure;  
- negative reactions (e.g., blame) reported by victims from friends, family, and the lesbian community;  
- women more likely than men to disclose to friends;  
- no racial differences in likelihood to disclose;                                                                 | Social Reactions to Disclosure  
Victims’ Feelings or Fear  
Characteristics of IS  
Social Reactions to Disclosure  
Characteristics of IS  
Victims’ Feelings or Fear  
Characteristics of IS  
Social Reactions to Disclosure  
Type of Violence  
Victims’ Feelings or Fear                                                                                   |
| Rose et al. (2000)   | 31 Urban community women victims of IPV                                                  | - about one fourth of women reported fully positive reactions to disclosure; remainder experienced mixed reactions both within individual ISs and across their network of ISs;  
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- most likely to disclose following psychological IPV;  
- victims cite denial of IPV occurrence, family rejection, shame, self-blame, and homophobia/heterosexism as factors inhibiting disclosure;  
- negative reactions (e.g., blame) reported by victims from friends, family, and the lesbian community;  
- women more likely than men to disclose to friends;  
- no racial differences in likelihood to disclose;                                                                 | Social Reactions to Disclosure  
Victims’ Feelings or Fear  
Characteristics of IS  
Victim Gender                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Vatnar & Bjorkly (2008) | 157 Norwegian community women that sought formal help for IPV   | - victims cite denial of IPV occurrence, family rejection, shame, self-blame, and homophobia/heterosexism as factors inhibiting disclosure;  
- negative reactions (e.g., blame) reported by victims from friends, family, and the lesbian community;  
- women more likely than men to disclose to friends;  
- no racial differences in likelihood to disclose;                                                                                                                   | Social Reactions to Disclosure  
Victim Gender                                                                                              |
| Walters (2011)      | 4 Self-identified lesbian women victims of IPV                                          | - victims cite denial of IPV occurrence, family rejection, shame, self-blame, and homophobia/heterosexism as factors inhibiting disclosure;  
- negative reactions (e.g., blame) reported by victims from friends, family, and the lesbian community;  
- women more likely than men to disclose to friends;  
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Note. IS = informal Support; IPV = intimate partner violence; SES = socioeconomic status.
interaction of different factors influencing help seeking and the complex cycle of victims’ process of help seeking. Yet, ecological/symbolic interactionist theories are unique in their inclusion of multiple levels of factors that encompass victims’ disclosure experiences; feminist/survivor theories place a crucial and particular emphasis on gender and have a strong focus on combating victim blaming; and process/transtheoretical theories are unique in the focus on victims’ disclosure processes and how this process is fluid and changes over time. In the Discussion section of this article, we will return to these theories and discuss the extent to which these frameworks capture the rates and forms of IPV disclosure, factors associated with victims’ disclosure, the characteristics and process of disclosure, social reactions associated with disclosure, and the psychological correlates of disclosure, all of which are reviewed next.

**Motivations and Factors Associated With Disclosure**

Over the last three decades, researchers have explored factors associated with a victim’s willingness and motivation to disclose IPV to informal supports. These factors may be organized into demographic characteristics, intrapersonal attributes, and situational variables.

**Demographic Characteristics**

**Victim Gender.** With regard to demographic characteristics, research employing samples of high school students demonstrates that female victims are more likely to disclose than are male victims (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O’Leary, 2001). One of the few studies to examine IPV disclosure of adult men and women experiencing physical or sexual IPV revealed that 81% of the female victims disclosed to at least one informal support, whereas only 57% of the male victims disclosed to at least one informal support (Ansara & Hindin, 2010). Alternatively, Douglas and Hines’ (2011) study of help-seeking adult men experiencing IPV had disclosed to family, friends, or a neighbor. The higher percentage obtained by Douglas and Hines (2011) is likely due to the sample’s selection of help-seeking men.

**Victim Race.** Victims who are White, as opposed to minority residents of the United States (e.g., Black/African American, Hispanic, Latino), are more likely to disclose to informal supports (Kaukinen, 2004); and when White victims disclose, they disclose to a greater number informal supports than non-White victims who disclose (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). However, two studies indicated that disclosure is not always lower among racial minorities (Flicker et al., 2011; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, and O’Leary). Watson and colleagues’ (2001) sample of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian high school students found no racial differences related to disclosure, and Flicker and colleagues’ (2011) sample of African American, Hispanic, and White adult women found no race differences in disclosure to family. However, the authors did find that African American and Hispanic women were less likely to disclose to friends than White women (Flicker et al., 2011).

With regard to disclosure rates of specific minority groups, a recent review of the literature concluded that Hispanic women victims of IPV were less likely to disclose to informal supports than White women (Rizo & Macy, 2011). A low informal disclosure rate has also been shown among Korean immigrant women (Kim & Lee, 2011), although this study only assessed disclosure to family or neighbors. One study compared disclosure rates among a community sample of women recruited from domestic violence agencies representing several racial minority groups (Yoshioka, Gilbert, El-Bassel, & Braig-Amin, 2003) and found that South Asian women had the highest rates of informal disclosure, followed by Hispanic women; whereas African American women generally had the lowest rates of informal disclosure.

**Victim Socioeconomic Status.** Socioeconomic status (SES) has been associated with help seeking, such that persons of lower SES utilize fewer informal supports than persons of middle to higher SES (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). Further support for this is found by Leone, Johnson, and Cohan’s (2007) study of largely low-income minority women, which concluded that a victim’s access to financial resources predicted help seeking to family members but not to friends. However, the authors found no relationship between education level and employment status and informal help seeking.

**Intrapersonal Attributes**

Intrapersonal attributes are defined as factors germane to the individual (e.g., attitudes, thoughts, feelings). Two key themes emerge in the literature related to intrapersonal attributes impacting the disclosure of intimate partner violence, meaning
attached to the violence and the victim’s feelings or fear preventing disclosure.

**Meaning Attached to the Violence.** For Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, and Weisz’s (2008) high school students, ascribing the violence to an anger or jealousy motive was associated with an increase in the likelihood of talking with others about the violent behavior. In contrast, those who ascribed the behavior to controlling, protecting, or a loving motive were less likely to disclose (Black et al., 2008). Similarly, Edwards and colleagues (2012) found that, among college women, participants who disclosed endorsed more partner blame for the violence than victims who did not disclose.

**Victim’s Feelings or Fear Preventing Disclosure.** Similar themes emerge among the responses of victims from across studies assessing women’s reasons for nondisclosure—a desire to keep personal matters private, feelings of shame and embarrassment, and fear of the informal support’s reaction (Edwards et al., 2012; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Swanberg & Macke, 2006; Walters, 2011). In one of the original studies on IPV disclosure, Mahlstedt and Keeny (1993) found that college women experiencing physical IPV who chose not to disclose described a belief in keeping private matters to themselves, feelings of embarrassment, and a concern that others would try to take control of the situation (e.g., take over and handle the situation, pressure to end the relationship) as barriers to disclosure. Subsequent studies have identified additional reasons for nondisclosure of IPV, including minimization and normalization of the violence (i.e., interpreting the violence as “no big deal”), concern for the reactions of potential social supports, the desire not to bring their personal issues into a public sphere, feelings of shame, and not trusting people in their social network (Edwards et al., 2012; Swanberg & Macke, 2006).

The themes for nondisclosure of IPV identified previously came from studies that largely utilized samples of White heterosexual women. However, studies with ethnic/racial and sexual minorities have identified similar themes for nondisclosure of IPV. A recent literature review on the help-seeking experiences of ethnic minority women (with a focus on Hispanic women) demonstrated that several of the same themes mentioned previously (e.g., fear, shame, embarrassment, concern for safety of themselves or their children, dependence on their partner) influence minority women as well as additional themes related to cultural barriers to disclosure (e.g., religious beliefs, family values, and language barriers; Rizo & Macy, 2011). Sexual minority victims are also inhibited from disclosure for reasons such as not being “out” to members of their informal network, not wanting to elicit disapproval of same-sex relationships, and the perception, fear, or experience of homophobia and heterosexism from members of their social network (Walters, 2011). Thus, although ethnic and sexual minority victims report feelings and fears related to IPV disclosure similar to White, heterosexual victims, individuals with minority status, often report additional barriers to disclosure.

**Situational Variables**

Characteristics of the violence (i.e., type, severity, and frequency) and if others witnessed the violence are additional factors explored by research that influences victims’ informal disclosure.

**Type of Violence.** We found two studies that examined disclosure rates by type of victimization. First, Vatnar and Bjorkly (2008) found that Norwegian community women who had recently experienced sexual IPV were less likely to disclose to informal supports than physical or psychological IPV victims, whereas women who had recently experienced psychological IPV were the most likely to disclose to their informal supports. Second, among the NVAWS sample of women, Flicker and colleagues (2011) found that victims of stalking reported the highest frequency of help seeking to informal supports (more than psychological, physical or sexual IPV victims). Further, for women experiencing physical abuse, the cooccurrence of sexual abuse was associated with a decreased likelihood of disclosure to family but not for disclosure to friends (Flicker et al., 2011). Considering an alternate classification of IPV types, Leone et al. (2007) found that victims of situational couple violence were more likely to disclose to friends and neighbors (but not family) than were victims of intimate terrorism.

**Severity and Frequency of Violence.** Research indicates that greater severity and frequency of IPV are associated with an increased likelihood of disclosure (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Flicker et al., 2011; Levendosky et al., 2004). Increased likelihood of disclosure is also evident when the number of physical injuries is considered (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). In contrast, Kim and Lee’s (2011) study of Korean women found that violence severity was unrelated to victims’ likelihood of disclosing.

**IPV is Witnessed.** Research suggests that among high school students, about half of IPV instances happen in the presence of others (Black et al., 2008; Molidor & Tollman, 1998). Further, high school students from Black et al.’s (2008) study were more likely to talk to a friend if the violence was witnessed. Specifically, victims were more likely to disclose to someone of the same sex as the person who witnessed the violence (i.e., victims are more likely to disclose to someone who witnessed the incident more than if a man witnessed the incident).

**The Characteristics and Process of Disclosure**

In addition to factors associated with victims’ disclosure of IPV, research indicates that there are a number of features common to the informal supports to whom victims disclose and the disclosure process.

**Characteristics of the Informal Support**

Victims are most likely to disclose to a friend, followed by female relatives (Edwards et al., 2012; Mahlstedt & Keeny,
...disoned to a brother, and about 5% disclosed to a father. Research on adult Latina immigrants also suggests that a higher percentage of adult Hispanic women disclosed to a friend than a family member (Yoshioka et al., 2003), and sexual minority women and men also report an increased likelihood of disclosing to friends than other informal supports (McClenne, Summers, & Vaughan, 2002; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1988, 1989; Walters, 2011). Further, Merril and Wolfe (2000) make the distinction of increased disclosure to the victims' friends specifically, rather than mutual friends shared with their abusive partner.

**Characteristics of the Disclosure Process**

**Victims’ Perspective.** Little published research has focused on describing when and what the act of informal disclosure looks like for victims of IPV. Research tends to focus on the rates of and motives for disclosure, to whom victims disclose, and the reactions and consequences of disclosure. The research in addressing the details of disclosure, however, does indicate that about half of the victims who choose to disclose do so immediately following the IPV experience (Dunham & Senn, 2000). In contrast, over a third of disclosers wait 3 months to 2 years after their IPV experiences before they disclose to anyone (Dunham & Senn, 2000). Dunham and Senn’s (2000) research also indicates that at the time of disclosure, victims are likely to minimize their experiences of IPV (i.e., omitted important details when describing the abuse). Over a third of victims who disclosed IPV to an informal support reported that they had minimized their descriptions of abuse during their first disclosure (Dunham & Senn, 2000).

**Informal Supports’ Perspective.** Latta and Goodman’s (2011) qualitative interviews with informal social supports provide a framework for understanding the perspective and process of helping from the supporters’ perspective. From the interviews, the authors identified a three-stage process that informal supports undergo as they engage in a course of “struggling to define [their] role” in providing support to the victim. Informal supports transition among stages of “becoming aware” (i.e., moving from a state of unawareness of the violence to having confirmation of the victims’ IPV experiences), “developing a narrative” (i.e., the informal support gathers information from the victim and other sources related to the IPV integrates the information into a coherent representation of the victims’ experiences), and “taking action” (i.e., deciding how to act or engage with victim and perpetrator). Latta and Goodman (2011) describe this process as fluid and nonlinear, such that informal supports modify their narratives and responses as additional information surfaced.

**Social Reactions to Disclosure**

Although little is known about the specifics of the situation, process, and nature of IPV victims’ disclosure, a substantial literature exists describing victims’ perceptions of informal support members’ reactions to their disclosure of IPV. Social reactions to disclosure are defined as the ways in which informal supports respond both verbally and nonverbally to victims’ disclosures (Ullman, 2010) and are generally studied in one of two ways. The first examines social reactions to disclosure within researcher-derived categories of positive (e.g., believing, validating the victims’ experiences) and negative reactions (e.g. disbelieving, blaming the victim), which is largely based on research from the sexual victimization literature (Ullman, 2010; for a review of findings within sexual assault literature, see Ullman, 1999). The second method for studying social reactions to IPV disclosure does not use researcher-derived categorizations but rather asks participants to identify for themselves the helpfulness or supportiveness of individual reactions. Given that categorizations currently employed in studies utilizing the first method described previously were largely derived from studies utilizing the second method, findings from these differing methodologies (i.e., research-derived categorizations and victims’ reports of helpfulness) of studying victims’ social reactions to IPV disclosure largely are consistent and thus reviewed together subsequently. Following this, we summarize literature on the informal supporters’ reports of their reactions to disclosure and correlates of social reactions.

**Positive and Helpful Social Reactions.** Consistent with researcher-derived forms of positive social reactions, across studies, helpful reactions described by victims often include emotional support, giving advice, allowing the victim to talk about the abuse, and providing practical/tangible support (Edwards et al., 2012; Lempert, 1997; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Renzetti, 1988). Among positive social reactions, emotional support is the most common type of support provided (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Goodkind, Gilmour, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Rose et al., 2000; Trotter & Allen, 2009; Weisz, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Black, 2007), which is consistent with qualitative reports of victims regarding the most desired form of support (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993). Victims are also often provided with tangible (e.g., provided a place to stay, providing child care, running errands) or advice/instrumental (e.g., advised to seek counseling, encouraged to contact law enforcement or legal supports) support following disclosure of IPV (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Goodkind et al., 2003; Renzetti, 1988; Rose et al., 2000; Trotter & Allen, 2009; Wuest & Mettitt-Gray, 1999). Finally, the women in Mahlstedt and Keeny’s (1993) study reported experiencing a positive impact following informal supports’ expression of anger...
In general, many reactions can be divided clearly into trauma, violence, & abuse 15(1) of women. Victims generally reported inconsistency within a single sample, which the researchers hypothesized, could be related to where women were in their process of reestablishing their lives and breaking free from the label of a victim. Further, providing excessive advice and expressing anger with pressure toward the victim or informal supports’ attempts to take over the situation may reinforce victim-blaming scripts and contribute to a negative perception of these reactions (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993). Finally, Edwards, Dardis, and Gidyecz’s (2012) qualitative results demonstrate this inconsistency within a single sample, which the researchers hypothesized, could be related to where women were in their leaving processes. Taken together, it appears that giving advice is helpful to the victim when advice is sought, but if provided when unwanted serves to frustrate the victim and prove disempowering.

**Mixed Reactions.** Although victims do report negative or unhelpful reactions to their initial disclosures of IPV, victims generally report that negative reactions to disclosure are less frequent/common than positive or helpful reactions (Goodkind et al., 2003; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983), with the exception of one study (Moe, 2007). In a sample of women currently living in a domestic violence shelter, Moe (2007) described victims’ reports of being abandoned by informal supports as more common than receiving assistance. It is possible that these findings are due to the formal help-seeking sample such that negative informal social reactions could have served as an impetus to formal help seeking. In their qualitative study of community women seeking help from a community agency for IPV experiences, Trotter and Allen (2009) found that 78% of women reported that they had received mixed reactions to their disclosure to informal supports, whereas the remaining 22% reported exclusively positive reactions (no participant reported exclusively negative reactions overall). Further, the women in Trotter and Allen’s (2009) study reported that an individual informal support responded in both negative and positive ways to their disclosures and also that an individual informal support responded in more positive ways than another individual informal support within their network. Thus, overall, victims are likely to encounter a mix of positive and negative reactions to their disclosure of IPV (Turell & Herrmann, 2008).

**Helpful and Unhelpful Informal Supporters.** Victims generally rated friends as the most helpful/supportive, followed by family members (Belknap et al., 2009; Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Douglas, & Hines, 2011; Edwards et al., 2012; McClennen et al., 2002). Similar to the findings of Trotter and Allen (2009) described previously, other researchers (Edwards et al., 2012; Moe, 2007; Renzetti, 1989) found that the victims in their studies reported that although friends and family members were cited as the most helpful informal sources of support, friends and family were also among the most often cited as the least helpful sources of informal support. Other research indicates that the victims’ friends and family members are perceived as the most helpful informal supports, whereas the perpetrator’s family and friends are perceived as the least helpful (Bosch & Bergen, 2006; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Rizo & Macy, 2011).

**Informal Supports’ Reports of Reactions to Disclosure**

Although most of the research on social reactions to IPV disclosure has been conducted with victims who disclose, two studies (Beeble, Post, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2008; Latta & Goodman, 2011) have assessed comprehensively reactions from the informal supports’ perspective. In a national sample of adults who knew of a victim experiencing IPV in the past year, about half engaged in helping behavior (i.e., providing emotional...
support, connections to formal resources, and tangible/instrumental support) on behalf of the victim (Beeble et al., 2008). Of those who helped, the majority (88%) provided emotional support, half (49%) provided connections to formal resources, and about 15% provided tangible/instrumental aid to victims. Women were more likely than men to provide all forms of support, and informal supports that provided tangible/instrumental aid were more likely to have previous experience with IPV victimization. Further, informal supports with histories including more forms of IPV were more likely to provide tangible/instrumental aid than informal supports with fewer forms of IPV victimization experiences (Beeble et al., 2008).

Additionally, Latta and Goodman’s (2011) qualitative interviews with informal social supports demonstrated that all but one participant reported that they had decided to engage in a variety of responses intended to be helpful to the victim (e.g., providing emotional support, giving advice, naming the abuse, developing a plan, providing resources). However, participants commonly reported that they had participated in periods of disengagement from the victim (e.g., avoiding the victim or ignoring the occurrence of IPV in the relationship) to safeguard their own mental health during a frustrating process and remain active in other areas of their lives. Largely, periods of disengagement occurred alongside periods of engagement; however, some participants eventually disengaged entirely from the victim.

Correlates of Social Reactions

Three studies have explored the factors associated with social reactions to IPV disclosure. In a study of community women who had visited a domestic violence shelter, Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, and Sullivan (2003) found that more threats to the victim by the perpetrator and being married to the perpetrator predicted emotionally supportive reactions to disclosure by informal supports; type of violence (physical or psychological) did not predict emotional support. However, negative reactions (e.g., avoidance of the victim or talking about IPV, annoyance when the victim does not take the informal support’s advice) were unrelated to threats by the perpetrator to the victim and relationship status, whereas psychological abuse, having fewer minor children living with the victim, and more direct threats from the perpetrator to the social support system predicted negative reactions to disclosure (Goodkind et al., 2003).

Two studies have assessed correlates of social reactions utilizing samples of informal supports rather than victims. In a national study of adults in the United States, Beeble, Post, Bybee, and Sullivan (2008) found that a number of characteristics related to an increased likelihood of providing help to a victim—being female, being younger, witnessing IPV as a child, personal history of IPV victimization, and a greater perception of prevalence of IPV. Additionally, in a random telephone survey of Kentucky residents, Paquin (1994) found that half of the respondents who had knowledge or strong suspicions of physical IPV occurring in their neighbors’ homes had allowed the victims to stay in their homes for any period of time as an escape from the violence. Providing this form of tangible support was associated with neighbors having children of their own or having taken in the victims’ abused child on another occasion (Paquin, 1994).

Psychological Correlates Associated With Disclosure

The disclosure research has also explored the psychological correlates associated with disclosure itself and the social reactions following disclosure (discussed separately below). Within Levendosky and colleague’s (2004) sample of pregnant women, the act of disclosure of IPV was associated with lower levels of depression but was not associated with anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, or self-esteem. Alternatively, few researchers have examined the number of informal supports with psychological well-being. Belknap, Melton, Denny, Fleury-Steiner, and Sullivan (2009) found that after accounting for IPV severity and demographic and relationship factors, higher levels of social support were related to better psychological well-being. Further, Fortin, Guay, Lavoie, Boisvert, and Beaudry (2012) found that for male (but not female) victims of psychological and physical violence, the number of informal supports was associated with higher levels of psychological distress. However, when examining the victims’ ratings of satisfaction with the support provided, higher levels of satisfaction were related to lower levels of psychological distress (although not significant for male victims’ satisfaction for support for physical violence; Fortin, Guay, Lavoie, Boisvert, & Beaudry, 2012).

Concerning psychological correlates of social reactions following disclosure, the majority of research suggests a complicated relationship between psychological well-being and both positive and negative social reactions. Researchers have identified a positive relationship between empathic responses from friends following disclosure and psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983) and feeling empowered as active agents within their own lives (Moe, 2007). Additionally, researchers have found that more avoidant or minimizing responses to disclosure were associated with lower levels of mastery (i.e., victims’ feeling in control of their lives) and self-esteem and more reports of depressive symptoms, self-injury or suicidal thoughts, and self-blame (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Moe, 2007).

Further, Levendosky et al. (2004) found that higher levels of emotional (listens to the victim), practical (provides advice or guidance), and critical (provides negative support or criticism) supports were related to fewer symptoms of depression and higher levels of self-esteem; more emotional and critical support were related to fewer anxiety symptoms, and more critical support was related to fewer PTSD symptoms. This positive relationship between critical support and mental well-being may indicate that any support or acknowledgment is better than avoidance or other negative forms of support, or it may be an artifact of the moderate positive correlation between critical support and emotional support. That is, the
informal supporters may be providing both critical and emotional support to the victim, and the provision of emotional support is the source of the effect.

Goodkind and colleagues (2003) documented similar relationships among negative social reactions and psychosocial variables but somewhat different relationships among positive social reactions and psychosocial variables. With regard to positive social reactions, they found that, although emotional support was unrelated to quality of life and depression, providing tangible support (i.e., a place to stay) was related to better quality of life and fewer symptoms of depression. Alternatively, negative reactions were related to worse quality-of-life ratings and higher levels of depression. Further, negative reactions to IPV disclosures predicted lower quality of life and offering the victim a place to stay predicted more depression symptoms.

Discussion of the Limitations of Existing Literature and Future Directions for Research and Practice

Cross-Sectional Methodologies

Research on victims’ disclosure of IPV is focused overwhelmingly on collecting data at one time point and asking the victim to sum across all past experiences. Gathering information and drawing conclusions using this methodology is helpful, albeit limited. Although current research provides a general framework for disclosure of IPV and its effects, the next step of research should be to provide more details regarding the motivations, circumstances, and outcomes of disclosure to the various informal support system members utilized by the victims over time. Not only may reactions vary within and between members of the victims’ informal networks (Trotter & Allen, 2009) but also reactions to disclosure may change over time (i.e., when additional details are provided or when the informal support has a better understanding of the nature and extent of the IPV the victim is experiencing). Cross-sectional methodologies do not allow researchers to determine directionality regarding factors associated with victims’ disclosure or social reactions to disclosure. For example, although research has demonstrated that negative social reactions to disclosure are related to increases in psychological distress (Goodkind et al., 2003; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Moe, 2007), we do not know the directionality of these relationships. It could be that negative social reactions lead to psychological distress, that high levels of psychological distress elicit negative social reactions, or that these relationships are bidirectional. Taken together, future research should employ longitudinal methodologies with multiple assessment points. Furthermore, longitudinal methodologies that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods would allow for a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the IPV disclosure process.

Sample Characteristics

Research on IPV has concentrated on specific demographic groups. The majority of the research involves White or Black, female, heterosexual, lower income victims, with at least one child, and a mean age in the 30–39 range. Although this research is relevant and useful for many victims, the dearth of research exploring the experiences of victims outside these demographics limits the generalizability of research findings. Especially pertinent are the issues in interpreting research with regard to the age of the victim. Within the current review, we have included research on both community samples of older adults and high school/college-aged adolescents. It is important to note that these two groups of victims differ with regard to the backdrop of their romantic relationships (i.e., older adults are likely to be cohabiting, financially dependent, have children, etc.) and that these differences could affect various aspects of the disclosure process. Thus, future research would benefit from the inclusion of more diverse samples in terms of age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other relevant demographic and cultural factors as well as a better understanding of how these diversity factors influence the disclosure process.

Focus on Reports From the Victim and Unilateral Violence

Research focuses almost exclusively on the victim’s perspective of the disclosure and the informal supports’ responses. Few studies (Beeble et al., 2008; Latta & Goodman, 2011; Paquin, 1994) have investigated the informal supports’ perceptions of their responses to the knowledge or suspicion of IPV. These studies have provided a foundation for a comparison of the perspectives of the victim and a member of his or her social support network. Overall, the findings of the three studies (Beeble et al., 2008; Latta & Goodman, 2011; Paquin, 1994) examining disclosure of IPV from the informal supports’ perspective reviewed previously indicate an overlap between the reports of victims and the reports of informal supports regarding responses to disclosure. Victims and informal supports are consistent in reporting a high frequency of emotionally supportive reactions and that informal supports are also unhelpful at times. However, future research that focuses more on the informal supports’ reactions to disclosure and their motivations for action could be used to inform future efforts of educating informal supports on how to best help a victim.

Additionally, given that 55%–84% of violence in relationships is mutual (i.e., both partners perpetrate IPV and experience victimization; Kessler, Molnar, Feurer, & Appelbaum, 2001; Straus, 2008; Testa, Hoffman, & Leonard, 2011), it is likely that at least in some instances of disclosure victims are discussing their own use of aggression. However, given that current methodologies focus exclusively on disclosure of victimization experiences, we know very little about the process by which individuals disclose mutual aggression and how this is similar or different to the rates and correlates of IPV victimization disclosure. Future research should employ methodologies...
that allow for the assessment of both IPV victimization and perpetration disclosure.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Issues With Studying IPV Disclosure**

Despite the limited existence of theoretically driven research on disclosure of IPV to informal supports, it is apparent that the theories alluded to in some studies (e.g., ecological model, survivor theory, process models, symbolic interactionist role theory) are promising for future work. For example, survivor theory, which focuses on victims’ active engagement in help-seeking, may account for the overall high rates of informal disclosure and contribute to our understanding of situational factors influencing disclosure. Second, process models (e.g., the transtheoretical model of change) and the ecological model/symbolic interactionist role theory are especially helpful in explaining the intrapersonal and situational factors leading to disclosure of IPV and are especially promising in being extended for work on how disclosure and social reactions are integrated with the process of leaving an abusive relationship. Although a few qualitative studies have shed light on the connectedness of these phenomena, there is surprisingly little systematic, methodologically rigorous work on how disclosure, social reactions, and the leaving process relate to one another, and process and ecological models allow for the opportunity to explore these connections.

Given the literature reviewed here, a meta-theory combining promising elements of these theories would be beneficial in advancing informal disclosure research. One attempt at such a framework was proposed by Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, and Weintraub (2005). Liang and colleagues (2005) advocate a theoretical model of help seeking in which help seeking is viewed as a process in itself, parallel to the process of leaving, and includes a feedback loop in which victims recognize and define the problem, decide to seek help, and select supporters (and is influenced by individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors). This model appears especially promising, given that it integrates components of several theories supported by the extant body of research.

However, some elements are not explicitly included in Liang et al.’s model (e.g., how this process functions for male victims, the impact of other identities, such as sexual identity, as a barrier to informal help seeking). Nevertheless, the framework and language of the model proposed by Liang et al. (2005) model is open to the inclusion of additional elements such as factors and processes particularly relevant for men and sexual minorities. Additionally, Liang et al.’s model would benefit from inclusion of an additional stage or two to incorporate victim’s experience with the disclosure (i.e., general characteristics such as the use of minimization or graded disclosure), how the disclosure experience informs the victim’s engagement with the chosen informal support (e.g., the continued use of this support, engagement with additional or alternative supports, or the detachment from any support), and the broader psychosocial impacts of the disclosure process and social reactions to the disclosure. Although Liang et al. (2005) acknowledge that disclosure experiences shape future disclosure behavior (“the helper [that the victim] chooses will influence how she defines the problem and whether she chooses to seek help again”, p. 73), the research reviewed here would suggest that the influence of disclosure characteristics and reactions following it should play a more important role in conceptualizing a complete model of victims’ process of disclosure.

Along these lines, Ullman (2010) presents an adapted model of Liang and colleagues’ (2005) theory which combines Liang et al.’s (2005) second (i.e., decision to seek help) and third (i.e., support selection) stages into a single, “disclosure/help seeking” stage along with other disclosure characteristics (e.g., timing of disclosure, coping, and social reactions) and adds a third, “negative and/or positive outcomes” stage to understand help-seeking experiences of sexual assault victims. Ullman’s (2010) adapted model provides a new framework for the inclusion of other factors related to the disclosure and the outcomes of disclosure (e.g., self-blame, psychological symptoms, substance abuse). Although Ullman (2010) used this revised model to discuss the disclosure process among sexual assault survivors, it could be a useful theoretical framework for increasing our understanding of the various stages of the IPV disclosure process. Although the stage model connects the various elements of the disclosure process reviewed in this article, it is critical to acknowledge the fluidity and nonlinearity both between and within the stages (e.g., characteristics of the disclosure are likely to influence social reactions or that psychological symptoms influence/are influenced by substance abuse), which will be important for future theoretical and empirical work to consider.

Another conceptual issue that needs to be the focus of future work in this area is the assumption throughout the extant literature that disclosure is motivated solely by the victim’s decision to disclose. No identified research has focused on the extent to which disclosure occurs as a result of an informal support’s suspicion or witnessing of IPV followed by a “forced” disclosure (i.e., an informal support confronted the victim about the relationship violence). Indeed, there is an apparent assumption within the IPV help-seeking literature of a benevolent sequence of events culminating in the victim’s disclosure (even if initially motivated by an informal support); however, this is not necessarily the case. It is likely that at least some if not many disclosures are not the result of an empowered victim’s decision or even an overt desire to seek help, especially considering findings that about half of the IPV situations were witnessed (Jackson et al., 2008; Molidor & Tolman, 1998). Employing diverse methodology (as described above) and explicitly exploring this issue within research would be helpful in disentangling some of the questions concerning motivations for disclosure.

Taken together, we encourage scholars to continue to work toward developing a stronger and more integrated theoretical presence in research on the disclosure process for IPV victims. Along these lines, it is important that future research move beyond identifying the correlates and predictors of various
aspects of the disclosure process and rather focus on employing theoretical frameworks (such as those previously discussed and proposed) that explain the meaning behind relationships among variables of interest and the motivation of disclosure, which could aid in translating research findings to practice and advocacy efforts.

**IPV Program Evaluation Research**

Although IPV prevention and intervention programs often provide suggestions on how to help a friend in an abusive relationship (see Black & Weisz, 2008 for review), there is little to no research assessing the effects of this program component on informal supports’ actual behavior toward victims who disclose experiences of IPV. Indeed, most program evaluation research focuses solely on changes in IPV attitudes and rates of IPV victimization and perpetration. Thus, an important area for future research is to test the effects of existing IPV programming efforts on both victim and informal supports’ roles in the disclosure process. For example, are victims who participate in these types of programs more likely to disclose IPV experiences to informal supports compared to victims who do not participate in these types of programs? Also, are informal supports who participate in these types of programs more likely to provide victims with positive and helpful responses compared to individuals who do not participate in these types of programs? Although current program evaluation research should seek to answer these questions, as we develop a more complex understanding of the disclosure process, it is likely that some aspects of programming related to how to help a friend in an abusive relationship will need to be modified. This is especially true, given some of the conflicting evidence regarding what victims find most helpful and how social reactions relate to psychological distress.

**Implications for Treatment**

Although this article focused on the role of informal disclosure of IPV, the findings from this research could inform the work of formal support providers (e.g., counselors, doctors, law enforcement) who work with IPV survivors. First, it is important that formal support providers be aware of the informal resources available to victims of IPV seeking formal support, the victims’ utilization of their informal supports, the social reactions received, and the impact of these social reactions on psychosocial well-being. Second, formal support providers may have the opportunity to mitigate the psychological consequences associated with IPV victims’ lack of informal support networks or the negative social reactions received from informal supports. Third, when possible, formal support providers should include informal supports in the victims’ treatment and provide informal supports with suggestions on how to be effective in supporting the IPV victim, similar to what is done in IPV programming efforts discussed previously. This suggestion is consistent with research documenting the benefits of including informal supports in psychotherapy with trauma survivors, and the negative impact that inappropriate support behavior can have on victims’ psychotherapeutic progress (see Ullman, 2010 for a review). Thus, we recommend that policies be in place requiring formal support providers to have the necessary knowledge, skills, and training to work effectively with IPV victims and their informal support networks.

**Conclusion**

Although our understandings of survivors’ disclosure processes have increased over the past few decades, additional research is necessary to address gaps and inconsistencies within the existing framework. Given victims’ high rates of disclosure to informal supports, psychological correlates associated with disclosure, and the strong potential for the integration of knowledge of IPV disclosure in treatment and programming efforts, it is important to give considerable attention to the role of disclosure in victims’ IPV experiences. The current article reviewed the research to date on informal disclosure of IPV, evaluated the theoretical underpinnings of this research, highlighted the critical issues and limitations present within these studies, and provided suggestions for future theoretical and empirical work as well as implications for programming and treatment efforts. Overall, we found support for a number of demographic, intrapersonal, and situational factors influencing a victim’s likelihood of disclosing their IPV experiences in addition to a number of characteristics and correlates associated with the disclosure. It is important to take an integrated systems approach (such as proposed by Liang and colleagues, 2005, and elaborated on by Ullman, 2010) in the examination of how these function for individual victims in order to inform most effectively intervention and treatment efforts to support IPV victims and their informal supports. Although it is critical that researchers’ efforts also focus on primary prevention of IPV, it is also important that we continue to understand the most effective ways to promote victims’ recovery, which requires an understanding of the disclosure and help-seeking process.

**Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

- A better understanding of the informal disclosure process related to IPV could inform programming efforts to educate informal supports on how to respond most effectively to victims’ disclosure of IPV. Albeit justified and important, much of the research has focused on reports from the victim in understanding the nature of IPV disclosure; however, examining the experiences and perspectives of the informal supports who provided varying levels of support (or no support at all) to victims is crucial to the development and successful implementation of IPV intervention programming.
- Given that positive reactions to disclosure are associated with better mental health markers (e.g., fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD), and although there is
sometimes an inverse relationship with negative reactions, interventions should place a focus on increasing positive reactions to victims of IPV.

- Formal support services and policy makers should be aware of the informal resources available to victims of IPV seeking formal support, the victims’ utilization of their informal supports, the social reactions received, and the impact of these social reactions on psychosocial well-being.

- Future research should employ more diverse methodologies (e.g., longitudinal research) to the study of IPV disclosure, broaden existing sample characteristics, and utilize and advance existing theoretical frameworks in study design.

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