

Is the End Really the End? Prevalence and Correlates of College Women's Intentions to Return to an Abusive Relationship

Violence Against Women

2018, Vol. 24(2) 207–222

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DOI: 10.1177/1077801216686220

journals.sagepub.com/home/vaw

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Abstract

Fifty-six college women completed surveys before and after terminating an abusive, heterosexual dating relationship. Whereas 64% of women had contact with their abusive partner post break-up, only 14% reported a moderate to high likelihood that they would return. Intentions to return were prospectively predicted by fewer perceived quality of alternatives, and cross-sectional correlates of intentions to return were being single, shorter time since relationship termination, having contact with one's abusive ex-partner, and social pressure to return. These data can be used to inform intervention and advocacy efforts and to guide future research.

Keywords

dating violence, intimate partner violence, returning, college, investment model, social pressure

Intimate partner violence (IPV), which includes physical, sexual, or psychological violence toward a current or former partner, is a major social and public health concern, and occurs at alarmingly high rates among college students in particular (Edwards et al., 2015; Straus, 2004). The consequences of IPV are extensive and varied, leaving

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IPV victims at a higher risk of physical health issues (e.g., injuries, chronic pain disorders; Black et al., 2011; National Research Council, 1996; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and mental health problems (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, substance abuse, decreased self-esteem, self-blame, shame; Black et al., 2011; Follette, Polusny, Bechtle, & Naugle, 1996; Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders, & Best, 1993; Ruback & Thompson, 2001). Although IPV victims may experience these deleterious outcomes, many remain in the relationship or have difficulty separating from their partner permanently, suggesting that leaving an abusive relationship may be a dynamic process requiring several attempts (Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom, 2006). However, returning to an abusive relationship has its own risks, as it has been shown that women who only temporarily leave their partners experience greater violence than those who do not leave their partners or those who permanently leave their partners (D. J. Anderson, 2003; Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000).

To date, existing research has primarily examined factors that relate to women's stay/leave decisions. Only a small number of studies, and none focusing on college women, have examined the relevant factors that affect either actual returning or the intention to return to a partner after leaving an abusive relationship. In fact, there have been no previous studies that utilize younger women in a non-shelter sample to examine the incidence and correlates of returning to an abusive dating relationship. This is a major gap in the literature given the high rates of stability in abusive dating relationships among college women (Edwards, Gidycz, & Murphy, 2011; Edwards, Kearns, Gidycz, & Calhoun, 2012; Katz, Kuffel, & Brown, 2006) and the increasing attention at the federal level on gender-based violence, including IPV, on college campuses. Furthermore, no study has used a prospective design in examining predictors of victims' intentions to return to an abusive partner: that is, to examine how factors measured prior to relationship termination affect women's intentions to return to their partner afterward.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the aforementioned gaps in the literature. We specifically examined intention to return as the variable of interest for two reasons. First, previous research shows that both actual return behaviors and intention to return are correlated with similar factors (e.g., emotional attachment, previous returns, more recent separation; Griffing et al., 2002; Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Schutte, Malouff, & Doyle, 1988). Second, intent is a strong predictor of actual behavior, both for returning decisions in shelter samples (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004) and for leaving decisions in college women (Edwards, Gidycz, & Murphy, 2014).

As there is a lack of studies utilizing college samples, the available literature utilizing help-seeking samples was examined as a starting point to help determine the underpinnings and direction of the current study. Across studies using shelter populations, findings suggest that 18-74% of women who terminate their abusive relationships return to their partner (see Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Strube, 1988, for review). Researchers have also documented that a pattern of multiple returns to an abusive partner in this population is common (Griffing et al., 2002). Previous studies with

largely shelter-based samples have documented common reasons for returning to an abusive relationship include economic dependence (M. A. Anderson et al., 2003; Griffing et al., 2002), access to children (Baker, 1997; Schutte et al., 1988), and emotional attachment (Baker, 1997; Griffing et al., 2005), particularly if the abusive partner has promised to change (M. A. Anderson et al., 2003; Schutte et al., 1988) or has shown remorse for his actions (M. A. Anderson et al., 2003; Schutte et al., 1988).

Whereas these initial investigations into why women intend to return or actually return to their abusive partners have revealed several important factors, the fact that the research has only focused on women who are actively seeking help in shelters is a major limitation that constrains the generalizability of these findings to other populations, such as adolescents and college students. Looking beyond economic dependence and access to children, which are likely not as relevant for most college women's decisions to return to an abusive relationship, several relational variables have also been associated with actual returning and intention to return in shelter samples. These variables include relationship length (D. J. Anderson, 2003), more recent separation (Lerner & Kennedy, 2000), and relational constraints including social pressure, relationship investment, and quality of alternatives (Gordon et al., 2004). As previous research has shown that several of these relational variables are related to stay/leave decisions for college populations (Edwards et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2006; Rhatigan et al., 2006), these may be the ideal starting point for examining returning decisions in this younger population.

Although no research has focused on returning to abusive relationships in college populations, the amount of research examining stay/leave decisions for this group, as well as shelter samples, has recently grown. In particular, the investment model has gained attention in its ability to predict women's decisions to stay with or leave their partners, both for women in shelters (Rhatigan & Street, 2005; Rusbult & Martz, 1995) and college samples (Edwards et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2014; Katz et al., 2006). The investment model theorizes that women who feel more committed to their partners will have greater intentions toward remaining in the relationship, and that this commitment is a function of greater satisfaction within the relationship, greater feelings of investment toward the relationship, and fewer perceived quality of alternatives outside the relationship (Rhatigan et al., 2006; Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Rhatigan and colleagues (2006), who studied shelter samples, suggested that the pattern of multiple returns often found in abusive relationships may be explained by the investment model's fluid constructs, emphasizing and addressing that leaving an abusive relationship is commonly a multi-step process. Investment model constructs may also be influenced and/or operate alongside other relational and social variables that could be important in understanding young women's intentions to return to an abusive partner.

Specifically, women who were in relationships of a longer length, a factor related to investment, may be more likely to intend to return than women who were in relationships of a shorter length. Women with a new dating partner, a construct related to quality of alternatives, may be less likely to intend to return than women who are still single. Similar to shelter samples, it is also likely that more recent separations as well as greater numbers of previous returns are related to intentions to return among college

women (Lerner & Kennedy, 2000). Furthermore, given that a college environment fosters close proximity and that romantic relationships often develop from the context of adolescent peer groups (see Furman, 1999, for a review), presumably many college women have contact with their abusive partners following the termination of a relationship, which could increase intentions to return to the relationship. Finally, consistent with research that social pressure to leave an abusive dating partner predicts college women's intentions to leave (Edwards et al., 2014), social pressure to return to one's partner may also predict intentions to return.

In the current study, we aimed to broaden the research about the predictors of IPV victims' intentions to return to their abusive partner by focusing on a sample of young women in college who recently terminated an abusive dating relationship. More specifically, we examined the cross-sectional and prospective relationships between relational variables and intent to return to an abusive partner. Relational variables were operationalized to include relationship commitment, satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, number of previous returns, and relationship length (all measured prospectively at Time 1, before the break-up) as well as the presence of a new dating partner, social pressure to return to the relationship, contact with the abuser after relationship termination, and length of time since relationship termination (all measured at Time 2, after the break-up, and at the same time as return intentions). Previous research led us to three research questions, followed by our predicted hypotheses for each:

Research Question 1: Do young women have contact with their abusive partners after relationship termination, and if so, in what capacity?

Hypothesis 1: Given the close proximity in which college students live, it is predicted that the majority of participants would report some form of contact following relationship termination.

Research Question 2: To what extent do young women intend to return to the abusive relationships they have recently terminated?

Hypothesis 2: Given that college women do not present the same economic dependence and child care needs that shelter women typically do, it may be that young women would have relatively low intentions to return. However, given research suggesting that the majority of college women remain in their abusive relationships for some time (Edwards et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2006), and that most college women report generally high levels of investment model variables regarding abusive relationships (Dardis, Kelley, Edwards, & Gidycz, 2013), it could also be speculated that college women would have rather high intentions to return. With these conflicting perspectives and the lack of previous research in this specific area, this research question remains exploratory.

Research Question 3: What are the correlates and predictors of women's intentions to return to their abusive relationships?

Hypothesis 3: Women who report greater intentions to return to their abusive partner are predicted to also report prospectively higher levels of commitment, satisfaction, and investment; lower quality of alternatives (which could also be evidenced by the lack of a new dating partner at the cross-sectional measurement); longer

relationship lengths; and a greater number of previous returns. Regarding cross-sectional relationships, we further hypothesized that women who reported greater intentions to return to their abusive partner would report shorter lengths of time since relationship termination, greater contact after relationship termination, and greater social pressure to return to the abusive partner.

Method

Participants

Participants included 56 college women, all of whom had terminated a physically, sexually, and/or psychologically abusive, heterosexual dating relationship within the past 4 months. These data come from a larger study predicting stay/leave decisions in abusive relationships (Edwards et al., 2014); in this article, we focus on correlates and predictors of intentions to return among the subset of women who terminated the abusive relationship. In the larger study, 506 women completed an initial survey at Time 1. Of the 506 participants, 272 women (54%) met criteria (i.e., currently in an abusive relationship; operationalized below), but only 184 of these 272 women returned to the follow-up (Time 2); 18 women did not complete the future participation form at Time 1 (and could thus not be contacted), and 70 women completed the future participation form and either declined to participate at Time 2 for various reasons (e.g., transferred schools, too busy) or were never reached. There were no significant differences between women who met criteria and returned ($n = 184$) and women who met criteria and did not return for Time 2 ($n = 88$) on any of the study variables. Of the 184 women who returned, 38.6% ($n = 71$) of participants reported that they were no longer with the partner they were dating at the initial assessment, indicating that the majority ($n = 113$; 61.4%) of abusive relationships were stable over the 4-month follow-up period. Of the women ($n = 71$) who reported that they were no longer with their dating partners at Time 2, 52.1% ($n = 37$) reported that they ended the relationship, 21.1% ($n = 15$) reported that their partner ended the relationship, and 26.8% ($n = 19$) of women reported that it was a mutual decision to end the relationship. Consistent with previous research (Edwards et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2006), the 15 women who reported that their partners ended the relationship were excluded from the analyses, and women who reported that they ended the relationship and that the decision was mutual were considered “leavers.” Thus, the sample used in this article consists of the 56 “leavers.”

Participants ($n = 56$) were between the ages of 18 and 22 ($M = 18.53$; $SD = 0.02$) and mainly identified as Caucasian ($n = 49$; 88.1%), followed by African American ($n = 2$; 3.4%), Asian or Pacific Islander ($n = 2$; 3.4%), and multiracial ($n = 3$; 5.1%). Fifteen participants (26%) reported that their combined, annual family/parents' incomes were less than US\$50,000; 25 (46%) reported that they were between US\$50,000 and US\$100,000; and 16 (28%) reported that they were more than US\$100,000. All participants were currently in relationships with men at Time 1, although 10.7% of participants reported previous sexual and/or relationship experiences with women.

Procedure

For the initial assessment (Time 1), participants were recruited from the research participant pool in the department of psychology at a medium-sized Midwestern University. Inclusion criteria required that participants be female, above the age of 18, and currently in a dating relationship; there was no mention of abuse or conflict in the solicitation message. After completing informed consent, paper-and-pencil surveys were administered in a group format by either a female graduate student or a female advanced undergraduate research assistant. Women were compensated with course credit for their participation and provided with debriefing and referral information. Study procedures were approved by the Ohio University Institutional Review Board.

Women who endorsed experiences of current partner abuse (i.e., answering affirmatively to any of the physical, sexual, and/or severe psychological victimization items on the Conflict Tactics Scale–Revised [CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996] or harassment items on the Composite Abuse Scale [CAS; Hegarty, Bush, & Sheehan, 1999]) and provided their contact information for potential follow-up were contacted 4 months after their initial participation by telephone and/or email and asked to participate in a follow-up survey (Time 2). The follow-up paper-and-pencil surveys were similar to the format of the initial survey session except that women were compensated with US\$20 rather than course credit. All survey procedures occurred in person in a classroom in the Department of Psychology or a research laboratory.

Measures

Return intentions. The dependent variable was measured at Time 2. Women were asked to answer three questions, modeled after previous work (e.g., Ajzen, 1991, 2006; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) about their intentions of getting back together with their Time 1 partner (“I intend to get back together with my Time 1 partner,” “I will try to get back together with my Time 1 partner,” “I plan to get back together with my partner”) on a 7-point scale (ranging from *extremely unlikely* to *extremely likely*). Responses were summed and averaged; higher scores reflect greater intentions to return to one’s partner; internal consistency was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .98$).

Investment model variables. The Investment Model Scale (IMS; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) was used at the initial study session (Time 1) to assess prospective investment model variables: satisfaction (e.g., “My relationship is close to ideal”), quality of alternatives (e.g., “My needs for intimacy could be fulfilled in alternative relationships”), investment (e.g., “My partner and I share many memories”), and commitment (e.g., “I want our relationship to last for a very long time”). Response options range from “do not agree at all” (0) to “agree completely” (8). Higher scores on each of the subscales reflect higher levels of that particular variable. The internal consistencies (Cronbach’s α) for each of the four subscales were as follows: Satisfaction (.94), Quality of Alternatives (.80), Investment (.89), and Commitment (.92).

Other relationship variables. At the initial assessment (Time 1), women were asked to report in months how long they had been with their current partner (relationship length) and how many times they had attempted to leave their partner in the past but returned after a period of separation (number of previous returns).

At the follow-up assessment (Time 2), women were asked to report in weeks how long it had been since the relationship with Time 1 dating partner ended (length of time since relationship termination), and whether they were dating someone new (new dating partner).

Women were also asked at Time 2 to indicate whether they still had contact with their Time 1 dating partner since the relationship termination and, if so, in what capacity with the following response options: *talked on the phone, hung out with mutual friends, give things back to one another, emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, to study, see in a class*, and *other* (write-in space provided).

In addition, women were asked at Time 2 to answer four questions regarding social pressure to return to their partners (e.g., “I feel social pressure to get back together with my partner”). These items were modeled after previous work (e.g., Ajzen, 1991, 2006; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Participants answered each of the four items on a 7-point scale; internal consistency was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for all continuous and categorical study variables are displayed in Table 1. Of note, consistent with other non-clinical samples of college students (Dardis et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2006), women in the sample generally reported experiencing moderate forms of IPV, such as pushing and verbal pressure for sex, as opposed to more severe forms of IPV, such as strangulation and rape (see Edwards et al., 2014, for additional details).

Do young women have contact with their abusive partners after relationship termination, and if so, in what capacity? Of the 56 women, a majority ($n = 36$; 64.3%) reported still having contact with their partner following relationship termination, supporting our hypothesis. Of the 36 women who had contact with their ex-partners, the following reasons were provided for that contact: 29 (80.56%) to talk on the phone, 11 (30.55%) to hang out with mutual friends, eight (22.22%) to give things back to one another, eight (22.22%) for emotional intimacy, six (16.66%) for sexual intimacy, one (2.77%) to study, and one (2.77%) to see in a class. Eight (22.22%) reported “other,” which was categorized into two reasons based on the written responses: Five (13.89%) described texting as the form of contact, whereas three (8.33%) described saying “Hi” or having a conversation if they happened to run into the ex-partner at home or on campus (e.g., “Talk if we do accidentally bump into each other on campus or at events”).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Continuous and Categorical Variables of Interest.

	M	SD	Observed range	Percent of sample "yes"	n	Spearman's correlation (with return intentions)
Return Intentions ^a	2.08	1.61	1-7	46.6%	26	—
Quality of Alternatives ^b	24.61	7.74	7-40	—	—	-.30*
Commitment ^b	32.02	15.21	2-56	—	—	.10
Investment ^b	20.59	9.01	3-39	—	—	-.10
Satisfaction ^b	23.95	10.58	1-40	—	—	-.14
Previous Leaving Attempts ^b	1.60	1.82	0-10	—	—	-.07
Months in Relationship ^b	15.08	12.73	1-48	—	—	.14
Weeks Since Termination ^a	8.70	6.63	1-20	—	—	-.29*
Social Pressure to Return ^a	1.81	1.29	1-7	—	—	.59**
Dating Someone New ^a	1.17	0.58	—	21.4%	12	—
Contact with Partner ^a	2.44	1.72	—	64.3%	36	—

^aVariables measured at Time 2.^bVariables measured at Time 1.* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

To what extent do young women have intent to return to the abusive relationships that they recently terminated? On average, women reported little to no intentions to return to their abusive partners ($M = 2.07$; $SD = 1.59$; range = 1-7). Indeed, a little more than half of the sample ($n = 30$; 53.4%) reported no intentions to return to their abusive partners, as evidenced by a mean score of 1 on the intentions to return measure. Another group of women ($n = 18$; 32.9%) reported some, albeit minimal, intentions to return to their abusive partner, as evidenced by a mean score of 2 or 3 on the intentions to return measure. A minority ($n = 8$; 13.7%) of women reported moderate to high intentions toward returning to their abusive partner, as evidenced by a mean score of 4-7 on the intentions to return measure.

What are the correlates and predictors of women's intentions to return to their abusive relationships? A series of bivariate correlations (Spearman's rank) and t tests were conducted to determine the correlates and predictors of women's intentions to return to their partners (continuous variable from 1-7). Analyzing the prospective investment model data, fewer perceived quality of alternatives predicted increased intentions to return to one's abusive partner, as hypothesized. However, the other investment model variables (i.e., relationship commitment, relationship investment, and relationship satisfaction) were unrelated to the criterion variable. Of the other prospective data, neither number of previous returns nor relationship length was related to women's intentions to return to their abusive partners.

Analyzing the cross-sectional data, women who had new dating partners ($n = 12$; 21.4%; M return intentions = 1.17; $SD = 0.58$), compared with women who reported they were single ($n = 44$; 78.6%; M return intentions = 2.33; $SD = 1.72$), reported significantly weaker intentions to return to their abusive ex-partner, $t(54) = 2.31$, $p < .05$,

Cohen's $d = 0.90$. In addition, women's intentions to return to their abusive relationships were significantly and negatively related to the length of time since relationship termination; in other words, women who had terminated their relationships more recently reported greater intentions to return to their abusive partners than women who had terminated their relationships less recently. Also, women who reported having contact with their partners since relationship termination ($n = 36$; 64.3%; M return intentions = 2.44; $SD = 1.72$), compared with women who reported having no contact ($n = 20$; 35.7%; M return intentions = 1.45; $SD = 1.20$), reported significantly higher intentions to return to their abusive ex-partner, $t(54) = 2.27, p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.67$. Finally, women reporting higher levels of social pressure to return to their abusive partner also reported significantly greater intentions to return to their abusive partner.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to expand the limited research examining women who intend to or actually return to their abusive relationships. Specifically, the focus was on college-aged women's intentions to return and which prospective and cross-sectional relational variables would predict these intentions, an area that has not been previously examined. As predicted by the first hypothesis, the majority (64.3%) of the participants reported having contact with their abusive partners after relationship termination. Continuing to associate with one's abusive ex-partner may encourage thoughts of returning to the relationship. The women who are still in contact with their abuser might be led to believe that their partners are remorseful for their actions or would act differently in the future, reasons that have previously led women in shelter samples to return to their partners (M. A. Anderson et al., 2003; Griffing et al., 2002; Schutte et al., 1988). In addition, these situations of ongoing contact could potentially increase women's risk of revictimization, given both the current finding that continued contact predicted intentions to return and previous research indicating that women who return to their abusive relationships are at risk of experiencing greater abuse (D. J. Anderson, 2003; Bell et al., 2007; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Fleury et al., 2000).

With regard to overall intentions to return, most participants reported minimal to no intention to return (32.9% and 53.4%, respectively), which is consistent with shelter samples who report very little intention to return to their abusive partners (Griffing et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2000). This may indicate, as speculated in the hypothesis, that college-aged women as a whole would have few intentions to return to their abusive partners. However, one in 10 women reported moderate to high intentions to return, and data in the current study shed light on factors that were related to intentions to return.

Analyzing the prospective data on investment model and other relational variables collected at Time 1, few of the hypothesized correlations emerged, with fewer quality alternatives being the only significant prospective predictor of intentions to return after relationship termination. Given that investment model variables are fluid constructs and likely to change over time (Rhatigan et al., 2006), it is likely that these constructs would have changed between Time 1 and the relationship termination. This idea could be compounded by the fact that Time 1 measurements were not

administered at a consistent length of time before the relationship ended (e.g., participants could have ended the relationship at any point during the 4 months between measurements). Meaning, women's perceptions of their relationship commitment, satisfaction, and investment may in fact be related to their intentions to return to their partner, but potentially only when these variables are measured closer in time to relationship termination and are more descriptive of women's feelings toward their partners at the end of the relationship. Furthermore, the finding that quality of alternatives in particular was a significant correlate of intentions to return, instead of other investment model variables, could be explained by previous research finding that greater quality of alternatives is predicted by higher self-esteem (Edwards et al., 2011). Although speculative, it is possible that quality of alternatives is more stable and more trait-based, relative to other investment model variables.

The other prospective variables measured (i.e., number of returns, relationship length) showed no statistically significant associations with intentions to return to the relationship. The mean length of relationship for this sample was comparatively short, about 15 months; older adult samples that have found significant correlations between relationship length and actual returns tend to have longer relationship lengths overall (e.g., an average of approximately 10 years; D. J. Anderson, 2003). Thus, it could be speculated that college-aged women in this sample may not have had long enough relationships in general for the time spent in the relationship to have as much of an effect on return intentions as it would for older women. For potentially the same reasons, the number of previous returns did not predict return intentions; however, the mean of 1.6 returns (with up to 10 returns reported) suggests that despite a lack of intention to return, a number of young women had previously terminated and then returned to their abusive relationships.

Although the investment model and other relational variables measured prospectively were not as pertinent as hypothesized, the cross-sectional variables were found to be better overall correlates of return intentions. Indeed, all of the variables examined at Time 2 (i.e., new dating partner, length of time since relationship termination, social pressure, and contact with one's ex-partner) were significantly correlated with intentions to return. Women who reported having new dating partners also reported fewer intentions to return to their former abusive partners. This is consistent with greater quality of alternatives being a predictor of return intentions, given that a new dating partner is one of several alternatives to returning to one's former, abusive relationship. Furthermore, it was found that shorter lengths of time since the relationship termination predicted greater intentions to return. Therefore, it could be hypothesized that before college-aged women have the chance to move on from their abusive relationships, there may be a critical period where they are more susceptible to return to their ex-partners. Finally, it was found that women who experienced social pressure to return to their partner were more likely to have higher intentions to return. This is consistent with research showing that social pressure to leave one's partner predicts intentions to leave (Edwards et al., 2014). Given that nearly a third of participants reported seeing their ex-partner while hanging out with mutual friends and that several participants reported seeing their partners around campus, it could be postulated that there may be something unique about the college environment specifically that could

foster intentions to return for some young women who share mutual social circles or contained environments with their abusive ex-partners.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the findings of the current preliminary study open up an area of research focusing on intentions of returning to abusive relationships in college-aged women, several limitations must be noted. Foremost is the fairly small sample size, as a limited number of women in the original study sample fit the criteria (e.g., having terminated an abusive relationship between Time 1 and Time 2). This limits the generalizability of the study, preventing the use of more advanced statistical analyses. In addition, the sample was mainly homogeneous in both race and sexual orientation, further limiting the generalizability of the findings to diverse student samples. Moreover, the single follow-up period of only 4 months may have excluded women who had yet to terminate their relationships. Future research should attend to these limitations by using larger, more diverse samples and both longer and more frequent follow-up periods. There was also no measure included in this study asking participants about potential IPV after their relationship termination, even if they had indicated that they had a new partner at Time 2. In the future, research should incorporate questions regarding the presence of violence participants may be experiencing after relationship termination, whether it be from the former partner (given that violence can escalate after the termination of a relationship; D. J. Anderson, 2003; Bell et al., 2007; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Fleury et al., 2000) or a new partner. Future research would also benefit by probing further into the context of the contact between ex-partners. For instance, our study did not question how the participant perceived the contact (e.g., friendly, threatening), but only whether or not there was contact. Finally, in the future, researchers could consider examining return intentions and behaviors among young, unmarried women not in college whose social networks likely differ in important ways from young, unmarried women in college.

Although the correlations that emerged between intent to return and the measured relational variables are an important and vital step forward in the IPV literature, the current study did not measure whether these women actually returned to their abusive relationships. Intent to return was chosen as the dependent variable to determine whether thoughts about returning were prevalent in this population during relationship separation, given that previous research has shown that intent is a predictor for both leaving in college samples (Edwards et al., 2014) and returning in shelter samples (Gordon et al., 2004). Although small, there was a portion of women who had intentions to return to their partners. Future research could extend these exploratory findings by measuring how predictive intent is for actual return and which variables may uniquely predict actual returns over intent to return. Future research would also benefit from using a mixed methodological approach to both focus on a greater extent of potential correlates and gain a more detailed perspective of young women's decisions to return to their abusive partners. Finally, investigation into the presence and development of strengths-based factors, such as self-esteem and personal and collective empowerment, may expand our understanding of women's decisions to return to their abusive relationships.

Implications for Intervention and Advocacy Efforts

As the first step of research focusing on young women's decisions to return to abusive relationships, the current findings provide several important implications for intervention and advocacy practices on college campuses. These data suggest that the period of time directly after the relationship terminates is a critical time to offer support and understanding to the victim. One method of doing this may be by sharing the information gathered here and in previous research that a pattern of multiple returns is common (Griffing et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2000), allowing victims to normalize their feelings and experiences. In addition, the fact that the majority of the participants maintained some form of contact with their ex-partner should be taken into account when addressing the possibility of revictimization after relationship termination, as safety planning may be especially salient during this time. It would also appear that working with the victim's informal social support network (e.g., friends on campus) may be vital, given that social pressure to return was an indicator for greater return intentions and that mutual friends between young women and their ex-partners were common. It has been previously shown that disclosure is high on college campuses, with approximately 75% of abused college women disclosing to their peers (Edwards et al., 2012). Thus, educating college students in general on topics of IPV and how to respond to disclosure may be integral to creating a supportive environment for victims and reducing the risk of return as well as future violence from abusive partners (Edwards & Ullman, 2016).

It is also important to highlight the fact that most of the women in this sample did not intend to return to their abusive partner. Although in need of replication in a larger, more diverse sample, the findings that most college women do not intend to return to their abusive partners could offer important implications for interventions. For example, campus violence prevention and intervention initiatives could recruit women who have not returned to serve as peer supports or counselors to other women on campus who are contemplating leaving or who have recently left an abusive relationship and may be considering going back. Furthermore, such information could be used to tailor social norms and social marketing campaigns to help counter peer pressure to return to an abusive partner. However, it is always important to keep in mind that in some instances, returning to the relationship unfortunately might be the safest option for the victim. At the same time, it is critical that all of these intervention efforts must exist alongside primary prevention efforts to stop IPV and other forms of violence against women from happening in the first place.

Conclusion

Although preliminary, the current findings expand our knowledge on women's decisions to return to abusive relationships. In particular, we examined the correlates of intentions to return among college women, a population receiving increasing attention given the endemic rates of gender-based violence on college campuses. Leaving an abusive relationship is a multi-step process, which often involves several returns, and it was demonstrated among college women that having a lower quality of alternatives,

remaining single, feeling social pressure to return to the relationship, a more recent break-up, and having contact with the abuser after relationship termination are all related to increased intentions to return to an abusive relationship. Focusing on these relational variables that are correlated with return intentions in campus-based intervention and advocacy efforts may be the most appropriate methods to support college-aged victims to promote their overall well-being and academic success.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank all of the women who participated in this study as well as Megan J. Murphy for her assistance with data collection.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding for this project was provided by the American Psychological Association Dissertation Research Award, American Psychological Foundation Graduate Research Award, and American Psychological Association Scott Mesh Honorary Scholarship for Research in Psychology.

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Kelly M. Palmer is a research assistant and project coordinator in Dr. Katie M. Edwards' research laboratory at the University of New Hampshire. She has had experiences with all phases of the research process, including (but not limited to) management of sensitive participation data, participant recruitment, data collection and entry, and co-authoring scholarly journal articles. Her research interests are broadly focused on understanding recovery processes associated with victimization experiences and using this information to inform intervention efforts.

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