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# Resolving Negative Affect and Restoring Meaning: Responses to Deflection Produced by Unwanted Sexual Experiences

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***Abstract***

*Unwanted sexual experiences are seldom acknowledged as "rape." These are identity-threatening events that cause negative affect and cognitive confusion. According to affect control theory, such events produce deflection that is resolved through restorative acts, redefinition of behavior, or modification or redefinition of identities. Since deflection reduction is an underspecified aspect of the theory, we employ theories of power dependence to better understand these processes. Using a mixed method approach, we qualitatively analyze 115 narratives about unwanted sexual experiences, finding respondents framed events in ways that protect the other person or their own self-meanings. We use closed-ended survey data to simulate women's experiences in Interact, affect control theory's predictive software, to demonstrate how event reframings reduce deflection. Finally, we estimate regressions to predict how power dependence and other relational contexts influence responses to unwanted sexual experiences.*

**Keywords**

affect control theory, emotions, identity processes, power processes, violence

In their national-level study of college women victimization, Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2000) estimated that approximately one-fifth of women will experience rape in college yet fewer than 5 percent reported the incident to law enforcement. While the fear of people finding out was a common reason for not reporting, almost half of the participants agreed that it was unclear whether "it was a crime or that harm was intended" (Fisher et al. 2000:25). Thirty years of quantitative studies demonstrate that women are less likely to personally acknowledge as a "victim of rape" when they know the perpetrator, have been intimate with him before, and there is a low level of violence (for a review, see Littleton, Rhatigan, and Axsom 2007). When women's experiences diverge from "real rape" scripts (which involve a violent stranger), they frequently import traditional sexual

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scripts to frame their experiences. At times, this results in normalizing sexual violence as "typical boy/girl relations" in which men are expected to initiate sex and persist despite women's protests (Harned 2005; Littleton et al. 2007; Muehlenhard and Rodgers 1996; Weiss 2009).

Although the script approach has helped predict whether or not a woman will acknowledge as a "victim of rape," it has been less useful in understanding how a person cognitively and affectively manages her perceptions of herself and the event. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, the "victim" is not a static label but a stigmatized identity that is both avoided and performed through identity and emotion management (Dunn 2010; Konradi 1999; Lesienring 2006; Loseke 2001). Acknowledging as a "victim" is not just about accepting or rejecting a label based on the "facts of what has happened" but is influenced by cultural constructions of the "victim" (Holstein and Miller 1990; Leisenring 2006:325). Embodying the ideal victim role—blameless, weak, and innocent—is helpful in some contexts, such as in the criminal justice system (Konradi 1999). In a society that values personal responsibility, strength, and autonomy, however, "victims" are negatively evaluated and considered deviant (Dunn 2001; Leisenring 2006). This literature finely explicates the very processes neglected in the rape acknowledgment literature, but due to its grounded and discursive nature, it has not used formal mechanisms to predict women's adoption or rejection of the victim label.

The first goal of this study is to bridge rape acknowledgment research and symbolic interactionist perspectives of the "victim" by developing a theoretical, social psychological understanding of how women respond to unwanted sexual experiences. We accomplish this by applying affect control theory (Heise 1977, 1979, 2007; MacKinnon 1994; Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988), a formalized theory that uses culturally agreed upon meanings to predict affective, behavioral, and cognitive response to disturbing events. In affect control theory, experiences that diverge from cultural understandings about identities produce affective distress and confusion—termed deflection—that instigates restorative behaviors or cognitive confusion. We frame and explore assault labeling as a general cognitive and symbolic process in which women are motivated to make sense of their experiences while protecting their identities. How do women resolve the deflection produced by unwanted sexual experiences?

The second goal of the study is to increase understanding of responses to deflection more generally. Research finds that individuals who are more dependent on their partners are more likely to minimize abusive behavior, demonstrating that power imbalances influence cognitive appraisal of disturbing events (Samp and Abbott 2011; Samp and Solomon 2001; Solomon and Samp 1998). Following Scholl's (2013) recent theoretical integration of affect control theory with social exchange theories, we deepen understanding of deflection reduction by employing a power dependence approach. How does dependence in relationships influence the ways in which women respond to deflection?

Because we integrate affect control and power dependence theories and both quantitative and discursive literatures, we employ multiple research methods in a three-stage process. First, we use grounded coding and elements of the extended case study method to analyze 115 narratives of female undergraduates' unwanted sexual experiences (Burawoy 1998; Charmaz 2006). In our analyses, three overarching themes emerged: "protecting the other," "protecting the self,"

and "defining the event as rape." One group of women engaged in "protecting the other" in that they neutralized the male's behavior or modified his identity in ways that protect the meanings they hold for friends, dates, and romantic partners. For example, women labeled the event as a miscommunication, or suggested that men do not have bad intentions when they pressure women into sex. A second group of women framed their stories in ways that "protect the self." These women distanced themselves from their younger, more naïve past selves and described restorative actions they have taken since the event, such as cutting off communication with a friend or breaking up with a boyfriend. Finally, the third group of women "defined the event as rape." These women described events that closely resemble cultural ideas about "real rape," and they used language that indicates they have not resolved the emotional distress produced by the event.

In the second step of our analyses, we match narratives with assault characteristics from closed-ended survey questions to simulate women's experiences using Interact, affect control theory's predictive software. This program calculates deflection and makes predictions about responses to events. Third, we use this same closed-ended survey data to estimate a series of regressions to triangulate and support our qualitative findings. We integrate our qualitative, simulation, and quantitative findings to illuminate, demonstrate, and predict (respectively) the different ways individuals respond to deflection. We conclude with a set of testable predictions that integrate power and deflection reduction processes and provide suggestions for future research.

## AFFECT CONTROL THEORY

According to affect control theory (ACT), individuals want to experience a world they understand and in which they feel comfortable (Heise 1977, 1979, 2007; MacKinnon 1994; Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988). This view of the world consists of *fundamental sentiments*, which are culturally agreed on attitudes about behaviors, identities, traits, emotions, and settings. Fundamental sentiments are internalized through socialization and operate at a subconscious level, allowing people to make inferences about situations and negotiate meaning (MacKinnon 1994).

Fundamental sentiments guide interpretations of and feelings about events and are operationalized according to their *evaluation* (good or bad), *potency* (strong or weak), and *activity* (calm or lively) (Osgood 1962; Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957). In ACT, these *EPA ratings*, ranging in measurement from −4.3 to +4.3, are mapped onto the three-dimensional *semantic differential* (Heise 1970). For example, Boyfriend (2.73, 1.49, 1.34), Girlfriend (2.49, 1.36, 1.24), and "have sex with" (2.29, 2.20, 1.88) are considered rather good and somewhat strong and lively (Francis and Heise 2002–2003). Rapist (−3.83, 1.37, 1.10), "rape" (−4.05, .79, 1.84), and Victim (−2.60, −2.39, −2.18) are very negatively evaluated concepts. The proximity of these identities and behaviors in three-dimensional semantic space formalizes cultural understandings about who is expected to have sex (Boyfriends and Girlfriends) and who is expected to perpetrate and be victimized by rape (Rapists and Victims, respectively).

Due to the differing motivations, expectations, and definitions of the situation by individuals, fundamental sentiments are bound to be unconfirmed at times (MacKinnon 1994). Every event produces *transient impressions*, which are situation-specific sentiments. Events influence impressions of interactants, a process called *impression formation*.

Because "rape" is a negatively evaluated behavior, a "Boyfriend raped a Girlfriend" leads to more negative transient impressions of both the actor and object than the noncontextual fundamental sentiments of Boyfriend and Girlfriend. *Deflection* is a measure of how meanings are disturbed and is calculated by summing the squared distances between EPA ratings of fundamental sentiments and transient impressions for the actor, behavior, and object (MacKinnon 1994). The resultant number represents how well a given situation confirms general, cultural expectations about the individuals involved.

Highly deflecting events disrupt meanings and instigate restorative action, redefinition of the behavior, modification of the actor or object's identity, or relabeling of the actor or object's identity. MacKinnon (1994) argues that because of the plethora of attributes and identities available, identities are more amenable to change than observed behavior. Conversely, Nelson (2006:220) suggests that identities are usually established before one labels the behavior, arguing for "stable identities and dynamic behavior." He finds support for this, as subjects in two experimental vignette studies were more likely to redefine the behavior than the actor or object's identities.

Francis (1997) also explores redefinition in her ethnographic study of bereaved and divorced support groups. She finds counselors shaped group members' identities from bad, weak, and inactive to good, strong, and active identities. By managing identities rather than emotions, group members were able to reclaim positive identities and move on from the event. Francis's (1997) study demonstrates the potential for using affect control theory to understand disturbing experiences and analyze qualitative data. She also highlights the cognitive, affective, and identity processes involved in deflection reduction. Although Nelson's (2006) and Francis's (1997) studies shed light on important structural and affective aspects of redefinition, respectively, to our knowledge, no study has simultaneously explored the multitude of deflection reduction strategies available to interactants. Thus, ACT has not fully theorized or tested what conditions or contexts influence deflection reduction.

The Interact program (Heise 2013; Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988), affect control theory's predictive simulation software, contains the EPA ratings of thousands of identities, behaviors, and dispositional traits, as well as impression formation equations from across the world. This powerful tool allows researchers to predict how members of a given culture feel about events, behave during events, and label events. Researchers have used Interact to generate and test hypotheses on an array of topics including the effects of psychiatric diagnosis on coping (Kroska and Harkness 2011), responses to leadership styles (Schneider and Schröder 2012), and stereotype content and self-meanings (Rogers, Schröder, and Scholl 2013). Importantly, these studies use Interact to demonstrate that affect control theory explains a number of processes described in other theories, creating theoretical bridges in social psychology.

## POWER IN EXCHANGE

Affect control theorists argue that evaluation, potency, and activity are the underlying dimensions that guide interaction, while many sociologists consider power and status to be the "central dimensions of social interaction" (Rogalin, Soboroff, and Lovaglia 2007:205). Thus, it is not surprising that researchers have attempted to integrate the two perspectives. Affect control theorists have long equated evaluation with status and potency with power (Heise 1987; Kemper and Collins 1990; Morgan and Heise 1988), an

approach supported in recent simulation, experimental, and survey studies (e.g., Ambrasat et al. 2014; Dippong 2013; Rogalin et al. 2007). Because gendered interaction contains identity, power, and status components, attempts at integration of these perspectives could enhance understanding of responses to victimization and deflection more generally (Balkwell and Berger 1996; Smith-Lovin and Robinson 1992).

Emerson's (1962) power dependence theory is a general, micro theory of social exchange that conceptualizes *power* as a property of relations rather than individuals. He proposes that actor A's power over actor B is directly relational to actor B's *dependence* on actor A for valued resources (Pab = Dba). Actor B's dependence on actor A is characterized by the value actor B attaches to these resources and his or her ability to get this resource from alternate exchange partners. Interdependence theory (e.g., Kelley and Thibaut 1978; Thibaut and Kelley 1959) and game theories (e.g., Cook 1987; Gintis 2009) also examine how power imbalances inform responses to social dilemmas. *Interdependence* is defined as a person's ability to control another person's outcomes, which can be more or less coercive (Axelrod 1984; Fiske 1992).

These power and (inter)dependence processes have consequences for individuals' behavior and perceptions in their relationships. The investment model (Rusbult 1980) is an outgrowth of interdependence theory and is frequently used to examine romantic relationships. Rusbult proposes that interdependence leads to *commitment*, which in turn affects the likelihood of sustaining a relationship. Partners that are dependent and committed are more likely to withhold complaints, accommodate a partner's dissatisfying actions, avoid confrontation, tolerate physical and psychological violence, and return to abusive relationships (Roloff and Cloven 1990; Rusbult and Martz 1995; Samp and Abbott 2011; Solomon and Samp 1998). When a person is highly dependent and feels she cannot control outcomes, she will cognitively appraise a threatening situation as less severe (Pearlin and Schooler 1978; Samp and Abbott 2011; Solomon and Samp 1998).

Scholl (2013:16) suggests the dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity "reflect the inherent logic of any exchange" between outcome maximizing actors. Scholl (2013:8) connects all three EPA dimensions with a number of research traditions, associating evaluation with *affiliation* (friendliness/hostility), potency with *power* (dominance/submissiveness), and activity with *activation* (high/low arousability or active/passive). Scholl argues that behavioral and affective responses to social dilemmas are linked to these three dimensions. Correspondence between outcomes, associated with affiliation, influences cooperation; differences in dependence, associated with potency, influence dominance and submission; and the magnitude of dependence, associated with activity, influences the level of arousal or urgency in reaction to exchange partners. We build on this link by examining whether dependence in relationships influences responses to deflection.

## METHODS

We emailed female students aged 18 to 25 at a Southeastern, public, urban university to participate in a study called "Attitudes about College Sex and Sexual Experiences." A total of 779 respondents completed a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987), which uses behavioral prompts (e.g., having sexual intercourse "when you didn't want to because someone threatened you") rather than direct questions about violence (e.g., "Have you ever been raped?"). Respondents indicated

**Table 1.** Words Chosen for Simulations and Proportions for Assault Characteristics

| Closed-ended assault characteristics | Word chosen for simulations | Proportion |
|---|---|---|
| Boyfriend | Boyfriend | 0.45 |
| Girlfriend | Girlfriend | 0.45 |
| Date | Date | 0.03 |
| Friend or acquaintance | Friend | 0.43 |
| Continual arguments or verbal pressure | Coerce | 0.80 |
| Physical force | Overpower | 0.25 |
| Fondling or unwanted sexual touching | Fondle | 0.64 |
| Completed sexual intercourse | Have sex with | 0.61 |
| Verbal resistance | Rebuff | 0.62 |
| Physical resistance | Push | 0.37 |
| Incapacitated due to drugs and/or alcohol | n/a | 0.17 |
| Length of acquaintance | n/a | 5.60 |
| Multiple victimizations | n/a | 0.46 |
| More than three years ago | n/a | 0.40 |
| Rape acknowledgment | Rape | 0.39 |
| **Open-ended narrative data** | **Word chosen for simulations** | |
| "[He] uses pressure" | Persistent | |
| "Guys don't always realize" | Careless | |
| "Turned him on" | Horny | |
| "Flirting" | Flirt | |
| "Uncomfortable" | Uneasy | |
| "Young" | Young | |

whether they had one or more unwanted sexual experiences due to coercion, nonphysical threats, incapacitation, or physical force.

Forty-four percent of respondents experienced one or more incidents of unwanted sexual touch or oral, anal, or vaginal penetration in their lifetime. These respondents were asked for more details about their most recent unwanted sexual experience (Table 1). They were asked their relationship to the perpetrator (boyfriend, date, friend or acquaintance), whether the perpetrator used coercion or force, what sexual acts occurred, whether the respondent verbally or physically resisted, and whether the respondent was incapacitated due to alcohol and/or drugs. These assault characteristics are dichotomous and are used in Interact simulations and multinomial logistic regressions. We use three additional variables in regression analyses. *Length of acquaintance* was an ordinal variable ranging from 0 (I did not know this person at all) to 7 (longer than one year). *Multiple victimizations* was a dichotomous variable that was coded 1 if they experienced multiple incidents in their lifetime (46 percent), and 0 if the reported incident was their only unwanted sexual experience. *More than three years ago* was a dichotomous variable that was coded 1 if the event occurred more than three years ago (40 percent), and 0 if it occurred more recently.

Respondents were asked the traditional acknowledgment question: "Looking back, how would you describe this situation?" Those who selected "I believe I was a victim of rape" are considered acknowledged (39 percent), and their experience is simulated in Interact as "rape." Those that selected "I do not feel I was victimized" are considered unacknowledged, and their experience is

simulated in Interact as "fondled" or "have sex with," depending on whether they experienced fondling or sexual intercourse.

### *Qualitative Analyses*

In the first stage of our methods, we analyze women's narratives. After completing the closed-ended portion of the survey, respondents were prompted to expand on their previous responses, including "any information about the incident." Of the 344 respondents who experienced victimization, 115 responded to the open-ended section. These narratives range in their topics and length, from 2 to 345 words (M = 56). The brevity of these narratives is not typical for studies that engage in narrative, in-depth analysis, but this open-ended yet restricted reply area allowed respondents to distill their experience and focus on what was most important for *them* to tell researchers.

Each author employed a different narrative analysis technique. Due to familiarity with affect control theory, the first author used the basic principles of Burawoy's (1998) extended case study method. This approach argues for theory-driven qualitative data analysis in an effort to redefine, rework, and complicate that theory. The second author used a more grounded approach (Charmaz 2006), which encourages researchers to pay attention to negative cases and emergent findings to build new theories. In the first phase, the authors used open coding, wherein emergent ideas and themes are given a label. In the second phase, both authors applied axial coding and independently grouped frequently emerging codes and kept a journal of recurring themes. We then engaged in "peer debriefing" to determine the final themes (Guba and Lincoln 1985). Although the second author had little prior knowledge of the core tenets of affect control and theories of power in exchange, the inductive coding was very similar to the first author's more deductive approach. Intercoder agreement was 86.1 percent and Cohen's (1960) kappa was 0.803.

### *Interact Simulations*

In the second stage of our analysis we conduct two sets of Interact simulations. We use EPA profiles collected from female Indiana University students for simulations because it is the most recent female data available and we are concerned with the experiences and perceptions of college women (Francis and Heise 2002–2003). These data are contained in the Interact program, a Java application that is available on the affect control theory website. This recent version of Interact contains newly estimated equations used to simulate impression formation (Heise 2014). Additional details regarding our simulation protocol, as well as an example, can be found in our Technical Appendix online.

In the first set of simulations, we use assault characteristics from the closed-ended portion of the survey. All simulations follow the same ordering of events that begin with male initiation ("coerce"). In the case of fondling or unwanted sexual touching ("fondle"), they end with female physical resistance ("push"). For cases of completed sexual intercourse, simulation sequences begin with male initiation and end with "have sex with" or "rape," depending on whether or not the respondent acknowledged the incident as rape. Although actual experiences are more complicated, and there is no way to ensure our simulations reproduce respondents' exact experiences, this is the most appropriate sequence of events, as research shows victims' responses to sexual assault often follow perpetrators' tactics (Ullman 1998).

We present Interact results for simulations that are exemplary of our themes: "protecting the other," "protecting the self," and "defining the event as rape." Tables 2 through 5 list the exact events simulated, which is the *input*. We list the deflection score (which is calculated by Interact as the sum of the squared distances between fundamental sentiments and transient impressions for the actor, behavior, and object) to the right of each subsequent event. Underneath the input, we present Interact's *output*. In order to increase the distance Interact will search for concepts that coincide with its predicted EPA profiles, we increase the search cut-off distance from 1.00 to 2.00 using the "select options" screen (see Heise 2013 and Technical Appendix).

Under output, we list predictions for the female and the male from the female's perspective. This output includes predictions for interactants' emotions and the attributes and labels that may be applied to interactants to decrease deflection. While Interact produces many results, here we only list the first two, which are the closest to the predicted EPA profile. In order to present a number of different simulations, we only present Interact's predictions for emotions, attributes, and labels for the final event.

The second set of simulations demonstrates how neutralizations, explanations, or justifications provided in narratives decrease deflection. Attributes or labels chosen to represent respondents' narratives are italicized and listed under second simulation input on the right side of each table. We re-run simulations with these modifications and list the new deflection scores and predictions calculated by Interact. In cases where the exact word was not available in Interact, a synonym was chosen, such as "uneasy" for uncomfortable (Table 1 lists all terms used in simulations).

**Table 2.** Examples of Simulations in which Respondents "Protect the Other:" Cases 1 and 2

| First simulation input | | Deflection | Second simulation input | | Deflection |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boyfriend coerces Girlfriend | | 16.3 | *Persistent* Boyfriend coerces Girlfriend | | 12.6 |
| Boyfriend has sex with Girlfriend | | 13.1 | *Persistent* Boyfriend has sex with Girlfriend | | 10.6 |
| **Output of final event for female** | | | **Output of final event for female** | | |
| Emotions | No words in range .40, −4.32, .53 | | Emotions | No words in range .41, −4.33, .53 | |
| Attributes | No words in range 1.40, −4.81, −2.51 | | Attributes | No words in range .81, −4.59, −2.13 | |
| Labels | No words in range 3.89, −2.75, −1.12 | | Labels | No words in range 3.23, −2.49, −.87 | |
| **Output of final event for male** | | | **Output of final event for male** | | |
| Emotions | Eager, Lustful .19, .96, 2.03 | | Emotions | Lustful, Eager .50, 1.61, 1.83 | |
| Attributes | Cheerful, Friendly 3.23, 2.30, 1.90 | | Attributes | Friendly, Cheerful 3.26, 2.31, 1.91 | |
| Labels | Newlywed, Spouse 3.34, 1.67, 1.70 | | Labels | Newlywed, Spouse 3.37, 1.67, 1.70 | |

*Note:* Simulations are conducted from the female's perspective with the female Indiana (2002–2004) dictionary. Attributes or labels chosen to represent respondents' narratives are italicized. Deflection scores that range from 0.0 to 7.9 indicate the female would perceive the event as an "expected" event; scores that range from 8 to 14.9 indicate an "unusual" event; scores that range from 15 to 21.9 indicate a "weird" event; and scores that are higher than 22 indicate an "impossible" event (Heise 2013).

### *Quantitative Analyses*

In the third and final stage of our analysis, we estimate a set of multinomial logistic regression models. In these multinomial logistic regression models, the independent variables are the following assault characteristics: whether the man was a *boyfriend*, their *length of acquaintance* at the time of the event, whether he used *physical force*, whether this was one of *multiple victimizations* in her lifetime or was a single incident, and whether the event occurred *more than three years ago* or more recently. The dependent variables in these multinomial regression models are the three identified themes: "protecting the other," "protecting the self," and "defining the event as rape." These models generate three sets of relative risk ratios: one set is associated with the odds of inclusion in the "protecting the other" as opposed to the "defining the event as rape" category, another set is associated with the odds of inclusion in the "protecting the self" as opposed to the "defining the event as rape" category, and a third set is associated with the odds of inclusion in the "protecting the self" versus "protecting the other" category. Thus, we are able to determine whether assault characteristics predict the way in which respondents described their unwanted sexual experiences.

Because these analyses necessitate mutually exclusive groups, we eliminate respondents whose narratives could not be clearly classified into any one of the three themes (N = 8). After listwise deletion for missing assault characteristic data, 103 of the original 115 respondents remained for quantitative analyses. We use these analyses to triangulate our qualitative findings and bolster our ability to derive testable predictions that integrate theories of power with affect control theory. Although we conducted our analyses in three distinct stages, we simultaneously present qualitative and simulation findings and conclude with regression analyses.

## PROTECTING THE OTHER

### *Submitting to Pressure*

Over one-third of respondents in the sample (N = 48) described being "guilted," "coerced," "pestered," or "manipulated" into sexual activity. A third of the women in this category described "giving in" to persistent romantic partners, an event that produces a deflection score of 13.1 (Table 2).

Although these women do not indicate resistance in their closed-ended survey responses, in their narratives, they describe their lack of desire, male persuasion, and their eventual submission to avoid disagreements or disappointing partners:

> One night he wanted sex, but I did not. He really wanted it and would not stop talking about it, and so I just ended up giving in because I did not want to start an argument. He persisted and said that he does things for me all the time, so I just gave in. (Respondent 1)

Similarly, Respondent 2 explains: "My sexual drive isn't as high as my long term boyfriend's. Sometimes I am not in the mood. . . . At times my boyfriend uses pressure or a 'guilt trip' on me to get what he wants." By incorporating these explanations into the second round of simulations, adding the attribute of *Persistent* Boyfriend, deflection was reduced to 10.6. According to these simulations, it is slightly less deflecting for *persistent* boyfriends to coerce girlfriends into intercourse. Whether he is persistent or not, she would see herself and her

**Table 3.** Examples of Simulations in which Respondents ''Protect the Other:'' Case 3

| First simulation input | | | Deflection | Second simulation input | | | Deflection |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male Date coerces Female Date | | | 11.6 | *Careless* Male Date coerces Female Date | | | 7.8 |
| Female Date rebuffs Male Date | | | 14.7 | Female Date rebuffs *Careless* Male Date | | | 10.9 |
| Male Date fondles Female Date | | | 15.4 | *Careless* Male Date fondles Female Date | | | 13.1 |
| Female Date pushes Male Date | | | 24.2 | Female Date pushes *Careless* Male Date | | | 19.2 |
| **Output of final event for female** | | | | **Output of final event for female** | | | |
| Emotions | No words in range | –1.57, −3.29, 1.47 | | Emotions | No words in range | –1.60, −3.31, 1.48 | |
| Attributes | Inconsiderate, Immature | –3.02, −1.79, 1.12 | | Attributes | Immature, Inconsiderate | –2.75, −1.73, 1.15 | |
| Labels | Rival, Tease | –1.56, .36, 1.33 | | Labels | Rival, Tease | –1.31, .36, 1.34 | |
| **Output of final event for male** | | | | **Output of final event for male** | | | |
| Emotions | No words in range | –.48, −3.12, −.34 | | Emotions | Awestruck, Repentant | 1.62, −1.08, −.05 | |
| Attributes | Violent, Bossy | –3.07, .78, 1.94 | | Attributes | Violent, Bossy | –2.93, .54, 1.76 | |
| Labels | Pimp, Rapist | –2.53, 2.05, 1.95 | | Labels | Pimp, Rapist | –2.53, 2.04, 1.95 | |

*Note:* Simulations are conducted from the female's perspective with the female Indiana (2002–2004) dictionary. Attributes or labels chosen to represent respondents' narratives are italicized. Deflection scores that range from 0.0 to 7.9 indicate the female would perceive the event as an ''expected'' event; scores that range from 8 to 14.9 indicate an ''unusual'' event; scores that range from 15 to 21.9 indicate a ''weird'' event; and scores that are higher than 22 indicate an ''impossible'' event (Heise 2013).

partner rather positively on evaluation and see him as a Newlywed or Spouse. Interact predicts that the female would feel neutral on evaluation and activity yet extremely powerless. Emotion profiles like these are examples of "pleasant vulnerability," and their locations in EPA space are absent emotion labels (Lively and Heise 2014:19).

In some cases, respondents viewed the men sympathetically, calling it a "mistake" or "miscommunication." Rather than blaming the men involved, respondents blamed societal or peer pressure. For example, Respondent 3 was sexually coerced and fondled by a male date that she physically resisted, which would be considered an impossible event because of the high level of deflection produced (Table 3). Interact predicts that this woman would feel somewhat bad and very powerless and see herself as an Inconsiderate Date or a Tease. She might see the male as a Pimp or Rapist, two of the most negatively evaluated identities in the dictionary. To resolve this deflection, she avoided blaming the man by blaming society: "The pressures of society have made it so that guys don't always realize they are pressuring girls. . . . I don't believe the guy really thought he was doing something wrong even though I resisted, verbally and physically."

Similarly, another woman stated, "I mostly blame society. . . . Guys are taught to pressure girls into hooking up and girls are taught that 'resisting' can make a guy want them more." These narratives invoke norms about appropriate sexual behavior: men are expected to initiate sexual activity and persist, disregarding protests as "token resistance" (Muehlenhard and Rodgers 1998).

When Respondent 3's experience was simulated after adding the attribute *Careless* to Male Date, deflection decreased to 19.2. Although this is considered a *weird* rather than an *impossible* event based on deflection scores, it still produces feelings of powerlessness. She would hold the same negative attributions toward herself and the man. Like Respondents 1 and 2, this narrative suggests she has an ongoing relationship or contact with him: "to this day he still thinks it was consensual." Blaming society rather than her date allows her to continue to interact with this person who she perceives as unaware of his actions.

The intertwining of flirtation, seduction, and resistance was common when women indicated they had done something they did not want to because it was their fault for "turning him on" (N = 4). For example, Respondent 4 (Table 4) resisted a friend who forced himself on and fondled her, a highly deflecting event (34.5).

She described the event as such: "It was also a miscommunication, the guy felt I was leading him on, but these days if a girl is nice it's considered flirting." The fact that this woman had been "nice" was used to partially justify his behavior. Modifying the male as a *Horny* Male Friend and relabeling the female as a *Flirt* produces less powerless emotion and less deflection, and she would see herself as a Greedy Flirt or a Tease.

A similar event was described by a respondent who "teased him and turned him on and didn't want to go further" but was coerced into continuing. As with the previous examples that assume a lack of bad intentions from the male, this woman then stated, "he didn't mean to make me feel uncomfortable." Interact predicts that such neutralizations would lead a woman to see the male as Careless rather than Violent, a Rival rather than a Devil. While these neutralizations do not entirely erase deflection, they do accomplish protection of the other's identity.

**Table 4.** Examples of Simulations in which Respondents ''Protect the Other:'' Case 4

| First simulation input | | | Deflection | Second simulation input | | | Deflection |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male Friend coerces Female Friend | | | 16.6 | *Horny* Male Friend coerces Female *Flirt* | | | 7.5 |
| Female Friend rebuffs Male Friend | | | 21.4 | Female *Flirt* rebuffs *Horny* Male Friend | | | 8.6 |
| Male Friend overpowers Female Friend | | | 28.9 | *Horny* Male Friend overpowers Female *Flirt* | | | 12.3 |
| Male friend fondles Female Friend | | | 27.6 | *Horny* Male Friend fondles Female *Flirt* | | | 10.9 |
| Female Friend pushes Male Friend | | | 34.5 | Female *Flirt* pushes *Horny* Male Friend | | | 13.9 |
| **Output of final event for female** | | | | **Output of final event for female** | | | |
| Emotions | No words in range | –1.79, −4.62, 1.06 | | Emotions | Shaken, Fearful | –1.23, −2.33, .67 | |
| Attributes | Inconsiderate, Intolerant | –3.38, −2.49, .66 | | Attributes | Greedy, Self-Centered | –2.38, −.90, .70 | |
| Labels | Gossip, Know-it-all | –1.64, .36, 1.33 | | Labels | Rival, Tease | –1.64, .36, 1.33 | |
| **Output of final event for male** | | | | **Output of final event for male** | | | |
| Emotions | Terrified, Fearful | –.91, −3.04, −.13 | | Emotions | Fearful, Peeved | –.88, −2.02, −.20 | |
| Attributes | Violent, Cruel | –3.44, .92, 2.03 | | Attributes | Careless, Narrowminded | –2.91, −2.32, −.01 | |
| Labels | Devil, Bully | –2.94, 2.60, 2.30 | | Labels | Rival, Tease | –1.45, .40, .97 | |

*Note:* Simulations are conducted from the female's perspective with the female Indiana (2002–2004) dictionary. Attributes or labels chosen to represent respondents' narratives are italicized. Deflection scores that range from 0.0 to 7.9 indicate the female would perceive the event as an ''expected'' event; scores that range from 8 to 14.9 indicate an ''unusual'' event; scores that range from 15 to 21.9 indicate a ''weird'' event; and scores that are higher than 22 indicate an ''impossible'' event (Heise 2013).

### *Obligatory Sex*

It appears that some of these women had less power in their relationships. Ten respondents described sexual coercion in which they wanted to end or avoid a fight or so that they would not "lose" their partner. Others explained it was "owed" to him because he was "always" doing things for her or because she lived with him and had "nowhere else to go." Scholl (2013) argues that great *differences* in dependence and a large *magnitude* of dependence (lower potency and activity) are associated with submission and reluctance to act. Sexual coercion leads to feelings of powerlessness for the female, while the males are usually seen as more powerful and active than the females. Thus, it is not surprising that narratives describe eventual "giving in" to sex when women felt it was "owed" or when they were dependent on their relationship.

## PROTECTING THE SELF

### *Naïveté and Abuse*

Respondents not only protected their partner through their event framings but also protected their own identities (N = 22). Eighteen respondents explained that they were "stupid," "pretty young and wanted to impress," or "young and dumb and didn't know any better." In adding these explanatory attributes, a respondent protects her past self as well as her current self, which is older and "knows better." For example, Respondents 5 and 6 were coerced into sex with their boyfriends, whom they resisted verbally and physically (Table 5). Interact simulations predict that this highly deflecting event (36.4) would cause a woman to feel bad and infinitely powerless (−1.46, −4.37, 1.07).

Respondent 5 described the experience as: "We were both quite young—it was my first time. I said no, I don't want to, and pushed him away, but not very hard. . . . I said nothing because I was uncomfortable and didn't know what to say." Adding the explanatory attributes *Uneasy* and *Young* to Girlfriend decreases deflection to 22.9 and increases evaluation for the male from −3.35 to −2.79. However, the event still produces shock and anxiety, he is still seen as a Violent Boyfriend or Rapist, and she is still seen as a Pornographer or Slut. This is not the only example in which words related to female promiscuity appear in Interact's output. A woman who had an unwanted sexual experience may see herself as a Slut, Adulteress, Tease, or Hussy. This suggests one potential reason why a woman might not discuss or report her experience—whether she calls it "unwanted," "abuse," "rape," or something else—to avoid negative attributions and the stigma associated with being sexually violated (Boskey et al. 2010).

Respondent 6, who had the same assault characteristics, explains: "I was . . . 'in love' and blacked out—plenty of abuse at the hands of my cruel EX-boyfriend. . . . Anyway, I was young and stupid . . . that was a long time ago." Similar to Respondent 5, adding the attributes *Stupid* and *Young* decreased deflection but did not change Interact's predicted explanatory labels. Respondent 6 acknowledged as a "victim of rape" in the closed-ended acknowledgment question, as did a few others who described abuse (N = 8). Negative emotions may linger for years, as evidenced by Respondent 6's apparent sarcasm and anger: "15 year olds . . . think that life is a fairy tale. He didn't really mean to hurt you? Pshh, yeah right."

It may be easier for women to label an event as rape when the incident occurred in a relationship that has since ended. New labels aid in meaning restoration and allow women to believe that

**Table 5.** Examples of Simulations in which Respondents ''Protect the Self:'' Cases 5 and 6

| First simulation input | | | Deflection | Second simulation input | | | Deflection |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boyfriend coerces Girlfriend | | | 16.3 | Boyfriend coerces *Uneasy, Young* Girlfriend | | | 9.3 |
| Girlfriend rebuffs Boyfriend | | | 18.2 | *Uneasy, Young* Girlfriend rebuffs Boyfriend | | | 9.5 |
| Girlfriend pushes Boyfriend | | | 24.2 | *Uneasy, Young* Girlfriend pushes Boyfriend | | | 13.5 |
| Boyfriend rapes Girlfriend | | | 36.4 | Boyfriend rapes *Uneasy, Young* Girlfriend | | | 22.9 |
| **Output of final event for female** | | | | **Output of final event for female** | | | |
| Emotions | No words in range | –1.46, −4.37, 1.07 | | Emotions | Shocked, Anxious | –.16, −1.27, 1.38 | |
| Attributes | Inconsiderate, Mean | –3.88, −1.71, 1.19 | | Attributes | Inconsiderate, Prejudiced | –3.62, −1.19, .21 | |
| Labels | Pornographer, Slut | –2.44, .26, 1.27 | | Labels | Pornographer, Slut | –2.41, .34, 1.31 | |
| **Output of final event for male** | | | | **Output of final event for male** | | | |
| Emotions | Panicked, Angry | –2.50, −.99, 1.97 | | Emotions | Panicked, Angry | –2.33, −1.19, 2.00 | |
| Attributes | Violent, Abusive | –4.25, −.24, 2.52 | | Attributes | Violent, Abusive | –3.62, −.04, 2.59 | |
| Labels | Rapist, Pimp | –3.35, 1.37, 2.15 | | Labels | Pimp, Rapist | –2.79, 1.39, 2.18 | |

*Note:* Simulations are conducted from the female's perspective with the female Indiana (2002–2004) dictionary. Attributes or labels chosen to represent respondents' narratives are italicized. Deflection scores that range from 0.0 to 7.9 indicate the female would perceive the event as an ''expected'' event; scores that range from 8 to 14.9 indicate an ''unusual'' event; scores that range from 15 to 21.9 indicate a ''weird'' event; and scores that are higher than 22 indicate an ''impossible'' event (Heise 2013).

boyfriends do not rape girlfriends, but *abusive* boyfriends do. Explained one acknowledged woman: "I was 15 . . . it was a very abusive relationship (physical, emotional, and sexual)." Although calling an ex-boyfriend abusive might decrease deflection, being the object of abuse still induces negative affect and self-attributions. This is consistent with affect control theory's logic: just because something "makes sense" does not mean it "feels good." Rather than a two-dimensional continuum of emotion and meaning, it is the content and direction of deflection that determines affective response (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 1992).

### *Restorative Action*

If individuals cannot restore meanings through behavior during an event, it is possible that they may do so afterwards by engaging in restorative acts or seeking interactions with other people that confirm their identities (Francis 1997; MacKinnon and Heise 2010; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 1992). Eighteen respondents described positive, identity-restoring actions such as breaking up or terminating communication. Respondents stated "he often tries to contact me but I never respond" or "I never hung out with him again, even though he continued to call and text me. . . I have made better decisions since then. I have never had another bad experience after that one." Four respondents said they would never put up with such behavior again.

Some respondents also mentioned their current, healthier relationships. For example: "I know now to be more forceful and decisive; I am also with someone who listens carefully to me and my feelings and desires." Similarly, "I currently have a different boyfriend and I would never let him do that." In addition to applying explanatory attributes to their past selves, these women attempted to maintain their self-sentiments by seeking out future interaction partners that better fit the meanings they hold for boyfriends and relationships. Although we cannot simulate such instances of restorative action here, it is important to highlight that deflection is not always resolved, nor *can* it be fully resolved, in a single interaction or through cognitive revision.

## DEFINING THE EVENT AS RAPE

Forty respondents described experiences that are consistent with cultural and legal definitions of rape. Ten cases involved a stranger or physical force: "I was jumped while running at night," "he forced himself on me," and "he held me down and I couldn't push him away." There were also three respondents who understood broader definitions of consent. For example: "I said no, I repeatedly said no. I may not have fought back physically, but there was no consent. That's rape." The legal concept of incapacitated rape, the inability to consent due to the influence of alcohol or drugs, was also evident. Five respondents mentioned scenarios where they had been drugged, were "blacked out," or "could not talk or move at the time." Five respondents were not drugged against their will but were incapacitated to the point of unconsciousness. Even some respondents who were semiconscious knew they could not legally consent to sexual activity.

Just because a rape resembles culturally agreed on rape scripts certainly does not make it any less deflecting or disturbing. For instance, Interact predicts that a woman who is subdued, overpowered, and raped by a friend would experience impossible, literally off-the-chart deflection (results available upon request). She would feel bad and infinitely powerless ($-1.16, -8.40, 0.25$). Unlike ineffable emotions that simply lack cultural labels

**Table 6.** Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Theme Inclusion and Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Acknowledgment in Total Sample

| | Protecting the other/defining as rape RRR | Protecting the self/defining as rape RRR | Protecting the self/protecting the other RRR | Acknowledgment in total sample OR |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boyfriend | 8.00** | 2.06 | 0.26* | 0.35** |
| Length of acquaintance | 1.11 | 1.19 | 1.07 | 0.87 |
| Physical force | 0.05*** | 0.16** | 3.02 | 12.20*** |
| Multiple victimizations | 0.64 | 0.24* | 0.38 | 1.91* |
| More than three years ago | 0.26* | 0.70 | 2.69† | 4.66*** |
| Constant | 1.43 | 0.81 | 0.56 | 0.31 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.24 | 0.24 | 0.24 | 0.30 |
| N | 103 | 103 | 103 | 325 |

*Note:* OR = odds ratio; RRR = relative risk ratio.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

(Lively and Heise 2014), this respondent's rape would produce feelings that do not *exist* in EPA space.

Several acknowledged respondents described rumination, intrusive thoughts, and lingering fear and anxiety. For example: "I have lived with this in fear and it has changed the way I feel towards men," "at the time it was not a big deal but has since given me nightmares," and it "has permanently affected how I approach relationships. Sex terrifies me." Interestingly, there is also evidence that assault labeling itself is a strategy for emotion management: "after awhile I just stop thinking it was such a big deal so it would stop affecting me in such a negative way" and "it is hard to admit to myself . . . what happened . . . I think I tell myself things like it wasn't a big deal/miscommunication . . . to make myself feel more ok." What is striking about these narratives is they indicate an active redefinition of behavior in order to move on. Like the counselors in Francis's (1997) study who shaped the perceptions and emotions of group members to help them heal from the loss of their spouses, some respondents in this study engaged in conscious reinterpretation to minimize the negative impact of the event.

## QUANTITATIVE COMPARISON OF THE THREE THEMES

Narrative analyses reveal that respondents who "protected the other," "protected themselves," and "defined the event as rape" differed in meaningful ways. Here, we compare these qualitative results with a series of multivariate regressions (Table 6). Some women who protected the other described ongoing relationships with long-term romantic partners. Although length of acquaintance was not significant, assault by a boyfriend increases the odds of protecting the other versus defining the event as rape (relative risk ratio [RRR] = 8.00, $p < .01$). Women who protected the other rarely described physical force, which is representative of the larger sample: physical force decreases the odds of protecting the other versus defining the event as rape by 95 percent ($p < .001$).

Women who protected their current identities by describing their naïveté or postassault restorative acts also differed from those who defined the event as

**Table 7.** Deflection Reduction Predictions from Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

| | Protecting the other | Protecting the self | Defining the event as rape |
|---|---|---|---|
| Relational dependence | High | Low | Low |
| Length of relationship | High | High/low | Low |
| Relationship status | Ongoing | Terminated | Terminated |
| Frequency of exchange | High | Low | High |
| Recency of exchange | Recent | Further in the past | Further in the past |
| Level of physical force | Low | Low | High |

rape. Women in this category often described single, isolated events that occurred during adolescence. These patterns also exist in quantitative analyses. Experiencing multiple victimizations decreases the likelihood of protecting the self versus defining the event as rape by about 75 percent (RRR = .24, $p < .05$). Physical force also decreases the odds of protecting the self versus defining the event as rape by about 84 percent ($p < .01$).

There were significant differences between women who protected the self and women who protected the other. Having a romantic relationship with the perpetrator decreases the odds of protecting the self versus protecting the other by 74 percent ($p < .05$). Being assaulted more than three years in the past increases the odds of protecting the self, though this effect is only marginally significant (RRR = 2.69, $p < .10$). Again, we see relational contexts and recency affecting deflection reduction processes.

Overall, violent, frequent, and less recent assaults by nonromantic partners are associated with defining the event as rape (Table 6). To complement analyses that predict theme inclusion, we estimate a binary logistic regression predicting rape acknowledgment ("I believe I was a victim of rape") for the entire sample (N = 325 after listwise deletion). As expected from studies of rape acknowledgment and our narrative analyses, assault by a boyfriend decreases acknowledgment. Physical force, multiple victimizations, and a less recent experience increase the odds of acknowledgment.

Although these variables are not direct measures of (inter)dependence, when regressions are examined beside narratives, it appears that commitment to and dependence on relationships leads to neutralization of unwanted sexual experiences. In Table 7, we draw from concepts in theories of power and exchange to make predictions that integrate our qualitative and quantitative findings about deflection reduction.

Although these predictions pertain to unwanted sexual experiences, they provide a foundation for contextualizing deflection reduction within a general social exchange framework. Deriving testable hypotheses from these findings extends the potential for integrating affective, identity, and power approaches to understanding interaction.

## DISCUSSION

The first goal of this study was to bridge rape acknowledgment and victim identity literatures to develop a social psychological understanding of how women respond to the deflection produced by unwanted sexual experiences. Using both grounded and formalized theoretical approaches, we find respondents used restorative acts, modified identities, and redefined behaviors to protect their partners and

their selves. We find that acknowledgment is not simply the acceptance of a label based on assault characteristics but is a dyadic process shaped by relational contexts. To fully understand rape underreporting and acknowledgment, researchers need to consider how sexual scripts *and* power processes structure the normalization of sexual violence (Hlavka 2014).

Narratives and simulations highlight the relationship between labeling, emotion, and distress, an underdeveloped aspect of the acknowledgment literature (Littleton et al. 2007). Pairing narratives with simulations reveals the tension between "unwanted" sexual experiences and "rape." Women who acknowledged in closed-ended survey questions made comments like "I feel like raped is too strong of a word" and "it might be raped a little," suggesting a desire to avoid a deviant act (Dunn 2010). In unacknowledged simulations, Interact predicts negative attributes and labels for the female like Tease, Self-Centered, and Immature. In acknowledged simulations, Interact predicts terms like Slut and Mental Case. The latter labels are certainly more deviant, providing a potential explanation for the heightened psychological distress exhibited among acknowledged victims found in some studies: the stigma associated with the victim identity (e.g., Boskey et al. 2010; Layman et al. 1996; Littleton, Axsom, and Grills-Taquechel 2009).

Whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, Interact simulations paired with narratives reflect lingering anger, fear, confusion, and altered views of relationships. This suggests that many of these women have unresolved emotional and identity conflicts. Francis (1997, 2003) argues that high levels of deflection necessitate drastic identity and emotion work; if left unresolved, this deflection likely results in psychological distress and impaired mental health. Since females are more likely than males to have unwanted sexual experiences (from street harassment to completed rape), it is possible that an accumulation of unresolved deflection partially explains increased levels of depression, anxiety, and anger found in girls and women (Hyde, Mezulis, and Abramson 2008; Simon and Lively 2010).

### *Power, Status, and Deflection Reduction*

The second goal of this study was to examine how power and relational contexts influence deflection reduction processes, an underspecified aspect of affect control theory (Francis 1997; Nelson 2006). We built on Scholl's (2013) recent integration of affect control theory with interdependence and drew from studies that demonstrate dependence and commitment lead to the minimization of abuse in relationships (e.g., Samp and Abbott 2011; Samp and Solomon 2001; Solomon and Samp 1998). Our quantitative and qualitative findings reveal that (inter)dependence in relationships, length of relationship, and whether the relationship has terminated shape whether a woman will protect the other, protect herself, or define the event as rape. The number of incidents, recency of the incident, and level of physical force also influenced deflection reduction strategy.

Since we examine female victimization in heterosexual dyads, it is impossible to untangle the effects of dependence and gendered status processes. If legitimized gender status beliefs decrease women's ability to influence group decisions, it is possible that lower status (in addition to lower levels of potency and activity) also shapes their ability to guide interaction in sexual relations (e.g., Ridgeway 2002; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). In the words of Respondent 8, maybe she "did do everything [she] could do to stop it,

and that it just didn't work out." She was left with the repercussions of accepting a victim identity or reframing the event to "feel more ok." It may be that when faced with a power-laden situation—sexual or not—the attribution of dispositional traits and redefinition of behavior are hallmarks of lower status individuals who are less able to enact restorative behaviors during deflecting, power-imbalanced events.

### *Future Research*

While qualitative data and Interact simulations are well suited for understanding identity processes, experimental research could best test the validity of our predictions. A social exchange design could be used to manipulate dependence and the frequency and length of exchanges to examine responses to coercive exchange (e.g., Molm 1994). Our predictions could also be tested with actual romantic partners using interdependence and other relationship factors in a quasi-experiment. Either design would reveal how structural and relational power imbalances influence restorative acts (through observation) and redefinition or modification (in post-experiment interviews). Increased understanding of why and how individuals respond to coercive, deflecting events could reveal interventions for abusive relationships and exploitation more generally.

Neither Interact simulations nor quantitative analyses are enough to completely explain responses to unwanted sexual experiences. Two women can have identical assault characteristics yet describe their situation differently. For example, one acknowledged woman stated plainly: "I was raped when I was 13, so this past experience really didn't faze me." Understanding responses to sexual assault in terms of personal history rather than a single event can be explored with MacKinnon and Heise's (2010) affect control theory of self. This theory expands on affect control theory while conceptualizing interactants as a set of self-sentiments—how one sees herself—produced by previous experiences. Because self-sentiments are also measured in EPA space, the affect control theory of self provides testable predictions about responses to identity disruption.

Up to two-thirds of women are revictimized, and multiple victims experience greater negative emotion and relationship problems than single victims (Classen, Palesh, and Aggarwal 2005). One prospective study of acknowledgment demonstrates unacknowledged victims may be more at risk for attempted revictimization, perhaps due to their heightened hazardous alcohol use (Littleton et al. 2009). Longitudinal research that untangles the relationship between previous victimization, affective response, identity, and revictimization may reveal helpful points of intervention and identity labels that protect self-meanings while encouraging positive outcomes. Like Francis (1997), we expect that redefining oneself as good and powerful (like a "survivor") may decrease distress and promote healing.

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