HER SELF: EXPLORATION OF A WOMAN’S SELF IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Science in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2009

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Abstract

The present study uses secondary telephone conversational data to explore how the abuse (power and control) used by an incarcerated perpetrator of intimate partner violence (IPV) influence(s) his victim’s self concept. The study is a journey of Alex’s influence on Allegra’s self concept, most evidently as a means to an end (drop legal charges) in the unique context of impending legal charges. Using thematic analysis and the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism (SI), Allegra’s self concept is understood as an amalgam of three interrelated themes of context, roles and identities, and accounts. Alex influences Allegra’s self concept through her salient identity of a romantic partner, and eventually forges a family identity. By virtue of being salient and relational (the identities include Alex), these identities are more susceptible to Alex’s power and control. He heightens role taking to appeal to her salient identities and creates apologies and accounts that are ultimately successful in influencing her self concept to drop the legal charges. Of note is Allegra’s identity of a worker which is resilient to the abuse tactics, highlighting the positive aspect of a self concept exposed to routine abuse. Amidst the juxtaposition of love and violence, Allegra works harder to diffuse contradiction and align her self concept with the salient identities. The study has implications for women in legally involved IPV cases and future research
geared towards understanding the decisions women take in response to their abusive partner, including their decision to prosecute and/or to return to the relationship.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my immense gratitude to my advisor, Dr Amy Bonomi for chiseling my ideas and writing at every stage. Her patience, attention to intricate detail and illuminating questions have been the crux of my final product. I have learnt beyond what words can describe from her work ethic and passion for communicating relevant research to the world.

I thank my committee member Dr Suzanne Bartle-Haring for her timely and significant inputs, in the form of asking the larger questions and suggesting resources.

Finally, I would like to thank the protagonists of my story, Alex and Allegra for providing an intimate view of their world.
Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Human Ecology
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Allegra: I’m not a dog, you don’t beat me …I can’t breathe… I mean, if you love me, you’re gonna go through these domestic violence classes and all these anger management classes… I’ve never been with somebody that loves me like you do, Alex… Our relationship and this baby is priceless.

Alex: I didn’t fuckin’ beat the shit out of you like I should have a felony for it… You’re nobody to me….I can replace you easily… in a heartbeat… I said I’m sorry, baby. I cherish you, like more than anything in this world. We need to go to counseling together… relationship counseling… is what we need.

(Summary excerpts from the conversational journey between Allegra-victim of intimate partner violence and Alex-perpetrator of intimate partner violence)

The present study uses telephone conversational data to examine how the abuse (power and control) used by an incarcerated perpetrator of intimate partner violence (IPV) influence(s) his victim’s self concept. Using thematic analysis and the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism (SI), recurring themes related to the woman’s self concept are identified and tied to the context of abuse (power and control). The study is a journey into the influence of one couple’s interactive dynamics on the woman’s self concept in the unique context of impending legal charges. Using the SI concepts of context, roles and identities, and accounts, an intricate relationship between the self concept of the woman and the abuse (power and control) is envisioned, whereby the perpetrator tries to influence the self concept of the woman as a means to an end (drop legal charges). Studying how women’s self concept is influenced as a result of their interactions with their abusive partner will ultimately help in
the understanding of actions women take in response to their partner, including their decision to prosecute and/or to return to the relationship.

The thesis has four chapters. Chapter 1 introduces IPV, self concept and the theoretical framework of SI followed by the influence of the abuse dynamics on the woman’s self concept through the SI lens. Chapter 2 outlines the methods section, elaborating on the secondary data set used to explore the study question. Chapter 3 details the findings along with supporting quotes from the data. Finally, Chapter 4 synthesizes and discusses the findings, followed by limitations and implications of the study.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this chapter, I discuss three areas. Section 1 creates a basic understanding of IPV by introducing the definition, statistical picture, overall health effects and the legal implications of IPV. Section 2 reviews the association between self concept and IPV in previous literature. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and its utility in studying the relationship between women’s self concept and the abuse process.

**Section 1:**

**Intimate partner violence definition and statistical picture**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006) provides a comprehensive and straightforward definition of IPV that includes “threatened or actual physical, sexual or psychological violence between adults who are present and/or past sexual/intimate partners in heterosexual or homosexual relationships.” Intimate partners include current or former marital or non marital partners or dating partners in relationships over one week. Further, IPV exists along a continuum from a single episode of violence to ongoing battering.

Across population-based studies of women in the United States, IPV has been shown to affect between 25% and 44% of women in their lifetime (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000; Thompson et al., 2006). In general, studies show higher rates of IPV among women compared to men (Coker et al., 2002; Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000), with the average duration ranging from 4.7 years to 8.5 years (Thompson et al., 2006).
Health effects of IPV

Numerous studies have pointed to an association between IPV and poor physical and psychological health in women (Rivara et al., 2007; Zlotnick and Kohn, 2006; Bonomi et al., 2006; Cascardi and O’Leary, 1992; Coker et al., 2002). With respect to overall health, Bonomi et al (2006) reported pronounced negative health outcomes for abused women (i.e. women with recent or remote, physical and/or sexual or non physical IPV only) when compared to their non-abused counterparts. The negative outcomes included smoking, engaging in heavy or binge drinking, and major and minor depressive symptoms. Coker et al (2002) also reported poor perceived mental and physical health, substance abuse, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, lowered self esteem and suicide ideation/action among abused women. With respect to physical health, IPV victims are more likely to report joint disease, current asthma, activity limitations, and HIV risk factors than non-IPV victims (Breiding, Black and Ryan, 2005).

Legal Implications

Due to the life threatening consequences of IPV, victims often resort to legal services, like police and courts, for protection. However, once victims have accessed services and their perpetrator faces prosecution and sentencing, some victims do not choose to proceed with prosecution or withdraw the Civil Protection Orders (CPO). Reasons to recant or withdraw CPOs include potential threat of future abusive behavior, fear of economic consequences especially loss of child support, victim’s belief in the perpetrator’s promise to change his abusive behavior and/or involvement with counseling services, and the victim and child’s attachment to the perpetrator (Roberts, Wolfer and Mele, 2008; Bennet, Goodman and Dutton, 1999). Moreover, victims’ decisions to recant are likely
influenced by their perceptions of their self concept, as influenced by the abuse process. My thesis explores women’s self concept as influenced by the abuse dynamics in the context of impending legal charges.

Section 2: IPV and Self

In numerous studies, self-related concepts have been implicated by victims as negatively altered or as a resource to exit and/or cope with the violence in the relationship (Mills, 1985; Shamai, 2000; Davies, 2002). Of note is that the term self has been used interchangeably with self concept, self esteem, self evaluation, self perception, self conception and identity. Empirical studies have shown a relationship between the experience of frequent and severe physical and/or psychological violence and negative self-esteem (Aguilar and Nightingale, 1994; Cascardi and O’Leary, 1992; Lynch & Graham-Bermann, 2000; Mills, 1985). The relationship between IPV and women’s self concept is an extension of the adverse mental health effects of IPV, typically an ongoing diminished sense of self, including loss of power and control, in response to interacting with an abusive partner (Smith, Tessaro, and Earp, 1995). Women have been found to experience loss of self or damage to self while experiencing violence in relationships (Kelly, 1988; Lempert, 1994; Mills, 1985; Hermann, 1992). Loss of self is evident when women give up all other identities to please the batterer, for example, limiting time spent with friends and relatives and restricting work life (Mills, 1985).

While there is some empirical support for women’s loss of self in relation to an abusive intimate partner, the theory of symbolic interactionism is a useful framework for further investigating women’s changing self in response to abuse. The SI framework
recognizes that a woman’s self concept develops in interaction with her abusive partner.

Though not explicitly stated, various SI concepts have been used in qualitative literature of IPV. Studies that stress interactions, varying interpretations of self concept as both a product and process of the abuse, along with dynamic and hegemonic meaning-making processes utilize the concepts of SI (See Lempert, 1994, 1995; Mills, 1985; Denzin, 1984). The following section discusses the SI framework, further delineating how women’s self concept is potentially influenced by the abuse process.

Section 3

Theoretical framework: Symbolic Interactionism (SI)

SI is based on the idea that humans are both actors and reactors, shaped by and shapers of, defined by and definers of social reality (Carrothers and Benson, 2003). Three central themes in SI are meaning making, the concept of self, and society. Meanings are created in the process of interaction among people and this meaning drives behavior (LaRossa and Reitzes, 2004). The self develops in concert with ongoing interactions with others, including significant others (LaRossa and Reitzes, 2004), and also drives behavior. Society is the underlying context for individuals’ behavior (Burr, 1979) and the society’s survival is shaped by individuals’ ongoing social interactions. Hence, emerging out of and reflective of the larger social structure, the self is an important agent and product of the meaning-making process that influences behavior. Context, roles, identities and accounts are important tenets of the SI theory, and contribute to meaning making, the concept of self, and society.

The SI framework was chosen because of two reasons. Firstly, self concept, the focus of this study is an integral concept in SI. Secondly, initially identified themes fit with
the SI concepts and explicate the victim’s self concept more effectively. The SI concepts of context, roles and identities, and accounts as themes, present a unified rather than disjointed expression and movement of Allegra’s self concept. The following sections discuss context, roles and identities, and accounts in explicit detail, specifically addressing how they relate to women’s self concept as influenced by the violence process, the underlying research question at hand.

**Contexts**

Context includes the macro and micro level structures that influence self definitions and behavior. Micro level contexts include significant others, family and immediate neighborhood, whereas macro level structures include social and cultural practices. At the micro level, male perpetrator’s definitional hegemony (power) restricts the women’s freedom in analyzing their abuse experiences objectively (Lempert, 1995). For example, often men talk down the intensity of injury which leads the women to reinterpret their injury as less severe. Another example is assigning the cause of violence to provocation by the woman, wherein the woman reinterprets the violence as her doing. At the macro level, perpetrators have been found to hold traditional notions of masculinity that create an expectation of submissiveness from their partners (Ferraro, 1988). This perpetuates and upholds violence as a means of controlling women.

Context highlights the interaction between an individual and the society. Strauss (1978) specifically devised the “negotiated order approach” to explain this interaction (as cited in LaRossa and Reitze, 2004). The approach consists of three concepts. First, *negotiation* refers to multiple ways of achieving your goals. For example, arriving at an understanding of what kind of abuse is acceptable in a relationship and reconciling differing
viewpoints of the violent episode. Second, *negotiation context* refers to the “structural properties” that pervade the negotiations. For example, previous exposure to violence impacts the understanding of subsequent violence. Finally, *structural context* refers to the larger cultural practices. For example, societal attitudes towards acceptance of men to women violence impact women’s legal decision making.

**Roles and Identities**

Roles refer to “*shared norms applied to the occupants of social positions that help us interact and anticipate future behaviors*” (LaRossa and Reitzes, 2004). In other words, roles refer to prescriptions of behavior. Role taking and role making help individuals construct and express their selves (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In role taking, an individual considers the perspective of others to figure out the expected behavior (Heiss, 1968). In role making, the individual enacts and experientially modifies a role. On the whole, violent couples do not engage in mutually assertive or egalitarian role sharing or role making (Steinmetz, 1987). In a study of 66 battered and 80 non-battered women, Forte and colleagues (1996) found that battered women's oppressive social situations (as characterized by powerlessness, social isolation, and economic dependency) prevented effective and equal negotiation of roles. Nonetheless, while batterers were found to be poor empathizers, abused women used role taking as a strategy to manage and minimize violence. For example, abused women became keen observers of violence triggers and sought to minimize these. Moreover, role making in an extreme form is evident in dissociation where, in order to manage in a relationship with an abusive partner, women dissociate some aspects of self (Goodrum et al., 2001). For example, women may easily slip back into routine or ignore acknowledging the violent event altogether (Mills, 1985).
Identities refer to “self meanings in a role” (LaRossa and Reitzes, 2004). In other words, identities are personally infused roles and help explicate the self. Identities are hierarchically organized by ‘salience’ or importance. The greater the salience of an identity, the greater its probability of being invoked within and across relational contexts. Women in heterosexual relationships have traditionally emphasized the identities of a wife and a mother (Ferraro and Johnson, 1993). Additionally, Forte et al (1996) reported that battered women are more likely than non-battered women to report being hurt by relationship termination and lose more than the batterer, clearly upholding the identity of a romantic partner. With a salient identity of a mother, battered women often return to the relationship because of the child’s attachment to the perpetrator (Roberts, Wolfer and Mele, 2008). Further, battered women may alter aspects of their salient identities of a mother and romantic partner to cope with the violence. For example, women may view themselves as nurturers to their abusive partners, even in the context of extreme violence, where through enough nurturance they believe they may be able to help their partners reveal their non-violent selves (Mills, 1985). Perpetrators may reinforce this identity through coercive communication and behavior.

Some identities may be less influenced by the violent process than others, and this may vary by individual and context. Lynch and Graham-Bermann (2004) found that IPV was not related to competency at work. In fact, the worker identity significantly and positively affected overall self esteem and the self at work. This means that a woman’s self concept as influenced by her work identity can be untouched by abuse and act as a buffer against pervasive damage to the self concept.
Accounts

Accounts are statements made by individuals to explain unanticipated or problematic behavior (LaRossa and Reitzes, 2004). The statement may be an *excuse*, where the individual admits to wrong doing, but denies responsibility, or *justification*, which involves accepting responsibility but denying the negative quality associated with the act (Scott and Lyman, 1968). For example, in the case of an excuse, a soldier may admit that killing is bad, yet deny responsibility by saying he acted under orders. In the case of a justification, a soldier may accept killing people, but deny the wrongness of the act as he/she exterminated enemies (Scott and Lyman, 1968). An account serves to align the self concept with the unexpected situation (which threatens the routine understanding of the self) by constructing varying interpretations of the violence.

As an extension of their power dynamics, perpetrators use accounts to present their selves positively and influence women’s definition of themselves by using denial, deflecting blame, minimizing the intensity of physical abuse, discussing legitimacy of violence and pleading reduced competence due to drugs, alcohol and temper (Cavanagh et al., 2001). Further, female victims have been found to aid the accounts of male perpetrators and get pulled into the accounts by being implicated as equal contributors of violence (e.g., women “provoking” the violence) (Cavanagh et al, 2001). More often, abused women ironically come up with accounts/reasons in the form of rationalizations to manage the violence. Rationalizations serve to provide an excuse or justification for the perpetrator. Women’s rationalizations include underplaying the intensity of the injury or denying it altogether; as well as implicating external factors like alcohol and drugs as causes of violence, (Ferraro and Johnson, 1993) thus expunging the perpetrator from any responsibility.
Interaction of context, roles, identities and accounts as explicating self concept

The SI framework provides an excellent backdrop for individuals to define violence, its intensity and legitimacy. Individuals attribute meaning to the violence and then act towards it rather than responding directly to the violence. The difference in responding to the meaning attached to the violence, rather than directly to the violence itself, is the subjective nature of meaning (versus objective interpretation) which is open to multiple reinterpretations and manipulation. This interface of meaning is fuelled and impacted by the self of the actors. Thus the woman’s sense of self (as well as her interpretation of violence) in the context of ongoing abuse is open to manipulation and reinterpretation by the significant other - the perpetrator.

I conceptualize self concept as an interaction and integration of three aspects. First, cognition or what the individual thinks about self. Second, affect or what and/or how the individual feels about the self. Third, behavior or what and/or how the individual acts as per the self. Within the SI framework, the abused woman’s self concept (i.e., how she sees herself, how she feels about herself and how she acts as per self) can be envisioned as an amalgam of the interaction among the roles, identities and accounts played out by both the victim and the perpetrator within a context. The self concept plays out patriarchal scripts provided by the society. Ongoing abuse (power and control) and interactional patterns may diminish the independent identity of the victim and restrict her understanding of roles. Eventually the victim’s roles and salient identities are created and maintained within the power and control cycle, as described in the Duluth Model (Pence and Paymar, 1993). The power and control cycle involves ongoing tactics (e.g., coercion and threats, emotional
abuse, intimidation) used by the perpetrator to gain power and control and to undercut the victim’s identity (Pence and Paymar, 1993).

The present study sees the self concept of the victim as influenced by the many tactics used by the perpetrator to exercise power and control. More specifically, the SI framework (context, roles and identities, and accounts) will be used to explore how abuse (power and control) used by an incarcerated perpetrator influence(s) the self concept of the woman and is most evidently directed towards dropping legal charges, considering the impending prosecution. Using thematic analysis, recurring themes related to the woman’s self concept are identified and tied to power and control. The study is a journey into one couple’s conversational dynamics in the unique context of impending legal charges.
Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter includes a description of the access to and analysis of the data set. Secondary data consisting of digital audio recordings of telephone conversations between incarcerated perpetrators of IPV and their victims along with the police, sentencing and prosecuting records were acquired by my advisor from the Seattle King County Detention Facility, Washington State. With a preliminary interest in a qualitative analysis of IPV and a personal interest in self concept I began listening to the conversations of 4-5 couples. Subsequently, I selected one couple’s conversations for the purpose of my masters’ thesis. Criteria for selecting this couple included- a) availability of direct conversations between the incarcerated partner and his victim (rather than with significant others); b) salient manifestation of the victim’s self concept, as influenced by the abuse (power and control) in the conversations; and c) convenient length of the audio recordings suitable for an in-depth analysis within the parameters of a master’s thesis.

The couple had ten conversations (maximum of 15 minutes each and designated track numbers starting from 1-10) adding up to 97 minutes and 6 seconds of audio recordings. The conversations took place over a period of period of 2-3 days and were recorded sequentially. Two audio recordings were discarded due to defects in playback. The conversations take place in the context of impending legal charges against the perpetrator who inflicted life threatening violence on his partner. The audio recordings were a mandatory and routine procedure implemented by the King County Detention Facility to
assemble additional evidence that could be useful in the prosecution and sentencing in the 
viole case. The conversations were recorded without deception. At the time the data 
was released for research purposes, this case was closed – that is, prosecution and 
 sentencing were completed. Both the participants were not contacted directly at any point 
in the study. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of The 
Ohio State University. Pseudonyms of Alex and Allegra are used for the perpetrator and 
victim respectively to protect their identities.

At the time of the abuse event in 2005, Alex and Allegra, both young adults, were 
romantically involved for two years and had a five month old son, Ian, in common. They 
were residing together with Alex’s father. Around the time of the abuse event, Allegra was 
working as a stripper. Previously, she has been in abusive relationships where she had “hit 
back”. As per the conversations, Allegra has had three DUI (Driving Under the Influence 
of alcohol) charges in the last three years and an assault charge as a minor. She also 
mentions ongoing treatment for the same. Alex was working at a local departmental store. 
As per the conversations, he has been a witness to and a recipient of family violence in his 
formative years. At the time of the abuse event and arrest, he was under the heavy 
influence of alcohol. He has had prior police involved IPV offenses involving Allegra, 
wherein he was arrested for assault and violation of a no contact order. However, he was 
not convicted in either case and the no contact order was dismissed. It can be assumed that 
both Alex and Allegra are substance abusers (alcohol) and have a history of IPV.

A qualitative exploration of the influence of the perpetrator’s abuse (power and 
control) on his victim’s self concept fits the exploratory purpose of the study and generates 
rich descriptions. I use thematic analysis (TA) to identify, analyze and report commonalities
or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in a textual data set. TA has been used to study IPV in various studies (Zink et al., 2004; Gerbert, 1999). TA was chosen for its methodological simplicity and flexibility that allows identification of tentative a priori themes subject to later modifications (King, 1998). Using TA, I explored the victim’s self concept with preliminary themes as generated by the study question, subsequently deleting or adding newer themes (King, 1999). Further, since the combination of a theoretical framework with TA increases the credibility of TA (King, 1998), themes were modified using SI.

The ten audio tracks of around 80-85 minutes produced approximately 60 pages of transcripts. I summarized each transcript to view the influence of the abuse (power and control) on the victim’s self concept. Each transcript was coded for the four themes of roles, identities, accounts and context. Multiple close readings of the transcripts and hearing of the recordings were interspersed with discussions about appropriateness of the themes to understand self concept with my committee members. Although presented in a linear fashion, the analysis was an iterative and reflexive process.

Credibility and trustworthiness of the study were achieved by prolonged engagement with the data, data triangulation with the aid of two sources of data, verification, weekly meetings with my advisor and an interdisciplinary team, and keeping self reflexive notes throughout. Engaging with my data set for 20 months while transcribing, coding and analyzing increased my familiarity and understanding of it. Verification was achieved in two ways: a) all transcripts were checked against the audio tapes for accuracy by my advisor and a CITI certified undergraduate research personnel; and b) the findings include rich descriptions of relevant quotes made by Alex and Allegra for each theme giving the reader the original flavor of their experience.
Data triangulation or the inclusion of two or more sources of data (as quoted in Padgett, 1998) was achieved by using the audio recordings and transcriptions, along with the police, sentencing and prosecution records lending consistency to observations regarding what happened during the abuse event. The police, sentencing and prosecution records lend important information about Allegra’s decision making and self concept in terms of her official police statement immediately after the abuse event as compared to her statement at a later time. These records also lend additional context in reconstructing the abuse event and the immediate aftermath, which was comparable to the audio recordings.

Ongoing vigilance for researcher bias was fulfilled by self reflexivity. Self-reflexivity refers to the ability to examine one’s self (Padgett, 1998). Situating myself in the research, I am a 26 year old female of middle socio economic bracket from India with no personal or professional exposure to IPV, except via media. I situate myself as an “outsider” exploring and observing the conversational dynamics to lend a fresh perspective, avoiding the pitfalls of preconceived notions of a victim or perpetrator. For example, victims are often viewed as lacking self esteem or agency, but I viewed Allegra as having a healthy self concept with some agency. I kept a detailed journal about my changing ideas and feelings especially considering the intensive and disturbing topic of IPV.

To summarize, the study utilizes thematic analysis with the SI framework to explore the victim’s self concept as influenced by the perpetrator’s abuse (power and control) largely intended to influence her decision to drop charges.
Chapter 4: Findings

Findings:

This chapter consists of the findings. I start first by describing the abuse event that led to the perpetrator’s incarceration followed by the tone of the conversation, and then describe the SI themes of contexts, identities and roles, and accounts as they relate to the victim’s self concept. The three themes of context, identities and roles and accounts have been identified and analyzed separately for the purpose of convenience. In actuality, it is the interaction of these themes that effectively explicate Allegra’s self concept. The macro context sets the background for the existence of IPV at the interpersonal level. Specifically, roles, identities and accounts are played out and created within the micro context of the jail.

The abuse incident started as a result of Alex’s anger over Allegra being late for a party, especially because of her work related delay. During the abuse, Alex (under the heavy influence of alcohol) woke up a “peacefully sleeping” (Track 9) Allegra and perpetrated the following: slapped her on the forehead several times, bit a side of her face causing bruises and indentation marks, and smothered her along with making verbal death threats. He was subsequently charged with felony assault and harassment.

In general, during the period of incarceration, Alex sets the tone for every conversation and Allegra responds to his expectations of the flow of the conversation. For example, Alex begins the first conversation on a hostile note saying, “So this is where you think I need to be right?” (Track 1) and this conversation is about hurling accusations. On
another occasion, Alex begins with an apology and the conversation centers on binding the relationship. Throughout the conversations, Pence and Paymar’s power and control tactics (1993) are distinctly identifiable. Except sexual abuse, all other abuse tactics of Pence and Paymar’s (1993) wheel are perpetrated by Alex. Alex is in charge of Allegra’s salary (“But you’re not smart enough to put it <money> where it needs to be…. And, er, it need to go wherever it needs to go.” Track 2), threatens and intimidates her (“If you wanna go against me, it’s gonna be the worst mistake you’ve ever done in your whole life. I guarantee you…” Track 4) uses their child to question her nurturance (“Do you think that’s going to be cool with him, when you’re dancing naked in front of his school teachers?” Track 5), uses isolation by urging her to keep the abuse incident private, plays the blame game by making her a contributor to the violence and employs male privilege in demanding a submissive romantic partner role from her (“When I tell you to do something, you need to listen to me and if you don’t wanna listen to me, you’re gonna bear the consequences” Track 2).

The opening quotes provide a summary glimpse of the conversational journey of Alex and Allegra. The following sections review the relationship between the abuse process during the unfolding of the couple’s conversations and Allegra’s self concept. Table 1 summarizes quotes that will be referred to in the description of the findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Context: The negotiated order approach to context includes negotiation, negotiation context and structural context.</td>
<td>Allegra’s quotes: “I’ve been, I’ve been beat up by other boyfriends and stuff like that and none have ever fuckin’ made me feel like I was gonna die and I’d always be able to hit him back” (Track 2).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The four themes (roles, identities, accounts and context) with the relevant quotes. Continued.
Table 1 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You watched your dad do it to your mom and then you do it to me” (Track 1).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“And the cops are like, next, next time he’s gonna’ kill you, so you either get out of here now or pay the consequences” (Track 9).</td>
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<tr>
<td>“You know, you kinda’ freaked me out the other day when you had a pan of grease and, like, pretended like you were gonna’ throw it at my face because you were pissed off about somethin’. You know, I’ve seen people that have had grease thrown in their face and it’s, it’s horrible, looking” (Track 9).</td>
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<tr>
<td>“My mom wouldn’t believe that you were pissed at me for being five minutes fuckin’ late. She’s like, “Oh, ho, ho, no! He can’t be like that” (Track 6).</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I don’t care how much money we’re gonna owe the court and al that fuckin’ bullshit. …..I’m just, I’m just worried about us, you know. Our relationship and this baby is priceless” (Track 9).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alex’s quotes:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You exaggerate... you’re a big drama queen” (Track 6).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“… A felony assault, like I fuckin’ beat the shit out of you or something, you know. I mean, I understand I bit you or whatever, grabbed your mouth, but I didn’t fuckin’ beat the shit out of you like I should have a felony for it” (Track 9).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Identities and Roles: Allegra’s salient identities of a mother, stripper, and romantic partner come to fore. Role taking and role making are heightened by both Alex and Allegra.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alex’s quotes:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“You don’t need to go to work. You fuckin’, fuckin’ ride dick all damn day and you don’t even wanna come home to your fuckin’ son and your baby’s dad and..” (Track 2).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“For you being a stripper is wrong” (Track 5).</td>
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<tr>
<td>“If you wanna go against me, it’s gonna be the worst mistake you’ve ever done in your whole life. I guarantee you....but you don’t know what I mean by the worst mistake. I mean, I could just be talking about leaving you, that’s all I’m talking about, just leaving you” (Track 4).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
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| 3. Accounts: The potential causes of violence are posited to be: Alex’s work stress, his alcohol consumption, his anger, his childhood experiences and Allegra’s verbal abuse. | Alex’s quotes: “I’m not gonna’ blame it on alcohol, but you know, alcohol makes me more angry… you know” (Track 9). “I know, but you got a verbal abuse problem that leads me to lose my temper” (Track 8). Working so much is killing me inside… like it’s killing my thought process” (Track 9). “You act like you’re an angel.. your mom, your mom, your mom and all your sisters tell me you need counseling” (Track 8). “We need to go to counseling together… relationship counseling… is what we need” (Track 8). “I wanna spend time with my family and I can’t do it because I have to work so much… and you know, like, and the reason why I get so bent outta shape when, when, you know, you’re fifteen minutes late from work or whatever… is because I’m at work all day and you’re like the highlight of my day to see you” (Track 9). “They, they, they pulled, they, the judge, they’re, the judge, he already told me the judge is going to pull up your record, too, and the assault that you had a minor and… the three DUI’s and all that shit is going to pop up and I’m gonna—a—and he was like… He said, “Because, right now,” he said, “I know this is a woman’s state” (Track 1). Allegra’s quotes: “You watched your dad do it to your mom and then you do it to me? (Track 1). “You’re still a kid (reference to employment stress)” (Track 9). “Be like, be upfront, be like, “I was out-of-control drunk, I was in a blackout. I would not have, I would’ve never have done something like that (Track 5).
Table 1 continued

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**Theme 1: Context:**

Alex’s use of context can be elaborated on by using Strauss’ negotiated order approach (1978), which consists of negotiation, negotiation context and structural context (as cited in LaRossa and Reitzes, 2004). Alex employs context as a potent tactic to devalue Allegra’s self concept by limiting and negating her expression of the violent episode or routine activities. Specifically, the current context of jail and the legal system is evoked to justify the violence, subsequently becoming a “common enemy” (Bonomi et al., 2009) to be combated. Exploration of the negotiation, negotiation context, and structural context expose the process of Allegra’s decision making, as guided by her self concept.

*Negotiation* centers on the goals of the conversations between Alex and Allegra. Alex works towards getting Allegra to drop charges whereas Allegra works towards expressing her distress about the violence and how it may impact their son. With these agendas, Alex imposes his understanding of the violent event onto Allegra’s interpretation on several occasions (though not sequentially) to close any doors of negotiation as evidenced in:

Alex: You exaggerate... you’re a big drama queen (Track 6).

Allegra: I know, Alex I love you very, very much, OK? I don’t—I want—I never
wanted to do this to you. I never wanted this to ever happen. It’s just that I… I, I was freaking out! (Track 9).

Allegra: I’d rather find a place to go when you get out, ‘cause I just to—we need time, alone.
Alex: No, we don’t. I wanna’ hug you and I wanna’ kiss you and I wanna’ tell you I’m sorry, in person. …You can at least let me do that (Track 7).

Alex: If you’re gonna be with me, this is what you’re going to get (Track 2).

The overall negotiation context includes ongoing experience with violence (past and present), significant others’ reactions, knowledge of experience of violence by other women and the legal system. Alex witnessed and experienced violence as a child and Allegra mentions being in previous relationships with violence. In addition, Alex and Allegra have a history of domestic violence. Starting out by discussing the life threatening nature of violence and its inappropriateness, Allegra moves to discussing the degree of violence that is acceptable in the relationship. It is these multiple experiences with violence that become the foundation to interpret future violence, whereby the degree of violence rather than its existence eventually becomes the issue, as illustrated by Alex and agreed upon by Allegra.

Allegra: I’ve been, I’ve been beat up by other boyfriends and stuff like that and none have ever fuckin’ made me feel like I was gonna die and I’d always be able to hit him back (Track 2).

Alex: A felony assault, like I fuckin’ beat the shit out of you or something, you know. I mean, I understand I bit you or whatever, grabbed your mouth, but I didn’t fuckin’ beat the shit out of you like I should have a felony for it (Track 9).

Allegra: I know, that’s crazy. It even, it even says, like on the paramedics thing that you didn’t break blood at all. I’m not—I never bled at all….I didn’t break blood at all (Track 9).

Allegra’s interaction with her family (mother) and the legal system (police) give her cues to decision making geared towards taking active steps to combat the violence. Allegra mentions her mother’s outrage with, “My mom wouldn’t believe that you were pissed at me for being five minutes fuckin’ late. She’s like, “Oh, ho, ho, no! He can’t be like that” (Track 6) supported by the
advice she received from the police man, “And the cops are like, next, next time he’s gonna’ kill you, so you either get out of here now or pay the consequences” (Track 9). However, when Alex’s colleague makes a connection between violence and alcohol, it impacts Allegra more than the policeman’s and her mother’s reaction.

Allegra: I don’t care how much money we’re gonna owe the court and al that fuckin’ bullshit. ….I’m just, I’m just worried about us, you know. Our relationship and this baby is priceless (Track 9).

Allegra’s experience with the unpredictable existence and imminence of Alex’s violence, as mentioned in, “You know, you kinda’ freaked me out the other day when you had a pan of grease and, like, pretended like you were gonna’ throw it at my face because you were pissed off about somethin’. You know, I’ve seen people that have had grease thrown in their face and it’s, it’s horrible, looking” (Track 6) hints towards her awareness of the existence of violence at the community level and her preoccupation with finding tactics to protect her physical body as well as self concept. Alex’s response, “I won’t reach that point” (Track 6) reflects their negotiation of the intensity of violence. Further, Alex diverts the conversation to expressing his being in jail as worse than Allegra’s injuries in a way that makes her speak out thus-

Allegra: And you don’t think I’ve slept <inaudible>, knowing my baby’s dad is in jail right now? I want, that baby to see your face every day (Track 6).

Therefore, Allegra’s self concept is influenced by Alex’s abuse, in a negotiation context fraught with ongoing domestic violence experiences, both within and outside their relationship. The negotiation context serves to downgrade her importance and hence nullify her self concept.

The “structural context” is addressed by Alex to highlight the male privilege where he finds it acceptable to be violent and then forgive a woman for resorting to legal services.
Alex’s statement about, “We men don’t hold grudges against something like that” (Track 8) clearly downs Allegra’s, “You don’t hit women” (Track 1). As an extension of the power and control and male privilege in the structural context, he also highlights the importance of keeping their relationship (and the violence) private by saying, “I mean, I didn’t tell him, you know, everything… I just told him, you know, just how… I’m not like you, babe. I’m not like you at all” (Track 8), finding fault with the way Allegra handled the situation, especially shaming her for making it public. With the information from the structural context, Allegra’s construction of her self concept comes across as limited, with fewer provisions of personal freedom.

Alex also expends much energy in keeping the awareness context closed. Awareness context refers to the knowledge each actor has about the identity of another and one’s own identity as perceived by the other (Hewitt, 1976). Knowing Allegra’s vulnerable salient identity of a romantic partner helps Alex in continually exercising his power and control (Hewitt, 1976).

**Theme 2: Identity and roles**

The life threatening experience during the violent episode brings to forefront three of Allegra’s identities: that of a mother, romantic partner and worker (stripper). These can hence be classified as her salient identities. The expression and strength of each identity wax and wane in tandem with Alex’s manipulative and controlling conversational dynamics. Allegra’s salient identities are related and Alex tries to devalue each, one by one. Both the worker identity and the identity of a mother threaten the maintenance of the relationship and increase the danger of the prosecution going through, whereas the identity of a romantic partner is hopeful of the relationship and decreases the chances of prosecution.
Allegra evokes her identity of a mother expressing the devastating effect of their child growing up witnessing violence and potentially experiencing violence at the hands of his father.

Allegra: It’s OK to fuckin’ beat me, it’s OK to abuse me in front of your son hearing his, hearing his mother scream because his dad’s fuckin’ beatin’ the shit out of her. What the fuck kind of person are you? (Track 1).

Allegra: You know all I do is keep looking at this baby, and, and it’s like, gosh, why? I don’t wanna’ mess him up… because of who I, you know, who I chose to be his father. I don’t wanna’ mess him up because of that (Track 8).

Allegra: You know, I don’t want you to hit him like your dad hit you (Track 6).

Moreover, the violent episode has diminished her ability to nurture their son, as she states, “It’s like a big black ball on my face… like swollen and puffy. I can’t, I can’t even do patty-cake with Ian” (Track 8). She ties her salient identity of a mother to Alex, repeatedly referring to herself as the “the mother of your child” (Track 1). The strength of the relational identity is evident in the police records where Allegra reported that her “baby’s dad” had assaulted her while placing the call to 911. Moreover, Alex highlights his own importance in this identity by saying that he has given her “the best life” (Track 2) as she got her “fuckin’ son” (Track 2) from him. This relational identity is directly visible in the salient identity of a romantic partner.

Allegra’s identity of a mother evokes two more identities: Alex’s identity of a father, as their child comes into the picture and Allegra’s identity of a romantic partner as she refers to herself through Alex. Allegra appeals to Alex’s identity of a father, by saying, “I mean, do it for Ian if you’re not gonna do it for me” (Track 9) as a final plea. Alex displays the importance of his identity as a father with, “You add fuel to the fire by saying weird shit to me, saying, you’ll never see your son again’ and stuff like that” (Track 2) and “I’m gonna’ have to be at his doctor’s appointment. I have to be there….That’s big to me, that’s big… to me. I need to be there” (Track 6). Allegra expresses
her identity of a romantic partner while expressing her disappointment in the juxtaposition of love and violence. She sees violence as a consequence of the lack of love, yet appeals to Alex to enroll in the domestic violence classes and end the violence for the sake of love.

Allegra: Because I’m not a dog, you don’t beat me… you know I love you to death and look at what you do to me (Track 2).

Allegra: I know, but I could have died. Nobody can stop you. I mean, what would happened if I didn’t call ‘em? (referring to police) I could be dead right now. Wouldn’t you rather be there than me be dead? (Track 6)

Allegra: You need time to think about—I mean, if you love me, you’re gonna go through these domestic violence classes and all these anger management and you’re gonna… fuckin’ know what you did is wrong. If you love me and if you want—

Alex: I don’t love you. I don’t love you anymore—

Allegra: Well, OK, well then you deserve to be there then (Track 4).

Alex in turn questions her ability to be a good romantic partner as she put her “baby’s dad” in jail. He subsequently questions her commitment to the relationship, albeit disguised as a threat, when he states:

Alex: If you wanna go against me, it’s gonna be the—

Allegra: I’m not going against you.

Alex: I-if you wanna go against me, it’s gonna be the worst mistake you’ve ever done in your whole life. I guarantee you. You think I’m joking, you think I deserve it, you think, you know, I need to get well, I need to get—but this is going to be the worst mistake you ever make in your life….Yeah, but you don’t know what I mean by the worst mistake. I mean, I could just be talking about leaving you, that’s all I’m talking about, just leaving you. This could be the worst mistake.

Allegra: No, I’m not going against you. I’m trying to help you (Track 4).

However, quick to realize the importance and vulnerability of this identity, Alex validates her identity of a romantic partner by rejecting her idea of, “I’d rather find a place to go when you get out, ‘cause I just to—we need time, alone” (Track 7) with “No, we don’t. I wanna’ hug you and I wanna’ kiss you and I wanna’ tell you I’m sorry, in person. You can at least let me do that” (Track 7). Alex’s apologies are especially and elaborately directed toward Allegra’s salient identity of a romantic partner:
Alex: I said I’m sorry, baby. I cherish you, like more than anything in this world. I like, love spending time with you. I love seeing your smiling face. I’m like, love to hear you laugh, I like love to hear—be with you. Like, when I’m not at work, I wanna’ be with you… you know? I look forward to seeing you… every, every, every time like, it’s like, when I wake up, you know, I’m, you know, I wake up next to you, and I look at you and I, I just love to see you and I, you know, I want to be happy (Track 9).

which clearly elicits a response in favor of decreasing the chances of prosecution.

Allegra: I’ve never been with somebody, I’ve never been with somebody that loves me like you do Alex…that wants to be with me all the time and stuff like that. I love that. You don’t even know how that feels. That’s like so special to me. It feels like I’m whole, you know. I dunno how to explain it (Track 9).

As a part of appealing to her identity of a romantic partner (and perhaps denial of his violent self to himself), Alex initially refuses to see Allegra as he would have to see “what I did to your face” (Track 9).

Allegra’s other salient identity of a worker is expressed as a reaction to Alex’s continued devaluation of her occupation as a stripper. Alex is clearly uncomfortable with the nature of her work and brings it up to devalue her self concept, with an underlying aim to implicate her as a contributor to the violence as evidenced in:

Alex: You don’t need to go to work. You fuckin’, fuckin’ ride dick all damn day and you don’t even wanna come home to your fuckin’ son and your baby’s dad and…. (Track 2)

Alex: For you being a stripper is wrong (Track 5).

He further links her stripper identity to her identity of a mother, questioning her competence as a mother who works as a stripper. However, each time, Allegra’s self concept is highly resistant to Alex’s devaluation. In fact, Allegra expresses pride in her worker identity as observed in:

Alex: Do you think that’s going to be cool with him (Ian)? Do you think that’s going to be cool with him, when you’re dancing naked in front of his school teachers? You think that’s going to be OK with him? Huh? Because that’s the only thing you know how to do?
Allegra: Hey, if that’s the only thing I know how to do, I’ll use it to my best ability.
Alex: No, do you think that’s going to raise him (Ian) right?
Allegra: I will raise him right. Better than, better than…I will with you. I will raise him better than I would with you (Track 5).

She then goes on to uphold both her salient identities of a mother and stripper while stating that a violence free home is of utmost importance to her.

Allegra: I’d rather have him in a home where his mom’s stripping than a home where his mom is getting her fuckin’ ass beat all the fuckin’ time (Track 5).

Abandoning his unsuccessful attempts at denigrating Allegra’s worker identity, Alex then goes on to positively address the worker identity, albeit as related to her identity of a romantic partner. Allegra’s salient identities are manipulated to fit Alex’s desires and expectations, restricting negotiation.

Alex: You might feel that I’m a little, you know, I mean it might come across to you as like jealousy. I mean, it, it, it but to me, it’s not jealousy. I, I trust you, and you know, I might say mean shit but I just… I just, you know… I just always love spending time with you, that’s all… and there’s no crime for that (Track 9).

Alex: I know, I know, I know, you know, I love you when you, you listen to me. It makes me feel good, you know, I, like—or if you do something for me, you fold my clothes, or you know, you clean up the house, I mean it makes me feel good because I know that, that you love me and you like, you know, you know—if I say like, “Oh, can you grab me a pop?” or you know, or you’ll ask me if—you know, I love all that. You know I love you and I don’t know why I act funny sometimes (Track 9).

Alex eventually creates and addresses a family identity, which incorporates Allegra’s (vulnerable) salient identities of a mother and romantic partner. In his interaction with the police, Alex recalls how he spoke about certain money as “our money” rather than his or her money:

Alex: And then he was like, “Who’s money is that? Is that hers or, or yours?” I said it’s ours. And he was like, “Ours?” I said—he was like, “Well, is it hers or yours?” I said, “This is our money.” I said, you know, “We both work and we both take care of this family. This is our money.” This is what—that’s what I said to the cops (Track 6).

Interestingly, Allegra ignores the contradictory feedback from the police, about the same episode wherein Alex refers to the money as his money. Eventually, he convinces her
as contributing to the violence by stating, “We need to go to counseling together… relationship counseling… is what we need” (Track 8). Alex’s power and control is reflected in Allegra’s subsequent expression of her romantic partner identity when she makes their relationship exclusive and special by saying “She (referring to a significant other) doesn’t understand why this is all happening” (Track 8). She discards the option of giving up the relationship, which is equivalent of dropping the charges, as a result of Alex’s power and control over her salient identities.

Alex is able to manipulate Allegra’s decision to converge on “relationship counseling” by means of heightened role taking. Roles can be posited as an indirect way of knowing about oneself wherein through the processes of role taking and role making, we create and express our self concept. Alex understands Allegra’s salient identity of a romantic partner and heightens his role taking ability by addressing this identity affectionately which may have influenced her decision to drop charges:

Alex: I said I’m sorry, baby. I cherish you, like more than anything in this world. I like, love spending time with you. I love seeing your smiling face. I’m like, love to hear you laugh, I like love to hear—be with you. Like, when I’m not at work, I wanna’ be with you… you know? I look forward to seeing you… every, every, every time like, it’s like, when I wake up, you know, I’m, you know, I wake up next to you, and I look at you and I, I just love to see you and I, you know, I want to be happy (Track 9).

On the other hand, Allegra displays the heightened role taking abilities of abuse victims (For example, being sensitive to cues that trigger violence) while expressing her fear of the unpredictable violence and anticipation of violence prior to the violent episode.

Allegra: When I come home from work, you know, I’m, I get, I’m just afraid that you’re gonna fuckin’ figure out, figure some shit to fuckin’ hurt me (Track 5).

Allegra: No, because I kept asking you, I said Alex, do you put it on your mom you’re not gonna beat me up when I get home,” and you wouldn’t give me a straight, straight answer (Track 2).
In fact she has a keen sense of awareness, actively looking out for cues that signal to impending violence especially expressed in:

Allegra: Don’t… start using that tone of voice, like, that, that’s the type of voice you use when you wanna hurt me. I hate that. It’s scary (Track 10).

However, Allegra role takes to understand Alex’s present situation that works to discount her agony in addition to affecting her decision to drop charges.

Allegra: Aww… babe, I’m sorry… you know I… I didn’t want any of this to happen.
Alex: …It’s too late now (Track 10).

With regard to role making, Allegra has role made her relationship as constituting violence, owing to her previous exposure to violence that comes through in, “You were gonna kill me!
This is the second time I’ve felt like I, I almost died. You covered my mouth and my fuckin’ nose and I feel like I’m gonna fuckin’ die, Alex… I can’t breathe. You were, like, smothering me to dead… I, er, nobody has ever like… I’ve been, I’ve been beat up by other boyfriends and stuff like that and none have ever fuckin’ made me feel like I was gonna die and I’d always be able to hit him back. With you, I’m like scared to hit you back because you’re so much more stronger than me” (Track 2). Further, according to Allegra, Alex has also role made the relationship with certain amount violence as a result of witnessing and experiencing violence in his family-

Allegra: You watched your dad do it to your mom and then you do it to me? (Track 1).

In terms of evoking roles, Allegra refers to her understanding of the roles of a man, woman and mother mainly to express her outrage and incarceration of Alex.

Allegra: Because it sure made me feel like a woman to put you in jail for doing that to me… but I hope that makes you feel like a man… but it was really worth it, Alex. …You need help, OK?

Allegra: No, you wanna act tough. You don’t’ fuckin’ do what you did to my face. You don’t hit women. You don’t hit the mother of your child and expect to, to….
Theme 3: Accounts

Accounts are reasons or rationalizations that both actors resort to in order to align their selves with the problematic situation. Every account is viewed as a negotiation of the underlying identities (as quoted in Scott and Lyman, 1968). Allegra creates and accepts accounts in her identity of a romantic partner, and Alex creates accounts to validate her identity of a romantic partner, by upholding her ideas of romantic love.

Though Allegra verbalizes “There is no excuse for it, Alex” (Track 1), she releases Alex of any responsibility towards the violent act by implicating his family background of violence as a cause of his violence towards her. In fact, Allegra comes up with the first account and this can be seen as her attempt to dissociate Alex from his violent part, and embrace the “good worker” (Track 6) and “wonderful father” (Track 2) parts.

Allegra: You watched your dad do it to your mom and then you do it to me?

She then goes on to give him a detailed response to present in court that will help minimize his “doing time” (Track 4).

Allegra: Listen to me. “I’ve never had any type of classes to help me out with my anger, you know, um… I need some type of, o-of, of class to teach me because when I was a little kid, I used to watch this happen to my mom and I guess, you know, I thought growing up with this was the right thing to do. I need help.” If you ask, if you tell the judge that you need help, they’re gonna work with you. But if you act like, “Oh, I’m a big shot and I don’t need help and I didn’t do that” and this and that, they’re gonna be like, “You know what, you’re, (chuckles) you’re a fucking liar. You do need help.” You know, they’re gonna make it harder on you (Track5 ).

This opens up other avenues to convince Allegra to drop charges, whereby Alex mentions alcohol aggravating his temper, and ultimately leading to violence. The use of alcohol as an account falls under the ‘appeals to defeasibility’ type of excuse, whereby the perpetrator of the untoward act pleads lack of control over his will and knowledge (Scott and Lyman, 1968).

The alcohol excuse is supported by Allegra.
Alex: I’m not gonna’ blame it on alcohol, but you know, alcohol makes me more angry… you know (Track 9).

Allegra: Be like, be upfront, be like, “I was out-of-control drunk, I was in a blackout. I would not have, I would’ve never have done something like that (Track 5).

The reason that ultimately convinces Allegra to further extricate responsibility from Alex is his work stress. Initially, Allegra rejects the connection between working/having a job and behaving violently-

Alex: No, I’m gonna tell ‘em I don’t because I’m a manager at the RRR (store) and I’ve been working fifty hours a week. When you deal with the public like that, that says so much to the judge. When you deal with the public everyday like that, fifty hours a week, and hold down your job for forty hours a week, they know there’s something not wrong with you. If I was, if I was, if I didn’t have a job and if I didn’t work and I was living off the state, yeah I might have a problem. I, but I don’t.
Allegra: Your job doesn’t have anything to do with—
Alex: Yah, it has a lot to do with it (Track 5).

But she quickly moves on to accept this account as it relates to her identity of a romantic partner and family identity.

Alex: What’s make, what’s gonna’ make me happy is to spend more time with you and Ian… and I can’t do it because I work so much…. You know the one day off a week or the two days off a week I get isn’t enough. I wanna spend time with my family and I can’t do it because I have to work so much… and you know, like, and the reason why I get so bent outta shape when, when, you know, you’re fifteen minutes late from work or whatever… is because I’m at work all day and you’re like the highlight of my day to see you (Track 9).

Alex: Working so much is killing me inside… like it’s killing my thought process (Track 9).

Allegra: I know… it’s part of the reason why, you know, you act that, like you do sometimes, I know that. Now that you’re explaining it, it makes sense (Track 9).

Allegra: You’re still a kid (reference to employment stress) (Track 9).

Further, Allegra creates a common enemy in the state that they can combat as a family unit (Bonomi et al., 2009).

Allegra: We’re gonna work things out. I don’t care how much money we’re gonna owe the court and al that fuckin’ bullshit…I’m just, I’m just worried about us, you know. Our relationship and this baby is priceless (Track 9).
Sykes and Matza (1957) presented four subdivisions of justification (involves accepting responsibility but denying wrongdoing), two of which are relevant and discussed below. Justifications are used to protect one’s identity (Hewitt, 1976). Alex’s justifications downgrade Allegra’s self concept when compared to his and serve to protect his own self concept. This reinforces and strengthens Allegra’s image of the good parts of Alex, which is a reflection of her choice of life partner, and in turn a question of her positive perception of herself (self concept). As a result of Alex’s abuse (power and control), Allegra’s self concept can be seen as tied to her relational identity, which means she has to create some positive perception of Alex, to positively perceive her own self concept.

Denial of injury: In denial of injury, the untoward act is deemed permissible since no one is injured, or since an insignificant person (from the community perspective) was hurt or since the act has trifling consequences (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Alex makes their relationship private and denies her injury. Alex calls Allegra a “drama queen” (Track 6) and someone who “over reacts” (Track 6) and “freaks out” (Track 8). This can be seen as a reconstruction of the violent events for Allegra, nullifying her interpretation and rendering her self concept as invisible. For example, when Allegra expresses how hard she works for her money stating, “I worked so hard for that, all day yesterday and you just took it. I don’t like that feeling at all” (Track 10). To this Alex replies, “I don’t like the feeling of you being late twenty minutes” (Track 10). This can be seen as Alex’s attempt to elevate his needs and expectations when compared to Allegra’s. Alex also reinterprets her injury as undeserving of a felony when he says, “I didn’t beat the shit out of you…” (Track 9). In fact, Allegra later apologizes
about “being scared and freaking out” (Track 9) and eventually recants her original statement and drops charges.

**Denying the victim:** In denial of victim, the victim is seen as deserving of the problematic act (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Alex negates Allegra’s position as a victim by implicating her “verbal abuse problem” (Track 8) as “adding fuel to the fire” (Track 2). Strategically pointing out and augmenting Allegra’s flaws, Alex devalues her self concept, suggesting she deserved the violence.

Alex: I know, but you got a verbal abuse problem that leads me to lose my temper (Track 8).

Alex: You act like you’re an angel… your mom, your mom, your mom and all your sisters tell me you need counseling (Track 8).

Alex blatantly ignores her victim identity especially when she tries to describe her injuries on multiple occasions-

Allegra: I hope that my face doesn’t scar, or anything.
Alex: I just don’t know why I parked the car. I don’t know if I, I hit the, thing and flattened one of the tires or what (Track 6).

Yet again deviating from Allegra’s victim status when she refers to her increased smoking (cigarettes) due to stress, Alex replies, “…stressed out about what? You’re not in here. I am” (Track 6). He systematically focuses on what he perceives to be her shortcomings; mentioning her work as a stripper, her prior assault charges and DUIs (Driving Under the Influence of alcohol), yet again making her deserving of the violence.

Alex: They, they, they pulled, they, the judge, they’re, the judge, he already told me the judge is going to pull up your record, too, and the assault that you had a minor and… the three DUI’s and all that shit is going to pop up and I’m gonna—a-and he was like… He said, “Because, right now,” he said, “I know this is a woman’s state” (Track 1).

Allegra’s attempt to salvage her self concept with, “I’m a good girl. I don’t—I’m not that bad of a
person. I'm not hard to get along with, you know” (Track 8) is clearly overpowered by Alex’s, “You act like you’re an angel” (Track 8) and “We need to go to counseling together... relationship counseling...is what we need” (Track 8).

When an account is acknowledged and accepted, the relationship attains equilibrium (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Allegra succumbs to the accounts as they are tailor-made to address her salient identity of a romantic partner. Alex is thus successful in making Allegra a contributor in the creation of violence.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion

This chapter summarizes the findings, study limitations and future directions for research. As a postscript, I discuss my experience of arriving at the findings as a self-reflexive exercise.

Allegra’s self-concept is largely dictated by Alex’s abuse. Alex’s tangible abuse tactics (for example—controlling Allegra’s income and commanding voice) and intangible abuse tactics (for example—periodically restricting Allegra’s communication by cutting her off and slipping into routine conversations) serve to consistently devalue Allegra’s self-concept. Since the self-concept drives behavior, manipulating it is a potent and certain way of exercising the abuse. Alex degrades every role and identity of Allegra and pulls her into the accounts created to explain the causes and consequences (his incarceration) of the violent episode. Evidently, this degradation is aimed to “keep her in place” or under control. Alex places Allegra and her needs as subservient to his. This elevates his own self-concept which works to invalidate Allegra’s self-concept, making her responsible for and deserving of the violence.

The findings are represented in figure 1. (Of note is that the findings are not as deceptively linear as represented pictorially, but are intended to simplify understanding). Though the original research question centers on the influence of Alex’s abuse (power and control) on Allegra’s self-concept, considering the context of impending legal charges, this
influence is largely aimed at getting the legal charges dropped. Specifically, Alex influences Allegra’s self concept through her salient identity of a romantic partner and the family identity. By virtue of being salient and relational (the identities include Alex), the identities are more susceptible to Alex’s power and control. Further, these identities in tandem with the ongoing abuse become the basis for the generation and acceptance of accounts that ultimately impact Allegra’s decision to drop charges. Initially, Allegra’s salient identities of a worker and mother are outside Alex’s power and control. The worker identity is consistently resistant to the abuse, by virtue of being non-relational (does not include Alex). However, the identity of a mother eventually gets subsumed under the salient identity of a romantic partner, finally both listed under the family identity created by Alex. The salient identities are a reflection of ongoing contextual emphasis on women’s relational identity. The micro factors (especially jail and significant others’ reactions) and macro contextual factors (especially traditional gender beliefs) play out in the conversational dynamics and impact Allegra’s decision making.
Coversational Dynamics:

Micro context: Jail/significant others’s reactions

- Alex' abuse (power and control)
- Allegra's self concept-salient identity of a romantic partner
- Allegra drops charges

Macro context: Gender norms

- Allegra’s salient identity of a worker

Figure 1. Pictorial representation of the findings.

The initial flow of the conversation is centered on the expression of outrage at the life threatening experience of the violent episode for Allegra and the angst of being incarcerated for Alex. The conversation slowly moves towards specific details of possible prosecution and conviction, at which point the blame game begins. The turning point in the conversation in favor of Alex is his apology to Allegra, disguised under his power and control dynamics and meant to influence her self concept through her salient identity of a romantic partner. The remaining conversations are aimed towards strengthening their family identity and fighting the repercussions of the violent episode like Alex’s incarceration and his absence at work (rather than discussion about the Allegra and her
injuries). The spontaneity of the conversations is more or less intact even with the knowledge of being recorded. Of note is that Allegra picks up every single call made by Alex, which probably reflects her willingness to work out the relationship.

Among Allegra’s three salient identities of a worker, mother and a romantic partner, the romantic partner identity emerges as the most salient. Allegra’s salient identities of a stripper and mother threaten the future of the relationship and increase the chances of prosecution going through. On the other hand, her salient identity of a romantic partner contributes to the upkeep of the relationship and the dropping of charges. Thus, the maintenance of the relationship and the possibly of prosecution are inter related. Alex’s final account and solution of relationship counseling directly addresses Allegra’s identity of a romantic partner. He further posits his work duration and related stress, along with temper and alcohol issues as interfering with his ability to be a good romantic partner. Wilkinson and Hamerschlag (2004) listed these factors as situational factors that contribute to violence. Cavanagh et al (2001) found similar results where perpetrators plead to reduced competence due to alcohol and temper.

The salience attributed to the identities of romantic partner and mother is an expression of the contextual emphasis on the relational/cultural identities of women. This is consistent with previous findings from Dobash and Dobash (1979) and Rosen (1998). Rosen (1998) emphasized the importance of maintaining relationships for women, and abused women deriving their primary identities from the abusive partner. The salient identity also drives the accounts of behavior, as ultimately Alex’s increased role taking in the form of a loving apology to her identity of a romantic partner that largely shapes her decision to drop charges. When Allegra contemplates temporary physical distance to re-evaluate the
relationship, Alex tries to blame Allegra for ending the relationship. Since physical distance directly affects the power and control Alex can exercise, he is quick to redefine the relationship positively, as the “best” aspect of her life. This serves to directly impact Allegra’s self concept as incapable of making accurate judgments hinting to the incorrect decision making (taking legal help) in the present situation with impending legal charges. Of note is that both Alex and Allegra repeatedly address each other through their child. It is possible that Allegra feels safer while trying to point out Alex’s violence by evoking his identity of a father rather than directly.

Allegra displays a healthy expression of self concept when she uses self preservation strategies like resorting to legal services for protection and repeatedly positing the inappropriateness of violence to Alex in the conversations. Allegra’s self concept also emerges strong and positive in her identity of a worker. Alex is unable to wield his power and control in this area as she actively excludes him from this identity, by rejecting his strategy of tying her stripper identity with her identity of a mother. However, Allegra’s subsequent attempt to protect her self concept may actually be harmful for her especially when she separates the violent side of Alex from his good parts of a worker and father. As a strategy to protect her own self concept in making a good choice in Alex, she mentions her choice in selecting her partner, implicates intergenerational transmission of violence and the influence of alcohol, extricating him from responsibility. This renders the violence invisible and as a one time event. While Allegra bifurcates his good and bad parts, Alex’s attempt is to degrade Allegra in entirety. Interestingly, though restricted, Allegra is able to express herself effectively in the present context, which may create a positive thrust for the self concept.
In sum, factors that expose Allegra’s self concept for manipulation are centered on her meaning making process that arises in her interaction with Alex’s abuse (power and control). The long standing existence of violence in Allegra’s life possibly lead her to construct a self concept that accommodates violence. Factors like Alex’s confessional accounts, Allegra’s stance as his nurturer/savior and her salient identity of a romantic partner may serve to strengthen this accommodation. In addition, the conversations are full of contradiction. This is a glimpse into the dynamic nature of meaning making that arises in order to keep the self concept aligned to the salient identity. For example, initially, Allegra strongly states that one’s work has nothing to do with being violent. However, once Alex appeals to her identity of a romantic partner linking work stress (expressed as violence) and spending time away from his family, Allegra finds it acceptable. Allegra demonstrates awareness of the violence dynamics by mentioning the futility of any classes mandated by the court and the guarantee of violence in future (futility of classes, once a man). However, her need for and to be a romantic partner and a two parent family for their child overrides all others considerations.

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the result of the impending prosecution was known and may have influenced the analysis to fit in with the known result. For example, Allegra’s decision to drop charges is evident in the conversations. But if this had not been supported by the police records, Allegra’s self concept would have been discussed based on the anticipated decision to drop the charges versus a definitive decision to drop charges. However, the exploratory nature of this study makes it valuable nevertheless, in understanding what aspects of the abuse process affect the self concept. Secondly, as this is a qualitative study focused on one couple and the findings are not intended to accurately
reflect how other abuse victims’ self concept is influenced by abuse. Thirdly, this study used the specialized lens of SI with template analysis but usage of diverse qualitative analytic methods and theoretical frameworks may focus on other aspects of the conversational data and yield varied results. For example, while the SI framework focuses on the ‘why’ of the abuse dynamics, a systemic perspective can explicate the ‘how’ of the abuse process. The systemic perspective would shed light on domestic violence as a system to be understood as a whole (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2004), rather than delineating isolated or linear interactions between the perpetrator and the victim. Of special mention is the highly sensitive context of the conversation (jail), which may alter the interaction in many ways. For example, the conversations may provide a window to talk about hitherto not discussed issue of Alex’s work stress as the main cause of his violence. Further, the woman’s expression of her feelings and thoughts may be different in face to face routine (abusive) interactions versus in a high pressure decision making context like the present one. Also, there is a specific aim to the conversations from the perpetrator’s point of view (to drop charges) which is different from ongoing routine abuse.

The study has potential implications for intervention in legally-involved IPV cases and research. With regard to intervention, evoking and validating a salient identity that is resistant to the abuse can affect subsequent decision making positively. For example, in the present study, Allegra’s identity of a worker-stripper is found to be resistant to the abuse whereas her identity of a romantic partner is most influenced by Alex’s power and control. In her identity of a worker-stripper, Allegra is able to objectively analyze the situation. For example, she mentions that there is no relationship between Alex’s work and his violence but accepts this very same association in her identity of a romantic partner. The positive
influence of employment on abused women has been demonstrated previously (Lynch and Graham-Bermann, 2004). Since the meaning of the violent event is created in hind sight and the incarcerated perpetrators have access to the victims via telephone, the perpetrator can still exercise his abuse. Women can be educated about the importance of rejecting the calls until they have understood the situation without the perpetrator’s influence. There is an air of privacy around this public display of the repercussions of the violent episode by both Alex and Allegra. For example, Alex is particular about Allegra not revealing his incarceration at his work place or to his colleagues, closing any doors to newer interpretations. Here in lies the danger of re-perpetration of violence. Increased exposure of the violent episode within the micro and macro level context can call for validation of the woman’s self concept. For example, Allegra may receive inputs about the devastating consequence of violence from various sources over a period of time. Micro level sources may include other significant others, friends and family. Macro level sources are formal networks like social work agencies and court advocates. With regard to research, studies can examine specific intervention strategies centered on identifying the salient identity and emphasizing meaning making by the victims, which is as independent as possible from the perpetrator. Independent meaning making may be especially difficult considering the perpetrator’s pervasive hold on the victim. Some amount of alternative meaning making, irrespective of the victim’s readiness may help reduce subsequent victimization. The short duration of decision making must be given special consideration, as the jail stay typically ranges from several days to a week. Further, the conversations may serve as an excellent medium to explore day to day interactional patterns between couples which can help identify the pattern of coercion and the specific ways in which perpetrators exercise abuse and
victims succumb. The SI framework accords agency to the victims and the impact of this agency on women’s self concept amidst the abuse can also be explored.

Conclusion

This study used conversational data to examine how the abuse (power and control) used by an incarcerated perpetrator of intimate partner violence influence(s) his victim’s self concept. Using thematic analysis and the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, the woman’s self concept was conceptualized as an amalgam of the four themes of roles, identities, accounts and context. The perpetrator’s influence on the victim’s self concept is most evident as an attempt to manipulate her decision to drop charges. The perpetrator influenced the victim’s self concept, through her salient identity of a romantic partner, eventually forging a family identity. With heightened role taking, he creates apologies and accounts that are ultimately successful in influencing the woman’s self concept to drop the legal charges. The victim’s identity of a worker deserves special mention because of its resilience to the abuse tactics, highlighting the positive aspect of a self concept exposed to routine abuse. The study envisioned and observed an intricate pattern of interaction between the abuse and the victim’s self concept. The study has implications for women in legally involved IPV cases and future research geared towards understanding the decisions women take in response to their partner, including their decision to prosecute and/or to return to the relationship.

(Postscript: As a 25 year old female with no previous professional and personal exposure to IPV, except via media, my first focus was the victim’s emotions. Sympathizing with the victim was natural and easy. The abuse was subtle as well as obvious and it was fascinating
to observe Allegra’s journey to finally drop the charges. Dissipating my myths, Allegra came across as vocal about her needs and highly self aware of the consequences and triggers of abuse. With some reservations, I also empathized with Alex in order to understand his impact on Allegra. In a rare moment of self expression, Alex comes across as stuck in his own abuse cycle. I found it challenging to present the conversational dynamics succinctly, yet retaining its complexity. I hope to strengthen the understanding of self concept and its invaluable contribution in disentangling complex abuse processes through this study).
References


