

Title: IPV experience, self-silencing, and compliance with unwanted sex among undergraduate women

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Abstract (500 words max.): Intimate partner violence (IPV), comprised of psychological/emotional, physical, and/or sexual violence, is a serious social problem, with young women under 25 continually being at highest risk (Breiding et al., 2014). Women are disproportionately affected by IPV victimization and other consequences of living in an androcentric (i.e., male-centered) society (Bem, 2007). In the current sociocultural context, women are taught that ‘good’ women are to be selfless. They are expected to have as a life goal seeking and maintaining intimate relationships (relational self theory; Jordan, 1985, 1991). Attempting to meet these expectations, women may learn self-silencing behaviours, which involve putting one’s partner’s needs first, inhibiting their own self-expressions in an attempt to maintain the intimate relationship (Jack & Dill, 1992). IPV is a context that may make this even more likely.

Self-silencing, although seemingly useful in the moment, has many consequences within the relationship (Woods, 2012). One potential consequence may be sexual compliance – or consensually engaging in undesired sex (O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Although sexual compliance usually occurs without coercion, women may be more likely to engage in it if there is a fear of impending violence (Walker, 2000). As well, women may be more likely to comply with unwanted sex if they have experienced previous sexual violence at the hands of their intimate male partners (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Therefore, this study aimed to extend the literature on IPV and self-silencing to investigate the role of IPV (i.e., type and frequency of abuse) on self-silencing, and sexual compliance among women.

We recruited young women ($N = 304$) from a mid-sized university and they completed measures of abuse victimization, self-silencing behaviours, and sexual compliance. Women’s experiences were categorized as representing 1) no abuse, 2) psychological/emotional and/or physical abuse but no sexual abuse, or 3) sexual abuse (with or without other forms of abuse). Higher frequency of abuse (collapsed across types) was associated with more self-silencing and sexual compliance. The type of abuse did not matter for self-silencing; the more frequent the abuse, the more women self-silenced. By contrast, sexual abuse was uniquely implicated in women’s sexual compliance. Women who had experienced sexual abuse also had more frequent abuse experiences overall; however, the presence of sexual violence predicted sexual compliance beyond how frequently women experienced abuse.

This is one of the first studies to provide evidence for the role of sexual IPV in predicting sexual compliance among young women. This study also provided preliminary evidence supporting relational self theory as a framework for understanding women’s experiences of IPV in a sociocultural context where messages about how women “should” be are rampant. Future directions and limitations are discussed.