

# Remaining in a situationally aggressive relationship: The role of relationship self-efficacy

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## Abstract

Relationship self-efficacy (RSE) is the belief that one can resolve relationship conflicts, and it may lead victims of situational violence to remain in their relationships because they expect to minimize subsequent violence. Indeed, a longitudinal study of two samples of college students demonstrated that RSE moderates the effects of victimization on relationship dissolution; intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization was positively associated with dissolution among intimates low in RSE but was unassociated with dissolution among intimates high in RSE. Interestingly, although RSE was negatively associated with dissolution among victims, it was associated with experiencing less subsequent IPV in one sample. Ultimately, whether victims' RSE is adaptive may depend on the extent to which any minimization of conflicts eliminates violence.

It is not uncommon for intimates to resort to physical violence in the midst of interpersonal conflict. Indeed, Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, and Fiebert's (2012) recent review of over 200 studies revealed that a quarter of both men and women have perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) during a conflict or disagreement. Although such situational IPV is categorically different from what Johnson and colleagues (see Johnson, 2010; Johnson & Leone, 2005) have termed *intimate terrorism*—a form of IPV used to exert power and control over a partner—even situational IPV has undesirable consequences. Most notably, both male and female victims of situational IPV experience physical and psychological

costs, such as physical ailments, mental distress, and reduced relationship satisfaction (e.g., Testa & Leonard, 2001; Williams & Frieze, 2005).

Nevertheless, like the victims of intimate terrorism, many victims of situational IPV remain in their relationships despite these costs (e.g., Arriaga, Capezza, Goodfriend, Rayl, & Sands, 2013; Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015; Edwards, Gidycz, & Murphy, 2011; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; O'Leary et al., 1989). Why do they stay? To date, most research addressing why victims remain in relationships involving IPV has focused on the constraints (e.g., lack of safety, shelter, other resources) that prevent victims of intimate terrorism from leaving such relationships, revealing that victims often do not leave because they believe that even their abusive relationships are better than their alternatives, which they believe involve even worse threats to safety and well-being (e.g., Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Gelles, 1974; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Victims of situational IPV may remain in their relationships for similar reasons; they may perceive that the alternatives to their relationship are worse than the

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net sum of the outcomes offered by the current relationship.

However, given that victims of situational IPV typically experience fewer constraints than do victims of intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2010; Johnson & Leone, 2005), there may be an overlooked benevolent self-belief that also contributes to situational IPV victims' decision to remain in their relationships. Specifically, intimates who are high in relationship self-efficacy (RSE)—the belief that one can resolve interpersonal conflicts—may stay in relationships involving situational IPV because they may believe that their ability to resolve conflict will help them prevent future IPV. Indeed, people recognize that IPV can stem from conflict (for review, see Flynn & Graham, 2010), and thus, the belief that one can effectively resolve conflict may lead to the belief that one can also prevent or minimize situational IPV.

The goal of the current research was to examine whether self-efficacy moderates the association between IPV victimization and relationship dissolution. To this end, the remainder of this Introduction is organized into three sections. The first section reviews theory suggesting why situational IPV might be, but is not, strongly associated with relationship termination. The second section reviews evidence suggesting that RSE may be one reason that victims of situational IPV remain in their relationships despite IPV. Finally, the third section describes a longitudinal study consisting of two samples of college students that tested this possibility.

### *IPV and relationship dissolution*

Understanding why self-efficacy may help determine the implications of IPV for relationship dissolution requires an understanding of why intimates decide to maintain or dissolve their romantic relationships in the first place. According to interdependence theories (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), intimates consider the rewards and costs they perceive are associated with a relationship when deciding to maintain or dissolve that relationship. In particular, interdependence theories posit that intimates

should be more satisfied with and thus more committed to their relationships to the extent that they experience relatively frequent and important rewards and/or relatively few and minor costs, but less satisfied with and thus less committed to their relationships to the extent that they experience relatively few and minor rewards and/or relatively frequent and important costs. Numerous studies support these ideas (e.g., Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Rusbult, 1980, 1983). For example, Bui et al. (1996) demonstrated with a sample of heterosexual dating couples that intimates remained more satisfied with, and thus more committed to, their romantic relationships over time to the extent that those relationships led to greater rewards and fewer costs.

As noted earlier, situational IPV has numerous costs that, according to interdependence theories, should lead victims to end their relationships. For example, even situational IPV can lead to physical ailments, such as scrapes, bruises, headaches, and stomach pain (Watkins et al., 2014). More frequently, however, situational IPV is associated with experiencing emotional distress (e.g., Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015; Testa & Leonard, 2001; Williams & Frieze, 2005) as well as depression and anxiety (Sillito, 2012). Finally, situational IPV is also associated with interpersonal costs, such as reduced intimacy with and greater distrust of one's partner (e.g., Amar & Alexy, 2005) and declines in relationship satisfaction (e.g., Testa & Leonard, 2001; Williams & Frieze, 2005).

Nevertheless, a large proportion of situational IPV victims remain with their partners despite these costs (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2013; Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015; Edwards et al., 2011; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; O'Leary et al., 1989). For example, Arriaga et al. (2013) conducted a 12-week longitudinal study of IPV and found that 73% of victims remained with their partners throughout the duration of the study. Similarly, Edwards et al. (2011) revealed that only 12% of victims of IPV left their partners over the course of a 10-week study.

To date, most research attempting to understand why victims remain in their relationships has focused on another factor that determines commitment—intimates' beliefs

about their alternatives to the relationship (Bui et al., 1996; Rusbult, 1980, 1983)—and most of this research has examined intimate terrorism. Specifically, a consistent body of research has demonstrated that victims of intimate terrorism remain in their relationships because they face extensive barriers to leaving the relationship, barriers that make their alternatives to the relationship appear worse than the relationship itself (e.g., Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Rhatigan & Axson, 2006; Rhatigan & Street, 2005; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic, 2003). For example, victims often fear retaliation from the partner and believe they will experience less physical harm by remaining in the relationship than by leaving it (e.g., Wolf et al., 2003). Likewise, victims who have made substantial investments, have limited financial resources, or do not have friends or family who could provide assistance are less likely to leave their partners because they believe that, despite the IPV, their quality of life will decrease if they leave their relationship (Gelles, 1974; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Finally, married victims may be reluctant or unable to leave a relationship that involves IPV if they reside in an area with strong cultural norms or legal restrictions against dissolution (Horne & Levitt, 2004; Raj & Silverman, 2002).

### *The role of RSE*

Although these constraints may also prevent victims of situational IPV from leaving their relationships, the fact that such constraints are relatively low in relationships marked by situational IPV suggests that other factors may also play a role. In particular, there are reasons to expect that RSE may determine whether victims remain in a relationship involving situational IPV. RSE is the belief that one can resolve relationship conflicts (Doherty, 1981); people who are low in RSE doubt their ability to prevent and resolve conflicts in their relationship, whereas people who are high in RSE believe they are capable of successfully preventing and resolving these conflicts. Given that most situational IPV occurs in the context of interpersonal conflict (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Finkel, 2014; Straus, 1979), and given

that people recognize this link (for review, see Flynn & Graham, 2010), victims of situational IPV who are high in RSE may expect to prevent or minimize future IPV because they believe they can prevent or minimize future conflicts. Given that the tendency to expect fewer costs should predict greater relationship commitment (e.g., Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986), such high levels of RSE may lead victims to remain in their relationships despite the IPV. In contrast, victims who are low in RSE may expect to be unable to prevent or minimize future conflicts and corresponding IPV and thus be more likely to leave their relationships. In other words, situational IPV may be more strongly associated with relationship dissolution among intimates who have lower (vs. higher) levels of RSE.

Two divergent examples may elucidate this proposed interaction. Imagine that Saul has been having problems with his girlfriend, Ellen, regarding her jealousy. During their last argument, Ellen slapped and shoved Saul. Now, further imagine that Saul has high RSE and thus believes that he and Ellen can overcome their problems and have fewer conflicts in the future. Saul should consequently be less likely to expect such violence to continue and thus be more likely to continue to his relationship with Ellen despite the current costs associated with being victimized. In contrast, imagine Kara has been the victim of aggression during similar arguments with her boyfriend, Lee. Unlike Saul, however, further imagine that Kara has low levels of RSE and thus believes that she and Lee are unlikely to overcome their problems. Kara should consequently expect the violence to continue and thus be less likely to continue her relationship with Lee because she expects the costs associated with the IPV to continue. In both cases, the victims experienced a relationship cost that might be enough to make them leave their relationship, but in each case, the individuals made different decisions regarding whether or not to end the relationship because of their levels of RSE.

The idea that victims of situational IPV may base their relationship decisions on their expectations for the future of the relationship is consistent with several perspectives

that suggest that people base their decisions primarily on their expectations for the future. For example, expectancy-value theories (Atkinson, 1957; Feather & Newton, 1982) and supporting research (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sriripada, 2013; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009) posit that people base their decisions on their expectations that such decisions will produce desired outcomes. Accordingly, victims of situational IPV may base their decision to remain in a relationship on their expectations regarding the likelihood that they will experience IPV again in the future. If so, those high in RSE may be more likely to remain in their relationships because they may be more likely to expect to be able to reduce conflict and thus IPV. Indeed, Sabatelli and Pearce (1986) provided support for the role of expectations in predicting commitment by demonstrating that intimates who expected to have a higher quality relationship in the future were more committed to that relationship than were intimates who expected to have a lower quality relationship in the future.

Of course, it is also possible that intimates with high RSE may confirm their positive expectations by preventing future situational IPV. A consistent body of research suggests that individuals tend to work harder to achieve their goals to the extent that they believe they can accomplish those goals (see Bandura, 1986). Indeed, RSE is associated with important interpersonal benefits (Baker & McNulty, 2010, 2015; Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008; Lopez, Morúa, & Rice, 2007; Riggio et al., 2013). For example, Baker and McNulty (2015) demonstrated that intimates with greater RSE experienced more positive changes in their motivation to resolve relationship problems than did intimates with lower RSE. Moreover, several additional studies (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2010; Cui et al., 2008) have demonstrated that intimates who are high in RSE experience fewer relationship conflicts over time than do intimates who are low in RSE. Given that intimates should experience less conflict to the extent that they have greater RSE, and given that most situational IPV occurs in the context of interpersonal conflict (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Finkel,

2014; Straus, 1979), intimates may thus experience less situational IPV victimization to the extent that they have greater RSE.

### *Overview*

In sum, interdependence theory suggests that, all else being equal, intimates should be more likely to leave relationships involving IPV than those not involving IPV because IPV involves higher costs. Nevertheless, prior research demonstrates that many victims of situational IPV remain in relationships despite such costs. We argue that RSE may partially explain why victims remain in relationships marked by situational IPV. Given that people low in RSE doubt their ability to resolve their conflicts, victims of situational IPV who are low in RSE should expect IPV and any IPV-related costs to continue, which should motivate them to leave the relationship. In contrast, given that people high in RSE believe they are better able to resolve their conflicts, victims of situational IPV who are high in RSE should expect less IPV and fewer IPV-related costs in the future, which should motivate them to maintain the relationship. As such, we predicted that IPV victimization would be more strongly associated with the decision to leave the relationship among people with low levels of RSE than among people with high levels of RSE. Furthermore, given that believing that one is capable of resolving relationship problems should only increase intimates' motivation to remain in their relationships when they are actually facing problems, we predicted that RSE would be negatively associated with the decision to leave the relationship among IPV victims, but not among nonvictims. However, given that individuals high in RSE experience less interpersonal conflict over time (Baker & McNulty, 2010; Cui et al., 2008), intimates high in RSE may actually successfully minimize such conflicts and, thus, experience less IPV victimization over time. We tested these predictions with a longitudinal study of undergraduate students who tend to (a) experience situational IPV rather than intimate terrorism and (b) be in dating relationships and thus less constrained (Givertz & Segrin, 2005).

## Method

### Participants

Participants included 676 undergraduate students from a large university in the South-eastern United States who were in a romantic relationship and completed both waves of a longitudinal study for partial course credit. Participants were recruited into two independent samples over two consecutive semesters. Three hundred and seventy-three (308 women, 65 men) people participated in the first semester (Sample 1), and 303 women participated in the second semester (Sample 2). At their baseline assessment, participants had a mean age of 19.44 years ( $SD = 1.94$ ). Participants' mean relationship length at baseline was 17.51 months ( $SD = 15.51$ ).<sup>1</sup> Four hundred and eighty-six (72%) participants identified as White (Non-Hispanic), 74 (11%) identified as African American, 77 (11%) identified as Latino(a), 14 (2%) identified as Asian American, 1 (<1%) identified as Native American or American Indian, and 24 (4%) identified as another race/ethnicity, two or more races/ethnicities, or did not report race/ethnicity. The participants who completed both waves of the survey did not differ from the 89 participants who could not be included in the current analyses because they completed only the baseline assessment on any of the variables examined in this study. These sample sizes were obtained because it was the number of participants obtained in each semester of data collection. A post hoc power analysis indicated that the power to detect the obtained results was .86.

### Procedure

Participants completed all portions of both studies online. After providing informed consent, participants completed measures assessing their RSE, the extent of their

partners' physical aggression toward them, and their own physical aggression toward their partners at baseline. Seven weeks (Sample 1) and 12 weeks (Sample 2) later, participants again reported their partners' physical aggression and whether or not they had ended the romantic relationship on which they reported at baseline. The different time frames were used to accommodate different constraints on students' schedules across the two semesters. The Institutional Review Board at Florida State University, where the research was conducted, formally approved all procedures.

### Measures

#### *Relationship self-efficacy*

RSE was measured at baseline in both studies using a seven-item measure developed by Bradbury (1989; also see Cui et al., 2008). These items measure the extent to which participants believe they have the ability to resolve conflict with their romantic partner (e.g., "I am able to do the things needed to settle our conflicts") on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree*) to 5 (*very characteristic or true, strongly agree*). Instructions required participants to respond to these items while thinking of their current relationship partner. All items were summed. Internal consistency was adequate ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

#### *Intimate partner violence*

IPV was measured at baseline, as well as the follow-up assessment for those who remained in their relationship for the entire duration of the study, using the five items from the minor physical assault subscale derived from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). These items measured physical assault perpetrated by the participant's romantic partner over the past 8 weeks (e.g., "My partner slapped me," "My partner threw something at me that could hurt," "My partner twisted my arm or hair," "My partner pushed or shoved me," and "My partner grabbed me") on a 7-point scale from 0 (*never*) to

1. We did not require that participants had been in their relationship for any minimum amount of time. Nevertheless, the IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction held when excluding people who had been in their relationship for less than 2 months, Wald = 5.71,  $p = .02$ .

6 (*more than twenty times*).<sup>2</sup> These specific items were used because they are often the most common physical IPV behaviors (e.g., Signorelli, Arcidiacono, Musumeci, Di Nuovo, & Aguglia, 2014). Five additional items measured the extent to which participants engaged in those same behaviors toward their partners. Given the skewed nature of the reports (skewness = 4.00, Kolmogorov–Smirnov = .40,  $p < .01$ ), we formed two dummy codes to indicate whether or not participants reported experiencing any IPV from their partner and whether or not participants reported engaging in any IPV toward their partner over the past 8 weeks, where 0 = did not experience IPV and 1 = experienced IPV. Of the 161 participants who reported experiencing IPV from their partner, 53 (33%) participants reported experiencing more than one type of violent behavior, and 82 (51%) participants reported that at least one behavior occurred more than once in the past 8 weeks. In other words, a reasonable percentage of these couples did experience IPV over the course of the study.

### *Relationship dissolution*

Relationship dissolution was measured 7 weeks (Sample 1) and 12 weeks (Sample 2) after baseline by asking participants if they had dissolved the relationship they reported on at baseline. If they had broken up with their partner, they were then asked the reason for the breakup. Because many of the participants were college freshmen who recently moved away from home, we excluded from all analyses any participants ( $N = 16$ ) who specifically reported that their relationship ended because it became a long-distance relationship and thus did not end because of violence.<sup>3</sup>

2. Although we assessed violence over the prior 8 weeks in both studies, participants in Sample 1 were assessed 7 weeks after baseline. Thus, it is possible that some of the same acts of violence were reported in both assessments. Nevertheless, analyses predicting subsequent violence controlled these initial reports, and thus, any overlap was statistically removed; that is, consistent with the goals of analyses predicting change in violence, those analyses accounted for only the acts of violence reported at the follow-up that were unique from the baseline assessment.

3. The predicted IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction was significant even when these 16 people were included, Wald = 4.67,  $p = .03$ .

### *Primary data analytic strategy*

To examine whether RSE moderated the association between partners' IPV perpetration and relationship dissolution, we used binary logistic regression to regress a dummy code of relationship dissolution onto mean-centered RSE scores, a dummy code for partners' baseline IPV (0 = the partner did not engage in IPV, 1 = the partner engaged in IPV), the partners' IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction, and two covariates: (a) a dummy code for participant gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and (b) a dummy code for sample (0 = Sample 2, 1 = Sample 1). To interpret the partners' IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction, we first calculated the simple effects of IPV for people 1 *SD* above and below the mean of self-efficacy and then calculated the simple effects of self-efficacy for victims and nonvictims, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991).

To examine whether initial levels of RSE predicted greater decreases in IPV among intimates who remained in their relationships, we regressed partners' IPV victimization scores at the follow-up onto their RSE scores, partners' IPV victimization scores at baseline, a dummy code for participant gender, and a dummy code for sample. Given that Poisson distributions can accommodate highly skewed count data, such as the IPV victimization scores, we used continuous IPV victimization variables and specified a Poisson distribution.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses*

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1. At baseline, 161 (24%) participants reported that their partners perpetrated some form of IPV over the past 8 weeks. At the follow-up, 126 (19%) participants reported that their romantic relationship had ended; of those whose relationships did not end, 55 (10%) participants reported at the follow-up that their partners had perpetrated some form of IPV over the past 8 weeks. Men and women did not differ regarding their levels of self-efficacy,  $t(358) = -0.99$ ,  $p = .32$ , 95% confidence interval (CI) CI [-3.25, 1.07]; the likelihood of IPV victimization at baseline,

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Partner's IPV at baseline	—					
2. Own IPV at baseline	.62**	—				
3. Relationship self-efficacy	-.20**	-.19**	—			
4. Relationship dissolution	.08*	.01	-.11**	—		
5. Partner's IPV at follow-up	.25**	.26**	-.06	—	—	
6. Own IPV at follow-up	.25**	.40**	-.12**	—	.69**	—
<i>M</i>	24%	18%	39.57	19%	12%	17%
<i>SD</i>			7.83			

Note. IPV = intimate partner violence.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Percentage of participants, partners, and both that engaged in each behavior at baseline

	Male participants			Female participants		
	Participants (%)	Partners (%)	Both (%)	Participants (%)	Partners (%)	Both (%)
Slapped	5	6	3	6	3	2
Threw something	11	19	11	4	6	3
Twisted arm/hair	11	11	11	5	6	4
Pushed or shoved	11	12	11	11	8	6
Grabbed	15	12	12	11	14	9

$\chi^2(1) = 1.60$ ,  $p = .21$ ; the likelihood of IPV at follow-up,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.17$ ,  $p = .68$ ; or the likelihood of relationship dissolution,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.81$ ,  $p = .37$ . RSE reported by participants in Sample 1 did not differ from that reported by participants in Sample 2; nevertheless, participants in Sample 1 were less likely to dissolve their relationships,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.89$ ,  $p = .03$ ; more likely to engage in IPV at baseline,  $\chi^2(1) = 8.98$ ,  $p < .01$ , and at the follow-up,  $\chi^2(1) = 18.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and marginally less likely to have partners that engaged in IPV at baseline,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.87$ ,  $p = .09$ , and at the follow-up,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.70$ ,  $p = .03$ . The dummy code for sample controlled for these differences in the primary analyses. As the correlations indicate, intimates' reports of their own IPV at both baseline and at the follow-up were positively associated with their reports of their partners' IPV at both baseline and at the follow-up. Additionally, RSE was negatively associated with partners' IPV victimization at baseline, own IPV victimization

at baseline and the follow-up, and relationship dissolution. Finally, partners' IPV victimization at baseline was positively associated with relationship dissolution.

The percentage of participants, partners, and couples that engaged in each behavior at baseline can be found in Table 2. Fewer participants reported IPV victimization at the follow-up than at baseline (McNemar test  $p < .01$ ). Of the 126 participants who reported that their romantic relationship had ended, 40 (32%) reported at baseline that their partners perpetrated some form of IPV; of the 534 participants who reported that their romantic relationship had not ended, 121 (23%) reported at baseline that their partners perpetrated some form of IPV.

We conducted a one-way analysis of variance to examine differences in RSE at baseline between victims and nonvictims who ended their relationships, victims who did and did not continue experiencing IPV, and nonvictims who did and did not begin to experience IPV.

**Table 3.** Effects of intimate partner violence, relationship self-efficacy, and their interaction on relationship dissolution

	<i>b</i>	Wald	95% CI	Odds ratio
Study	-0.40	3.55	[0.44, 1.02]	0.67
Participant gender	0.43	1.08	[0.68, 3.49]	1.54
Partners' IPV	0.18	0.51	[0.73, 1.95]	1.19
Self-efficacy (RSE)	-0.01	0.24	[0.96, 1.02]	0.99
Partners' IPV × RSE	-0.07*	6.05	[0.89, 0.99]	0.94

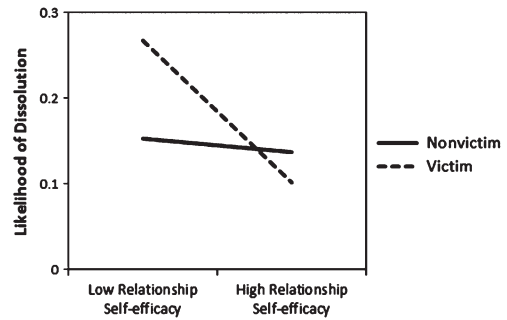
Note. All coefficients are unstandardized. CI = confidence interval; IPV = intimate partner violence; RSE = relationship self-efficacy.

\* $p < .05$ .

Results indicated that the only differences in self-efficacy involved nonvictims whose relationships ended ( $M = 33.25$ ,  $SD = 8.95$ ); this group had significantly lower RSE scores than (a) victims whose relationships ended ( $M = 39.84$ ,  $SD = 7.60$ ), (b) victims at baseline who continued experiencing IPV at the follow-up ( $M = 36.89$ ,  $SD = 9.10$ ), (c) victims at baseline who did not continue experiencing IPV at the follow-up ( $M = 38.75$ ,  $SD = 7.85$ ), (d) nonvictims at baseline who began experiencing IPV at the follow-up ( $M = 40.94$ ,  $SD = 5.78$ ), and (e) nonvictims at baseline who continued to not experience IPV at the follow-up ( $M = 40.74$ ,  $SD = 7.20$ ),  $F(610, 605) = 8.95$ ,  $p < .01$ .

#### Did RSE moderate the association between IPV and relationship dissolution?

The results of the primary analyses are reported in Table 3. As can be seen there, neither RSE nor partners' IPV victimization were associated with relationship dissolution in the context of the full regression model, on average. Nevertheless, as predicted, the Partners' IPV × RSE interaction was significantly negatively associated with relationship dissolution. A plot depicting this interaction appears in Figure 1. Consistent with predictions, simple effects tests indicated that partners' IPV victimization was associated with an increased likelihood of relationship dissolution among intimates low in RSE,  $b = 0.71$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $Wald = 6.59$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI [1.18, 3.47], but was unassociated with relationship dissolution among intimates high



**Figure 1.** Interactive effects of intimate partner violence and relationship self-efficacy on the likelihood of relationship dissolution.

in RSE,  $b = -0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.38$ ,  $Wald = 0.87$ ,  $p = .35$ , 95% CI [0.34, 1.47]. Furthermore, although RSE was unassociated with relationship dissolution among nonvictims,  $b = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $Wald = 0.24$ ,  $p = .63$ , 95% CI [0.96, 1.02], it was associated with a *decreased* likelihood of relationship dissolution among victims,  $b = -0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $Wald = 11.56$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [0.89, 0.97]. Notably, a test of the Partners' IPV × RSE × Participant Gender interaction indicated that the predicted interaction did not vary by gender,  $b = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $Wald = 1.55$ ,  $p = .21$ , 95% CI [0.87, 1.91]. Furthermore, a test of the Partners' IPV × RSE × Sample interaction indicated that the predicted interaction did not vary by sample,  $b = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $Wald = 0.03$ ,  $p = .87$ , 95% CI [0.88, 1.11].<sup>4</sup>

4. The IPV × RSE interaction also held when controlling for relationship length,  $Wald = 5.78$ ,  $p = .02$ .



Given that situational violence can involve perpetration by both partners (Flynn & Graham, 2010), we conducted three supplemental analyses to examine whether participants' own IPV perpetration could account for the predicted Partner IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction. First, we added own IPV to the primary model as a covariate. Despite the high correlation between own and partner IPV (see Table 1), the Partner IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction remained significant,  $b = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $Wald = 4.10$ ,  $p = .04$ , odds ratio = 0.94, 95% CI [0.89, 1.00]. Second, we examined the Own IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction as a predictor of dissolution by replacing partner IPV and the Partner IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction in the primary model with own IPV and the Own IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction. The Own IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction trended toward being negatively associated with relationship dissolution but was not significant,  $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $Wald = 2.13$ ,  $p = .14$ , odds ratio = 0.96, 95% CI [0.90, 1.02]. Finally, we examined the effects of the Own IPV  $\times$  RSE and Partner IPV  $\times$  RSE interactions in the same model. Once again, the Own IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction was not significant,  $b = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $Wald = 0.06$ ,  $p = .80$ , odds ratio = 0.99, 95% CI [0.91, 1.07]. Notably, the Partner IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction was reduced to a nonsignificant trend in that model,  $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $Wald = 1.93$ ,  $p = .17$ , odds ratio = 0.95, 95% CI [0.88, 1.02]. Nevertheless, this trend is not surprising given that the two interactions were correlated at .76. Indeed, at such high levels of multicollinearity, variables do not retain their construct validity (see York, 2012). What is most important is that the Own IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction was not significant on its own and does not appear to account for more variance than the Partner IPV  $\times$  RSE interaction. In other words, despite the reciprocal nature of the situational couple violence, the effects of partner IPV for relationship dissolution appear to be mostly due to partner and not self-perpetrated violence.

#### *Did RSE predict changes in IPV?*

Interestingly, consistent with the idea that RSE may in fact decrease violence, RSE was significantly negatively associated with changes in

IPV victimization,  $b = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $Wald = 5.09$ ,  $p = .02$ , odds ratio = 0.98, 95% CI [0.96, 1.00]. Notably, a test of the RSE  $\times$  Participant Gender interaction indicated that the effect of self-efficacy for changes in IPV victimization did not vary by gender,  $b = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $Wald = 0.44$ ,  $p = .51$ , odds ratio = 0.98, 95% CI [0.93, 1.04]. Nevertheless, a test of the RSE  $\times$  Sample interaction indicated that the effect of self-efficacy did vary by sample,  $b = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $Wald = 17.87$ ,  $p < .01$ , odds ratio = 1.07, 95% CI [1.04, 1.11], such that self-efficacy was associated with declines in IPV among those in Sample 2,  $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $Wald = 24.21$ ,  $p < .01$ , odds ratio = 0.95, 95% CI [0.93, 0.97], but not among those in Sample 1,  $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $Wald = 1.28$ ,  $p = .26$ , odds ratio = 1.02, 95% CI [0.99, 1.04].

## **Discussion**

Why do victims of situational IPV remain in relationships despite the costs associated with such IPV? A longitudinal study of romantic relationships provides evidence that one reason they remain is that they believe they can resolve their relationship conflicts. Consistent with the fact that situational IPV typically occurs in the context of conflict, victimization interacted with victims' beliefs regarding their ability to resolve conflict to predict dissolution; victimization was positively associated with relationship dissolution among those low in RSE but unassociated with dissolution among those high in RSE. Interestingly, suggesting that this response may be adaptive for some, RSE was associated with experiencing less victimization over time among intimates who remained in their relationships in Sample 2. Nevertheless, this association did not emerge in Sample 1, in which the follow-up was only 7 (vs. 12) weeks. It may be that it takes more than 7 weeks for intimates to experience the benefits of RSE.

#### *Implications*

These findings have important theoretical implications. First, although numerous studies have examined why partners remain in relationships marked by intimate terrorism

(e.g., Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Rhatigan & Axsom, 2006; Rhatigan & Street, 2005; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Wolf et al., 2003), this study is among the first to suggest why victims of situational IPV remain in their relationships. Although constraints may continue to play a role in the decision to remain in even situationally violent relationships, the current results indicate that RSE, a seemingly benevolent psychological belief, contributes to the decision to remain in a relationship involving situational IPV. These results suggest that RSE may be harmful if held in the context of a relationship in which IPV will continue.

At the same time, however, these results also join other studies in highlighting potential benefits of RSE (Baker & McNulty, 2010, 2015; Cui et al., 2008; Lopez et al., 2007; Riggio et al., 2013). Specifically, in the longer of the two studies, RSE predicted declines in victimization. Consistent with the idea that situational IPV emerges in the context of conflict, and consistent with previous research demonstrating that intimates high in RSE work harder to resolve conflicts (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2015), intimates high in RSE may successfully minimize situational IPV by minimizing conflict. Indeed, other longitudinal studies (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2010; Cui et al., 2008) indicate that RSE is associated with relatively lower levels of problem severity over time. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that RSE may not eliminate, or even reduce, IPV for everyone. Ultimately, any benefits of remaining in a situationally aggressive relationship likely depend on the likelihood that violence will continue.

Taken together, these findings join a small but important body of research (e.g., McNulty & Fincham, 2012; McNulty & Karney, 2004) demonstrating that optimistic relationship beliefs are not inherently beneficial or harmful; rather, their implications depend on whether intimates can actualize such positive expectations. The current study contributes to this growing body of literature by demonstrating that optimistic beliefs about relationship abilities are only beneficial when such beliefs are accurate. More specifically, the belief that one can minimize conflict is most likely costly in a relationship in which

the conflict is associated with IPV *and* the belief is inaccurate—that is, a relationship in which conflict and thus IPV will continue. The belief that one can minimize conflict may be beneficial, however, in relationships in which that belief is accurate—that is, a relationship in which conflict and thus IPV will decline.

In this light, these findings provide some preliminary practical implications. Although the commonality of mild forms of IPV (see Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008) suggests that not all victims may benefit from leaving their relationships, clearly, some victims will experience better outcomes after leaving the relationship. Indeed, Arriaga et al. (2013) recently demonstrated that IPV victims tend to experience greater happiness following the dissolution of their relationships, despite initially believing otherwise, yet other victims of situational IPV may benefit from staying in their relationships, particularly to the extent that IPV is unlikely to continue in the future. These findings highlight two important variables to consider in any interventions and practices involving couples facing situational IPV—their beliefs about their ability to manage conflict and the likelihood of future IPV. Specifically, victims who are unlikely to face IPV in the future may benefit from increased confidence about their ability to resolve conflicts. In contrast, victims who are likely to face IPV in the future may benefit from decreased confidence in their ability to do so. As such, intimates should ultimately benefit most when their beliefs about their ability to control conflict, and thus their expectations of future IPV, are accurate. Nevertheless, as noted, these implications are quite preliminary. As such, future research may benefit by not only directly testing these possibilities but also identifying factors that determine whether or not conflicts are manageable. Most relevant to the current findings, future research may also benefit by differentiating among different types of RSE. It is possible that the measure of relationship-specific self-efficacy used here captured participants' confidence in both dyad members' abilities to manage conflict. Thus, future research may benefit from examining the role of general levels of RSE as well as from directly examining the role of the partner's RSE.

### *Future directions*

These findings also suggest several additional avenues for future research. First, future research may benefit by examining whether other benevolent beliefs contribute to the decision to remain in relationships involving IPV. For example, intimates who endorse growth relationship beliefs—that is, intimates who believe that relationship problems are normal and that relationships require work to succeed (Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003)—may be more likely to believe that IPV can more easily be overcome and, thus, may be less likely to leave a relationship involving IPV. Consistent with this idea, not only do the relationships of intimates who endorse growth beliefs last longer than do the relationships of intimates who do not endorse such beliefs (Knee, 1998), but also, conflicts are associated with more stable relationship commitment among those who endorse growth beliefs compared to steeper declines in commitment experienced by those who do not endorse such beliefs (Knee, Patrick, Victor, & Neighbors, 2004). It is worth noting, however, that IPV is a particularly extreme form of conflict, and thus, IPV may be an exception to such tendencies. Future research may benefit by examining whether intimates with growth beliefs also become more committed to their relationships following IPV.

Second, future research may benefit from examining whether RSE also predicts remaining in a relationship characterized by intimate terrorism. The current study provides evidence that RSE prevents victims who are facing relatively few constraints from leaving the relationship, but victims of intimate terrorism face more serious obstacles to leaving their relationships, such as a lack of financial and structural resources and fear for their safety. On the one hand, such factors may make RSE a mute variable; these other factors may account for all of the variance in stay/leave decisions. On the other hand, intimates who face such obstacles may adopt the belief that they can prevent and minimize the extent of their victimization in order to protect their sense of control and well-being (see Lerner & Miller, 1978), and such beliefs may serve as the primary proximal

predictor of their decisions to not seek ways to minimize their constraints and leave their relationships. Future research may be particularly likely to benefit from examining how RSE and constraints interact to predict remaining in relationships marked by not only situational IPV but also intimate terrorism.

Finally, future research may benefit by examining the extent to which RSE moderates the association between other relationship costs associated with conflict and relationship dissolution. Not only can conflict lead to IPV, but it can also lead to other interpersonal costs, such as greater loneliness (Hagerty & Williams, 1999) and decreased relationship satisfaction (Cramer, 2000) and closeness toward (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005) and trust of (Murray, Lupien, & Seery, 2012) one's partner. Just as intimates high in RSE may believe they can minimize situational IPV by resolving conflict, they may also believe they can minimize other relationship costs associated with conflict in the same manner. Ultimately, the accuracy of such beliefs may determine whether or not they are beneficial.

### *Study strengths and limitations*

Several factors limit the conclusions that can be drawn from these results until they can be replicated and extended. First, although the longitudinal design provides temporal evidence for the associations examined here, the results are nevertheless correlational, and thus, causal conclusions should be drawn with caution. Second, participants self-reported their own and partners' behavior. Given that intimates often minimize the extent of IPV in their relationships (Wenger, 2015), future research may benefit by using more objective measures of IPV. Third, although our hypotheses were based on the idea that intimates' beliefs about their ability to resolve conflict would affect their expectations for future IPV, the current studies did not test this possibility. Similarly, although we believed that such expectations, and not other beliefs that have been shown to prevent victims from leaving relationships involving IPV (e.g., fear, lack of alternatives), would account for this association, the current studies did not assess these other beliefs.

Future research may benefit by addressing whether expectations about future IPV, and not other known predictors of remaining in an abusive relationship, account for the interactive association between IPV victimization and RSE on the decision to end a romantic relationship. Fourth, although our hypotheses were based on the idea that experiencing situational IPV would motivate victims low in RSE to end their romantic relationship, we unfortunately do not know from the current data whether the victims or the perpetrators initiated the dissolution. Assuming dissolutions initiated by the partner added error variance that minimized our ability to detect effects, future research may find stronger effects by predicting only self-initiated dissolutions. Finally, participants were primarily female undergraduate students. Although the pattern of results obtained in the current study did not vary between men and women, and although we are not aware of any theoretical reasons that RSE should differentially determine the decision to remain in an abusive relationship among nonuniversity students, conclusions about men and nonuniversity students should still be drawn with caution.

Despite these limitations, several strengths of the current research enhance our confidence in the results reported here. First, the primary pattern of results is replicated across two independent samples, reducing the likelihood that they were spurious or limited to characteristics associated with a particular sample. Second, although the correlational nature of both studies allows for third-variable interpretations of the associations, the longitudinal nature of the studies lends confidence to the idea that the interaction of IPV and RSE preceded and thus potentially caused relationship dissolution. Finally, both studies accounted for variance in an important outcome with real consequences, the dissolution of actual romantic relationships marked by real IPV. Although undergraduate couples may not experience the same levels of IPV as battered women recruited from shelters (see Johnson, 1995), a relatively high percentage of the individuals examined experienced real IPV, and the specific types of IPV (e.g., slapping, shoving) assessed can have important consequences (Ansara & Hindin, 2011).

## Conclusion

Situational IPV is surprisingly common, and the victims of such IPV often experience physical, psychological, and interpersonal costs. Nevertheless, many remain in their relationships despite these costs. The current results suggest that a seemingly benevolent belief—the belief that one can resolve relationship problems—partially accounts for this decision. Specifically, RSE was negatively associated with relationship dissolution among victims. Interestingly, RSE was associated with less IPV over time among some intimates. Accordingly, whether self-efficacy is beneficial or harmful for victims of situational IPV likely depends on the extent to which they are indeed successful in minimizing their victimization.

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