

# **Patterns in Coercive Controlling Behaviors Among Men Mandated for Batterer Treatment: Denial, Minimization, and Consistency of Tactics Across Relationships**

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The current study sought to explore if perpetrators of intimate partner violence use coercive control behaviors in their first romantic relationship and subsequent treatment relationship, how behaviors are recalled, if there is a pattern in the behaviors used, and the denial and minimization techniques to explain coercive control behaviors. In their first relationship narratives, 48.15% recalled a fight with 14.8% reporting coercive control behaviors. In narratives from the treatment relationships, 61.73% reported coercive control behaviors. Denial and minimization tactics were present as participants described fights where coercive control tactics were used. Results and their implications for treatment programs will be discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** dating violence; intimate partner perpetration; intimate partner violence; perpetrator treatment

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined by the United States Department of Justice (USDOJ) as, “a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner,” (United States Department of Justice, 2014, p. 1). Historically, IPV has been defined using several different terms such as domestic violence, interpersonal violence, intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, spousal abuse, and family violence. Terms such as interpersonal violence or domestic violence often limit the types of behaviors

to physical acts and/or those physical acts that risk the possibility of physical injury, while the actual range of harmful behaviors one partner can engage in against another is actually much broader. The term IPV was chosen because it encompasses the broadest range of behaviors and is defined as any behavior that causes harm physically, psychologically, or sexually (Black et al., 2011).

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that approximately 35% of women will experience physical violence, sexual assault, or be stalked by an intimate partner (Black et al., 2011). While there remains much debate on what precisely constitutes the core of an abusive dynamic (Johnson, 1995, 2006; Raghavan & Cohen, 2013; Stark, 2006, 2012), one view holds that defining abuse by the extent to which a relationship is marked by coercive controlling behaviors (CCBs) has a higher predictive value than by using physical abuse alone (Beck & Raghavan, 2010) and consequently may be more socially useful.

Stark (2006) defined coercive control as abusive behavior that follows, “a pattern that includes violence, intimidation, isolation, and control” (p. 1021). The isolation of the victim is one of the most crucial elements of CCBs along with the regulation of the victim’s everyday activities (i.e., microregulation), which can include controlling her access to work, education, and finances. Ultimately, through microregulation, isolation, and threats, the victim is robbed of her autonomy and her ability to make decisions and lives in a constant state of fear induced by the abuser (Arnold, 2009). Because the situation is chronically aversive, over time, victims of CCBs internalize the controlling behaviors and learn when the tactics will be used by their abuser as a means to prevent the abusive behavior from occurring (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2006).

To date, several studies have measured CCB in both men and women in relationships (Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Heyman, O’Leary, & Lawrence, 1999; Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2006). Due to them involving different instruments and populations, the results have been varied, albeit all pointing to extreme control as an indicator of more severe abuse and victimization within a relationship. While higher levels of coercion have been found to be perpetrated by men (Stark, 2006, 2012), one study found that the usage of controlling behaviors was present in both the coercively controlling partner and the victim (Robertson & Murachver, 2011).

Upon review of men and women who were attending batterer intervention programs, significant gender differences were not found in IPV perpetrations rates (Hamel, Jones, Dutton, & Graham-Kevan, 2015) and motivation behind abusive behavior (Kernsmith, 2005). Additionally, it has been found that the use of physical violence as a means of maintaining control occurs at similar rates irrespective of gender (Elmqvist et al., 2014). In contrast, in couples going through high conflict divorces, female partners were more likely to experience psychological abuse, sexual assault, intimidation, threats of escalated physical violence, and CCBs when compared to their male partners (Tanha, Beck, Figueredo, & Raghavan, 2010).

While the body of literature on CCBs is growing, much of the evidence of coercion relies on self-reports of prevalence from both the victim and the perpetrator in a

relationship or relies solely on reports from the victim (Lehmann, Simmons, & Pillai, 2012; Robertson & Murachver, 2011; Tanha et al., 2010). While this strategy affords efficient measurement, it does not allow a deeper understanding of the dynamic, nor, more pertinent to this study, how batterers express and understand their own controlling behaviors (Anderson, 2009). One of the difficulties in measuring CCBs from the viewpoint of the abuser rests in the definition of the phenomena itself. CCBs, unlike the neater definitions of act-based abuse, is a strategy that is ongoing and iterative (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). How much control is needed and the specific tactic depends on the fears of the abuser and the specific vulnerabilities of the victim, the nature of the relationship between the abuser and victim, whether the victim complied, and consequently future leverage (Stark, 2006). Thus, self-reports of prevalence do not tap the process part of coercion, but rather whether it occurred.

This study focused on batterers' accounts of their abusive behaviors in their first and a subsequent romantic relationship. Furthermore, since little is known about how CCBs develop and evolve over time, we compared how men mandated for batterer treatment report their own use of control in their first romantic relationship and a subsequent relationship in which there was abuse leading to mandated treatment. A self-report behavioral checklist and a qualitative interview were used to measure CCBs. The analysis will not only contribute to the current literature about batterers' own understanding of their abusive behaviors, but will also give a better understanding of what intervention methods are needed to address abusive tactics.

## **UNDERSTANDING THEIR OWN REASONS BEHIND ABUSE**

While no study has assessed how batterers view their own need for control, a few studies that directly queried batterers for reasons leading to abuse as a way to provide some indirect knowledge about batterers' awareness of their own use of control. Reasons given for abusing a partner include jealousy, a partner's personality, and self-defense (Mullaney, 2007; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). Abusive behaviors are often chronic and this can be in part due to perpetrators routinely attributing blame for the assault to the victim, to situational factors, denying the assault, or continuing to excuse or justify the violence (Dutton, 1986; Mullaney, 2007; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). Because abusive behaviors are part and parcel of CCBs, a similar set of defensive responses may occur when abusers try to explain their own CCBs.

## **MINIMIZATION AND DENIAL OF ABUSE**

In asking batterers in treatment to describe the assault they perpetrated against an intimate partner, two defense mechanisms become prominent in their descriptions: denial and minimization. Denial has been defined in recent literature as admitting to abusive behaviors but justifying one's actions, denying the seriousness of the behaviors, and/or denying personal responsibility or the need for treatment (Scott & Straus, 2007). Whiting, Oka, and Fife (2012) define denial as one providing, "false

descriptions about one's intent in an interaction." In contrast, minimization has been defined as admitting the behaviors, but denying the impact such behaviors had on a victim (Catlett, Toews, & Walilko, 2010; Scott & Straus, 2007), describing their actions as out of their control, or occurring due to provocation by the victims or stressors outside of the relationship (Smith & Randall, 2007). While denial and minimization may be one way to escape legal responsibility, such mechanisms may also develop as a way of protecting the abuser from confronting his pain.

The mechanisms of denial and minimization also appear to change over time, depending on the context and the cost of admission. Heckert and Gondolf (2000) surveyed male perpetrators enrolled in batterer intervention programs and their female partners. When participants were asked about an assault, 19% of the male participants denied the assault while 29% of the female participants did not report the assault. Furthermore, when assaults were broken down into severe or minor assaults, men were more likely to deny committing a severe assault, while female participants denied both types of assault equally. If a police report was available to corroborate the reports made by participants, more than half of male participants (56.9%) were more likely to report minor violence, while female participants (53.2%) were more likely to report severe violence. Additionally, men were more likely to minimize the assault as opposed to deny it outright. However, at the follow up interview, over three quarters (79.6%) of men denied the assault occurred, compared to 18.9% denying the assault at the intake interview (Heckert & Gondolf, 2000).

In examining how perpetrators viewed their mandate to treatment and the meaning they take from treatment, Catlett et al. (2010) found that men denied, minimized, and justified their actions. Thus, although none of these studies specifically examined coercion, it is possible that men may deny or minimize their own controlling behaviors as a way of distancing themselves from the abuse.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

Using a mixed methodology, the current study examined batterers' accounts of CCBs in their first romantic relationship and the romantic relationship in which they were involved at the time of the arrest in which they were subsequently mandated to a batterers' intervention program (treatment relationship). This study consisted of the following research aims:

Aim 1: Identify whether men mandated to a batterer intervention program used any form of CCBs in their first romantic relationship.

Aim 2(a): Identify if men mandated to a batterer intervention program used CCBs in their treatment relationship.

Aim 2(b): Identify if there is any pattern of continuity or difference in how CCBs were used between a first relationship and the treatment relationship.

Aim 3(a): Identify if batterers acknowledge their own use of CCBs or if they explain and/or justify their use of coercion with denial and minimization when describing a fight in their first romantic relationship.

Aim 3(b): Identify if batterers acknowledge their own use of CCBs or if they explain and/or justify their use of coercion with denial and minimization when describing a fight in their treatment relationship.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 91 male participants were recruited from a batterer intervention program located in a suburban area. Ten participants were removed due to only reporting one relationship, ending the interview due to emotional distress or English not being a first language.

Participants ranged from 21 to 54 years old with a mean age of 38.63 years ( $SD = 9.54$ ) and reported having been in 2 to 60 romantic relationships, with a mean of 8.65 ( $SD = 10.05$ ) relationships, which lasted at least 3 months and included sexual intimacy. All participants identified as heterosexual. Participants were ethnically diverse with participants self-identifying as White ( $n = 33$ ), Latino/Hispanic ( $n = 21$ ), Other ( $n = 17$ ), and Black/African American ( $n = 10$ ). Sixty-seven participants (82.7%) reported employment, with 70.4% ( $n = 57$ ) employed full-time.

Of the 81 participants used in analyses, 34 were able to recall and describe a fight that included violence in both their first romantic relationship and the relationship they were in when mandated to treatment. Thus, aim 2(b) focused on the 34 participants who described two fights and the remaining aims focused on the entire data set. Participants ranged from having completed 2 to 24 sessions ( $n = 79$ ) with a mean of 11.67 weeks ( $SD = 6.46$ ) of the 26-week treatment program. Of the 34 participants who were able to recall a fight with their first partner, 12 participants reported physical violence in the first fight and 29 reported physical violence in the fight in their treatment relationship. Of the remaining 47 participants who were only able to recall a fight in their treatment relationship, 36 reported physical violence. Thus of the 81 participants, 76.60% recalled a fight with physical violence in their treatment relationship.

### Measures

**Interpersonal Relationship Rating Scale.** (IRRS; Beck, Menke, Brewster, & Figueredo, 2009). The IRRS is a 47-item self-report measure asking about abuse perpetration. There are seven subscales: coercive control (*I controlled my partner's coming and going*), psychological abuse (*I put my partner down*), physical abuse (*I hit or punched my partner*), escalating physical violence (*I threatened my partner or used a weapon against my partner*), sexual abuse (*I physically forced my partner to have sex*), and stalking behaviors (*I stood or sat outside where my partner was staying or where she worked*). Items are scored using a frequency scale where participants were asked how often a behavior occurred over the course of the past 12 months, ranging

from *never* (0) to *daily* (6). Scores were determined by calculating the average for each subscale.

**Qualitative interview.** Narratives were obtained and subsequently coded to obtain qualitative data on CCBs. A semistructured interview was developed as a way to elicit the most details about the abuse in participants' relationships. Participants were asked to describe their worst fight with each partner that included violence. This approach obtains the most accurate recall because intense negative events evoke deeper cognitive processes (Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Stanley, Bartholomew, Taylor, Oram, & Landolt, 2006). If the participant was unable to recall a fight that included violence, he was asked to describe the worst fight in the relationship.

To structure each interview, probes included *how did it fight began, what were you arguing about, did anything make the fight escalate, how did the fight end, and how did you feel after the fight*. To obtain potential narratives of coercion, the interviewer probed whether the participant tried to force the partner into complying with something he wanted or to stop her from doing something she wanted, using pressure, humiliation, degradation, isolation, and/or a pattern of microregulation (Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2006).

Finally, to obtain information for denial and minimization, participants were asked *why do you think you used violence* (i.e., the type of abuse or controlling behavior used). The narratives were coded for the presence or absence of violence, the presence or absence of controlling tactics, and whether control was acknowledged, denied, or minimized.

## Procedure

The current study was approved by the IRB. Participants were recruited to participate in the study by the cofacilitators of their weekly group sessions. Inclusion criteria for the current study included being mandated to a treatment program due to an incident with an intimate partner and having had at least two romantic relationships, which included sexual intimacy and lasted more than 3 months. Interviews took approximately an hour to an hour and a half to complete. Participants received credit for one of their mandated group sessions as compensation. Participants completed measures about IPV present in their first romantic relationship and their treatment. Participation in the study was anonymous. Interview data were provided a code number and were not linked to the informed consent document. Program facilitators were only provided with the list of participants as a way of recording the compensated session.

## Coding

All narratives were coded for the presence of CCBs, denial, and minimization using a coding manual developed for this study. Two research assistants who were trained to

use the manual coded each narrative independently. The whole context of the narrative, not just splices of interactions, was used to make ratings. To ensure consistency of ratings and minimize bias, raters were asked to provide evidence that a certain dynamic or tactic was present when making their ratings, report if there was not enough evidence, or if there appeared to be missing information. Interrater reliability was high, raters agreed on 112 of the 115 narratives (97.39%), and the discrepancies were resolved by a third coder

To examine the presence of CCBs, fights were coded using Stark (2006) and Arnold (2009) characteristics of coercive control which included microregulation, restriction of liberty or autonomy, intimidation, punishment, and other evidence of domination/control. Narratives were then coded for the presence of denial and minimization. Codes for denial and minimization were adopted from Scott and Straus (2007), Smith and Randall (2007), and Whiting et al. (2012). Multiple codes were provided for each fight narrative.

## RESULTS

### Presence of Coercive Controlling Behaviors

The first aim of the current study was to identify if men mandated to a batterer intervention program exhibited CCBs in their first romantic relationship. Participant ages during their first relationship ranged from 12 to 26 years old ( $M = 17.05$ ,  $SD = 2.84$ ). Of the 39 participants who were able to recall a fight in their first relationship, 14.8% ( $n = 12$ ) described a fight exhibiting CCBs (see Table 1). Narrative excerpts exhibiting how microregulation, restriction of liberty and autonomy, intimidation, and punishment during participants' first relationship can be found in Table 2. While only 39 participants were able to recall a fight in enough detail to allow for coding in their first relationship, 59.26% of the participants ( $n = 48$ ) endorsed at least one CCBs item on the IRRS pertaining to their first relationship with an average score of .56 ( $SD = .58$ ) on the scale (see Table 1).

Aim 2(a) of the current study was to identify if men mandated to a batterer intervention program used CCBs in their treatment relationship. Participant ages at the start of the treatment relationship ranged from 15 to 54 years old ( $M = 29.96$ ,  $SD = 9.40$ ). Among the 81 participants, 61.73% ( $n = 50$ ) described a fight with a partner where CCBs were present, almost double reported in the first relationship narratives (see Table 1). Examples of microregulation, intimidation, punishment, and restriction of liberty and autonomy during participants' treatment relationship can be found in Table 3. Descriptive analyses were also conducted on the endorsed items on the IRRS for the treatment relationship. Overall, 79.01% of participants ( $n = 64$ ) endorsed at least one item on the coercive control subscale with an average score of .71 ( $SD = .55$ ) (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1. Coercive Control, Denial, and Minimization**

	<b>First Relationship</b>	<b>Treatment Relationship</b>
CCB (qual)	( <i>n</i> = 12)	( <i>n</i> = 50)
Restriction of liberty/autonomy	6 (50%)	15 (30%)
Punishment	6 (50%)	26 (52%)
Microregulation	3 (25%)	21 (42%)
Intimidation	2 (16.67%)	12 (24%)
Other ways of domination	–	7 (14%)
IRRS Subscales	( <i>n</i> = 81)	( <i>n</i> = 81)
Coercive control	48 (59.26%)	64 (79.01%)
Psychological abuse	52 (64.2%)	73 (90.12%)
Physical abuse	14 (17.28%)	42 (51.85%)
Sexual abuse	14 (17.28%)	13 (16.05%)
Escalating physical violence	7 (8.61%)	39 (48.15%)
Stalking behaviors	21 (25.93%)	49 (60.5%)
Denial		
Deny behaviors	–	2 (4%)
Deny seriousness of actions	–	11 (22%)
Admission with justification	5 (41.67%)	24 (48%)
Deny responsibility of behaviors	–	8 (16%)
Deny intent of behavior	–	7 (14%)
Didn't acknowledge response	–	2 (4%)
Minimization		
Victim provocation	7 (58.33%)	38 (76%)
Outside stressors provocation	2 (16.67%)	13 (26%)
Incident out of his control	1 (8.33%)	12 (24%)
Comparison to more severe forms	1 (8.33%)	2 (4%)
Downplay intensity or impact	1 (8.33%)	12 (24%)

*Note.* CCB = coercive controlling behavior.

### **Patterns of Coercive Controlling Behaviors**

As noted in aim 2(b), the data were examined for any pattern of continuity or difference in how control tactics were used between the first relationship and treatment relationship. While the number of participants who qualitatively reported CCBs in their first relationship was small (*n* = 12), data were explored to gain a better understanding of any patterns in the ways men used CCBs. In exploring the 12 narratives, most participants who used CCBs in their first romantic relationship continued to use the tactics in the treatment relationship (66.67%, *n* = 8). However, no other patterns emerged.

**TABLE 2. First Relationship Coercive Control Narratives**

<b>Participant Description</b>	<b>CCB</b>	<b>Narrative Excerpt</b>
White, 18 y.o.	Microregulation	The participant stated that his girlfriend at the time had previously agreed to go to prom with another male at school. The participant stated, "I spied on her and found (her) at his house."
Hispanic, 26 y.o.	Restriction of liberty and autonomy	He stated that his partner thought he was cheating. The participant stated that he did not want her to "make a scene" so he grabbed her arms and left with her as she was yelling at female co-worker.
Black, 19 y.o.	Intimidation	The participant stated that his partner was pregnant and that he did not want her to tell her family. As the partner tried to leave he stated, "I pushed her into the wall" to prevent her from disclosing the pregnancy to her family.
Chinese, 18 y.o.	Punishment	The participant explained that his partner at the time did not do as well on her final exams as he wanted so he told her, "she was lazy, irresponsible, not smart..."

*Note.* CCB = coercive controlling behavior.

### **Explaining Coercive Controlling Behaviors**

Aims 3(a) and 3(b) of the current study were to identify if batterers acknowledge their own use of CCBs or if they explain and/or justify their use of coercion with denial and minimization and assess if there was continuity or a difference in the denial and minimization tactics used. First, narratives that included the use of a CCBs from the first romantic relationship ( $n = 12$ ) were analyzed. Participants used both denial (41.67%,  $n = 5$ ) and minimization (66.67%,  $n = 8$ ) tactics when describing the use of CCBs (punishment, microregulation, restriction of liberty, and autonomy and intimidation; see Table 1). Participants' use of denial and minimization tactics can be found in Table 4.

Next, as stated in aim 3(b), narratives where participants reported using at least one CCB were analyzed for evidence of denial and minimization. Denial and minimization tactics were present in 72% ( $n = 36$ ) and 90% ( $n = 45$ ), respectively, when describing the CCBs (see Table 1). Narrative excerpts exhibiting how participants exhibited various denial and minimization tactics can be found in Table 5. Minimization tactics included downplaying the intensity or impact of the abusive behavior,

**TABLE 3. Treatment Relationship Coercive Control Narratives**

<b>Participant Demographics</b>	<b>CCB</b>	<b>Narrative Excerpt</b>
White, 53 y.o.	Microregulation	The participant explained that he had the suspicion of his partner cheating and that when he “followed up on it my suspicions were confirmed.” When asked what he meant by this the participant stated, “I checked her phone records.”
Puerto Rican, 51 y.o.	Restriction of liberty and autonomy	During the fight the participant shared that his partner was fighting with her brother on the lawn and did not want to go inside the house when the participant asked her to. The participant stated that next he, “grabbed her and pushed her inside the house.”
White, 43 y.o.	Intimidation	The participant stated that he was trying to get away from an “unhealthy environment and the heavy drug use.” He stated that his partner went to go get drugs and he did not want to so he drove the car towards her. The participant stated that he was not trying to hit his partner he just wanted to save them both from drug use.
Hispanic, 20 y.o.	Punishment	He stated that he was in the studio with a client and his partner had an issue with the client’s girlfriend. He stated that she started “screaming and cursing in front of my clients. She was embarrassing so I told her to leave.” He stated that he forced her to take a cab back to a nearby city.

citing outside stressors as provocation, indicating that the incident was out of his control, victim provocation, and comparisons to more severe forms of violence. The denial tactic of admission with justification was also used by participants.

Finally, narratives from fights where participants used CCBs in both the first and treatment relationships were examined to assess the continuity or difference in the use of denial and minimization tactics. While the number of participants reporting CCBs in both fight narratives was small ( $n = 8$ ), the narrative data were explored to provide a better understanding of the patterns that may be present in the ways men explained and/or justified their use of CCBs (see Table 1). The usage of minimization

**TABLE 4. First Relationship Denial and Minimization Narratives**

<b>Participant Demographics</b>		<b>Narrative Excerpt</b>
Black, 32 y.o.	Denial: Admission with Justification	The participant stated that his partner at the time made a negative comment about his mother while they were out at a bar and he “slapped her with an open hand.” When he was asked why he slapped her he stated that he was drinking and that she had made the comment about his mother to get him angry.
Chinese, 18 y.o.	Minimization: Victim Provocation	The participant reported that his partner did not do as well on her exams as he had wanted. When asked why the participant became verbally abusive to his partner he stated, “she didn’t do well on her exams.”

*Note.* CCB = coercive controlling behavior.

and denial tactics when explaining a fight in the first romantic relationship increased when compared to describing a fight in the treatment relationship. A closer look indicated a trend towards using more complex and more comprehensive denial tactics. Narrative data showed participants using admission with justification in the first fight (100%,  $n = 3$ ) suggesting that they were able to admit the behavior although they did not take full accountability for it. However, in the treatment relationship, a wider range of tactics emerged (see Table 1). Narrative examples of the expansion of denial and minimization tactics are provided below.

*Denial:* A 45 year-old African American participant admitted that at the age of 19 he pushed his pregnant girlfriend, but justified his actions by stating that this was because he did not want to her disclose her pregnancy or leave him. In his treatment fight narrative the participant denied the seriousness of his actions by stating that while he threatened to kill his partner he “was not actually threatening to kill her.” He went on to deny the intent (and seriousness) of his threat and stated that they were just words and that he had no intention of killing his partner.

*Minimization:* A 51 year-old Puerto Rican participant described how at the age of 26 he grabbed his girlfriend by the arm, put her in the car and left with her and stated that he needed to do this because at the time his girlfriend was “explosive” and could have started a fight with his female co-worker. In his treatment

**TABLE 5. Treatment Relationship Denial and Minimization Narratives**

<b>Participant Demographics</b>	<b>Narrative Excerpt</b>
White, 45 y.o.	Denial: Denying responsibility The participant stated that he had informed his partner he was no longer able to pay for her daughter's college tuition and that at 2:45 in the morning she woke him up by hitting him in the head. He stated that in response he grabbed her by the hair and that they argued for two hours. He stated that he went to bed and when he woke up a restraining order was placed against him. The participant then provided the following statement, "I was the third person she did this to. This was premeditated and arranged." The participant stated that his partner was looking for his gun the night before to commit suicide. During the fight the participant retrieved the gun and held it up to his partner's head and yelled, "Do you think this is going to solve your problem?" The participant stated that his 14-year-old daughter called the police. The participant stated that the gun, "wasn't a real gun," but rather a stunt gun for BMX riding.
Not provided	Denial: Deny seriousness of actions The participant stated that after the wedding his partner changed. He explained that she never held up her end of the bargain, had time for everyone but him and that he was "fed up." He stated that he "started doing to her what she did to me like blocking the doorway. The participant stated after his partner stated that he did not care about his family he tried to cover her mouth and she bit him so he covered her mouth again with a pillow. The participant stated that he was just trying to cover her mouth and removed the pillow once he realized his partner was unable to breathe.
Black, 35 y.o.	Minimization: Downplaying intensity or impact The participant stated that after the wedding his partner changed. He explained that she never held up her end of the bargain, had time for everyone but him and that he was "fed up." He stated that he "started doing to her what she did to me like blocking the doorway. The participant stated after his partner stated that he did not care about his family he tried to cover her mouth and she bit him so he covered her mouth again with a pillow. The participant stated that he was just trying to cover her mouth and removed the pillow once he realized his partner was unable to breathe.

*(Continued)*

**TABLE 5. Treatment Relationship Denial and Minimization Narratives (Continued)**

<b>Participant Demographics</b>	<b>Narrative Excerpt</b>
Did not say, 24 y.o.	The participant stated that he tried to keep his partner out of the house and they began pushing and shoving each other. Participant reported that his ex-partner then started to swing and punch him so his reaction, "was to grab her throat." The participant stated that his mother called the cops. When asked why he thought he used violence he stated that the, "relationship was dwindling, I was out of work, lost my apartment and she wasn't letting me see my son. I just let my emotions get the best of me."

*Note.* CCB = coercive controlling behavior.

*fight narrative the participant stated that his partner was at fault for him using violence due to his partner arguing with her brother on the front lawn and so he grabbed his partner by the arms and pushed her into their home.*

## DISCUSSION

### Interpretation of Results

The current study is one of the first to both examine men's accounts of their usage of CCBs in their romantic relationships and explore the patterns of continuity or differences in the way these tactics were used, understood, acknowledged, or denied across time. Although not a main goal of the study, the results showed that of the 81 men, who are currently abusive or violent, almost all (74.07%), used some form of abuse, violence, control, or sexual abuse in their first relationship. While these data are retrospective and therefore should not be misread as predictive (i.e., past violence predicts current), this pattern is consistent with numerous other studies that suggest that abusive tendencies are present early on (Eke, Hilton, Harris, Rice, & Houghton, 2011; Henning, Martinsson, & Holdford, 2009; Hilton et al., 2004; Richards, Jennings, Tomsich, & Gover, 2014) and continue if undetected and untreated.

A main goal of this work was to understand if CCBs were present in early relationships, if it continued to later ones, and if so, was there any discernible pattern or change. The mixed methods data, particularly the self-report data strongly support that CCBs were present in the early relationship and continued to the treatment relationship. About half the participants endorsed CCBs for their first romantic relationship and almost two thirds endorsed CCBs in their treatment relationship, suggesting an increase in the overall use of control in this population. Further, the amount of CCBs used increased significantly from the first relationship to the treatment relationship, suggesting that CCBs may escalate over time.

The qualitative data were too sparse to provide any kind of data suggesting continuity or change. Only a third of the sample recalled their first relationship, and of this, only a third reported using CCBs in their first romantic relationship. However, while no generalization or conclusion is possible, the narrations provide interesting information on the scope of the behaviors. Specifically, control was used in situations which were relatively minor, such as a partner not doing as well as the participant wanted on her final exams, but were also used in situations which were clearly abusive, such as a participant pushing his pregnant partner to stop her from disclosing her pregnancy to her family. Treatment relationship narratives suggested that if a tactic was used in the participant's first relationship, he was likely to continue to use the tactic in his treatment relationship. For example, the use of surveillance, a form of microregulation, was used in one participant's first and treatment relationship. In the first relationship, the participant spied on his partner to detect infidelity and in his treatment relationship, he monitored his partner's usage of a dictionary and her

phone calls to draw the conclusion that she never used the dictionary and thus must be having an affair with her instructor.

This study was the first to examine how men deny and minimize CCBs. Expanding on the previous work of Heckert and Gondolf (2000), Scott and Straus (2007) and Whiting et al. (2012), the current study sought to identify whether men acknowledged their use of controlling tactics or if they tried to explain and/or justify their use of coercion with denial and minimization tactics. Of the total sample, only three participants admitted to or acknowledged fault in their treatment relationship, the vast majority denied or minimized their use of control. Prominent denial mechanisms included admission with justification, denying seriousness of actions, denying responsibility of behaviors, and denying intent of behavior. Prominent minimization mechanisms included victim provocation, outside stressors provocation, incident being out of his control, and downplaying intensity or impact, suggesting that these defense mechanisms are crucial to understanding the way batterers understand their abuse. Comparisons of participants' first relationships and treatment relationships suggest that perpetrators might employ more denial tactics when describing a more recent fight than when describing a fight from an earlier relationship.

### **General Conclusions**

The presence of CCBs early on suggests that these tactics are important to measure. The data support a growing body of work that argues that CCB is an important element, if not a key defining element of abusive behaviors and should be included in all measures of IPV (Anderson, 2009; Arnold, 2009; Beck & Raghavan, 2010; Dutton & Goodman, 2005). These data also suggest that if controlling tactics and behaviors are used early in abusive relationships, dating violence screening measures, which currently focus on physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, should be adapted to reflect this. While little is known about CCBs in adolescent samples, and most studies focus on married couples, shelter populations, and adult community samples (Beck & Raghavan, 2010; Ehrensaft et al., 1999; Johnson, 2006; Lehmann et al., 2012; Robertson & Murachver, 2011; Tanha et al., 2010), and retrospective data are not the best gauge of early behaviors, the high endorsement of CCBs at both time points, suggests a likelihood of these behaviors are beginning early.

While the construct of coercion is not new and has been explored in early models of IPV (Pence & Paymar, 1993), systematic attempts to measure CCBs are relatively new. The mixed methods approach used with perpetrators of abuse is novel and it leads to divergent data on CCBs, which has both measurement and interpretive implications. Specifically, participants endorsed more scale items indicative of the use of CCBs than they provided in their fight narratives at both time points. The primary reason for this is likely the timeline the IRRS provides in comparison to the description of a single fight—evidently, given a 12-month timeline, men were more likely to identify a higher frequency of CCBs on the IRRS.

A second reason lies in the way coercive control information was obtained in the self-report questionnaires compared to the narratives—the IRRS scale provided participants with clear incidents of CCBs and a scale allowing them to endorse the number of times the behavior occurred. Thus, participants were asked to recognize rather than recall, a cognitively easier task. In contrast, the fight narratives required that participants actively recall all fight details. The differential cognitive loads involved in recall versus recognition may be particularly relevant, given abusers' tendency to deny and minimize their own need for control. Because these defense mechanisms involve distancing oneself from one's own role and responsibility in conflicts, the lower recall of CCBs in narratives may also be due to participants' defending their own use of CCB and other abusive behavior.

A third potential reason for the discrepancy between the narratives and the IRRS subscales lies in the nature of coercion itself. Dutton and Goodman (2005) noted that it is difficult to measure coercive control by examining the viewpoint of the abuser due to the fact that coercive control is not act based but rather cyclic in nature. That is, abusers use numerous controlling tactics over time and while the act reported in the fight narrative may seem minor when examined independently, the accrual of acts over time makes the impact of each independent act greater. As such, relying on the data from one argument makes it difficult to assess the level of CCBs in the overall relationship because the single incident provides only a snapshot. Thus, while the narratives were useful in describing CCBs, by definition, they underestimate the overall prevalence in the relationship. As such, self-report behavioral checklists may be necessary to gauge the chronicity and overall frequency of this dynamic; however, using checklists does not provide the fight context, crucial for understanding power dynamics (Loveland & Raghavan, 2014). One way of addressing this measurement dilemma is to separate CCBs measurement from IPV and to obtain behavioral reports that are tied to patterns over time rather than decontextualized checklists or to use mixed methods. More work in CCBs is needed to address how best to measure this complex power dynamic.

Overall, the results of the current study have important implications for the treatment of perpetrators of IPV. Most importantly, findings suggest that using only a perpetrator's account of the relationship may inhibit the treatment process, as perpetrators may not be able to fully disclose the extent of their controlling behaviors through recall. Even when participants were able to behaviorally describe their controlling tactics, they consistently failed to take responsibility for them, suggesting that perpetrators of IPV fail to recognize their use of CCBs. The current study provides the beginning steps to assess how batterers understand and describe their use of CCBs as recommended by Anderson (2009).

These data also support Dutton and Goodman (2005) that victims of IPV may be the more accurate respondents of abusive behavior, particularly if information about the context of a fight is sought. Further, the perpetrators' inability to recognize their coercive control behaviors speaks to their overall inability to recognize that they are abusive, despite admitting to concrete acts of violence. This conclusion has strong

implications for treatment outcomes. If a perpetrator is still unable to recognize that his behaviors are controlling and abusive, this hinders the treatment process and ultimately increases the likelihood that a perpetrator will continue his coercively controlling behavior.

This study also contributes to the work of Catlett et al. (2010). Consistent with the current study's findings of the usage of denial and minimization tactics when describing what occurred during a fight, Catlett et al. (2010) discuss the possible implications of men's use of denial and minimization tactics. Reliance on these tactics might predict batterer drop out from treatment programs due to the underlying belief that they did nothing wrong. Further examination by treatment programs of the use of denial and minimization tactics as they are linked to CCBs may shed light on where a batterer's cognitions are and what confrontation(s) during the treatment program may be necessary.

### **Limitations**

While the results provide important implications for treatment and directions for future research, the current study is not without its limitations. In addition to the small sample size particularly when looking at narratives across relationships, the primary limitation is related to the amount of time that had passed since the fights and abusive behaviors participants were asked to recall. In reference to participants being asked to recall a fight with their first partner, in some cases, decades had passed since the fight had occurred, potentially making it difficult for participants to recall all of the details of the fight. Thus, we cannot say with any certainty if the participants' accounts of abuse, denial, and minimization are related to memory decay or defensive postures.

Participants may have also had an easier time endorsing behaviors on the IRRS for their treatment relationship than their first relationship due to the time that passed since the first relationship. It is also possible that participants were unintentionally primed and were thinking more about their use of abusive behaviors during their treatment relationship and able to recall more behaviors. Additionally, the amount of time that had passed between the fight that sent them to treatment could have been as long as 2 years prior to participation in this study. Further, some participants were in a different relationship at the time of participation than when they were mandated to treatment. The change in partners could also contribute to participants having a difficult time recalling certain events during the fight due to their focus on a new partner.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

Current batterer intervention programs have been documented to range in duration from a week to up to a year in length (Arias, Arce, & Vilariño, 2013; Feder & Wilson, 2005; Herman, Rotunda, Williamson, & Vodanovich, 2014), with an emphasis

on physical abuse behaviors, perpetrator accountability, and the power and control wheel. Because CCBs are based on the power and control wheel, incorporating measures of CCBs along with denial and minimization tactics may help clarify and streamline treatment goals and outcomes. Treatment programs may also benefit from qualitatively examining how batterers come to understand their abusive behaviors before, during, and after treatment completion. Future research may also need to focus more on the experiences of perpetrators during college as a way to more accurately describe what CCBs looks like in earlier relationships.

Although conclusions need to be viewed with caution, the current study has been the first to focus on the developmental nature of CCBs, denial, and minimization. Results indicate the importance of measuring CCBs, the difficulty in measuring CCBs, and whether this information should be obtained from perpetrators, victims, or both. The widespread denial and minimization of CCBs also suggest that addressing these defenses may be as important as treating behavioral symptoms such as anger and acts of IPV.

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