

# Revenge and Forgiveness in Intimate Partner Violence Intervention

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## Abstract

Strictly clinical perspectives on intimate partner abuse focus on the psychological well-being of the victim and the structural factors of victimization, resulting in several unresolved questions regarding the role of public intervention. Because public intervention is the main predictor for preventing future assaults, the practical aim of this study is to increase public intervention by drawing from evolutionary psychology to identify and explain the central factors that minimize intervention. Our data show that most people express significant ambivalence and make anomalous decisions when confronted with various forms of intimate partner violence. We analyse a number of significant factors that decrease intervention behaviours and show how they are consistent with evolutionary theories of forgiveness-seeking and revenge-avoidance behaviours and cognitive mechanisms designed to avoid revenge-seeking scenarios.

**Key Words:** Aggression, altruism, bystander intervention, intimate partner violence, evolutionary psychology, forgiveness, human behavioural ecology, moral grammar, revenge.

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## 1. Introduction

When we imagine ourselves in moral situations, most of us think that we should intervene on behalf of kin, friends or neighbours. Yet what we think we should do often conflicts with what we would do when confronted with the actual situation, especially when it involves violence. Nowhere is this more evident than the common but often understudied phenomenon of *intimate partner violence intervention* (IPVI). To illustrate its importance, one-third of women in the United States (35.6% or approximately 42.4 million) will in their lifetimes be raped, physically abused or stalked by an intimate partner. And while men are also victimized, due to the preponderance of violence against women, we limit our exploration in this chapter to female victims. As such, intimate partner violence (IPV) is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States, making it a more common form of injury to women than automobile accidents, rapes and muggings combined.<sup>1</sup> Despite these data there remain few resources for victims beyond post-hoc health or social services, let alone third-party intervention. This latter point raises a serious concern for anyone familiar with intimate partner violence research: third-party intervention is in fact the main predictor for preventing future intimate partner assaults, yet it remains highly

uncommon and often avoided by professionals, neighbours, friends and family who know about the abuse.<sup>2</sup>

Three questions must therefore be answered to promote third-party intervention and thereby prevent intimate partner assaults against women. Why are most people reluctant to intervene in cases of intimate partner abuse? If intervention is effective, how can we increase the likelihood of intervention among the public? When is forgiveness appropriate in IPVI?

We argue that answering these questions requires an understanding of human psychology as it relates to morality, revenge avoidance and forgiveness. In what follows we propose first that evolutionary psychology can identify the proximate causes and psychological mechanisms that increase or decrease the likelihood of IPVI and the place of revenge and forgiveness therein. We then present results from interview and survey data to show that intervention is guided by at least two psychological systems – a moral grammar that drives what people *should* do and a mental calculus that determines what people *would* do. We show that these two systems are mediated by a host of contextual and life-history variables which include predictions about victim and perpetrator behaviours. To conclude, we draw from our results to offer recommendations that are the first to identify and explain the factors that impede interventions.

## 2. Theoretical Motivations

This study draws from three fields of inquiry that do not often overlap but nevertheless share in the endeavour to understand intervention (or lack thereof) in potentially violent situations. In this section we briefly address these fields and thereby develop the theoretical motivations of our research. For sake of brevity, we also focus on the issues that directly inform the hypotheses of the current study, which we delineate in a subsequent section.

### A. Intimate Partner Violence and Bystander Intervention

Besides decreasing assaults, IPVI is important because victims of intimate partner violence are more likely to talk to friends and family than to engage in any other help-seeking strategy.<sup>3</sup> Helpful responses by third parties are those that provide victims with the necessary resources for reducing violence, constructing safety plans and potentially leaving abusers. Such responses are correlated with an improved sense of self-worth, reduced sense of shame and self-blame and are associated overall with better health outcomes.<sup>4</sup> In fact, victims with strong support networks from family, friends and/or co-workers are more likely to end violent relationships than victims without them.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, not all responses are helpful. Unhelpful responses are those that either fail to provide resources or contribute to victims' self-blame, self-loathing and general isolation. Negative responses also include minimizing the abuse, blaming, judging and/or avoiding the victim as well as urging victims to stay in the

relationship in order to ‘work it out.’<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, negative reactions to intimate partner violence are closely tied to judgments of responsibility: the more severe and frequent the violence, the more likely third parties will fear for their own safety and blame the victim, not the perpetrator.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, contributes to cyclical violence wherein victims endure abuse and sustain injuries, from which they report negative responses and less emotional support from their informal social networks.<sup>8</sup> Thus, negative responses not only perpetuate violence but also make victims even more reluctant to ask for help, thus inhibiting the possibility of future interventions.

Indeed, IPVI research shows that when victims are blamed for their abuse, they receive less help than persons who are thought to have suffered an injustice.<sup>9</sup> Along these lines, a well-documented yet popular misconception about intimate partner abuse holds that women who stay with their abusers do so because of some internal flaw or because they enjoy violent treatment.<sup>10</sup> In general, these data underscore the fact that people underestimate the hardships and complexities involved in leaving a violent partner.<sup>11</sup> Some believe that victims are abused because they nag, drink too much or come from violent and/or dysfunctional families.<sup>12</sup> By way of example, Worden and Carlsen’s research on attitudes and beliefs about intimate partner violence reveal that two-thirds of people agree that women can leave their violent partners ‘if they really wanted to.’<sup>13</sup> Such blame places responsibility on the victim rather than the perpetrator. When this occurs, third parties are less likely to offer helpful or positive interventions, even to the disclosure of abuse, which often elicits attributions of unworthiness to victims.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, these attributions have been shown to have a direct impact on feelings of intervention responsibility and can inhibit bystander intervention.<sup>15</sup>

In agreement with Ervin Staub,<sup>16</sup> bystander research explores obstacles to intervention and thus asks: What are the psychological processes and environmental characteristics that prevent individuals from aiding those in need? While most bystander research focuses on violence perpetrated by strangers, it has shed light on the common barriers preventing IPVI. Granted this much, the proximate factors that facilitate or impede bystander intervention include whether the bystander is aware of the situation, identifies the situation as one requiring intervention, feels responsible or compelled to act and decides how to intervene.<sup>17</sup> Similar studies on sexual aggression illustrate that intervention is diminished in social contexts that foster violence<sup>18</sup> and augmented in communities that regulate violence.<sup>19</sup> Still, when it comes to individual psychology, most extant bystander research reduces psychological factors to rational decision-making and overlooks important bystander characteristics.<sup>20</sup>

In a notable exception, Beeble and colleagues found that respondents who witnessed violence as children were more likely to provide instrumental support to victims, such as providing a place to stay, giving financial support or removing them from the abusive situation.<sup>21</sup> Yet those very same respondents were *not* more

likely to provide emotional or formal support to the victims of intimate partner violence (e.g., listening or talking to the victim and/or linking them to formal support structures such as the police, shelters or churches). Although a remarkable study, Beeble provided little explanation for the differences found in intervention strategy and little analysis of the role exposure to violence played in intervention decision-making.

#### B. The Evolutionary Psychology of Intimate Partner Violence Intervention

Bystander research overall has yet to consider the evolutionary sciences of moral reasoning. This is perhaps not without good reason: third-party intervention can be costly and, in contemporary conditions, intervention will not always be met with future reciprocation. The present work nevertheless attempts to unite the disparate topics of IPVI and evolutionary psychology, since the latter has often illuminated once inexplicable behaviours as they relate to morality. It is our hope that it can do the same when it comes to the lack of intervening on behalf of victims among otherwise morally capable professionals and kith or kin.

While considerable attention has been given to evolutionary explanations of violence and sexual aggression,<sup>22</sup> little has been given to intervention or the lack thereof. The key insight that an evolutionary approach to IPVI can offer is this: provided a cost-benefit analysis of intervention, and an understanding of evolved cognition, evolutionary psychology is likely to shed light on interventionist behaviour. The problem is identifying why so many people favour intervention but are so reluctant to intervene themselves, a reluctance that is often attributed to the public's lack of intervention information and resources.<sup>23</sup> Of course, this assumes that people are more likely to intervene only if they are exposed to enough information, which in turn presumes a blank-slate model of behaviour – that is, that intervention is entirely learned. Yet the key insight of evolutionary psychology is that humans share psychological mechanisms and decision-rules that were designed to address social problems regularly confronted by human ancestors. In terms of moral decision-making, there is considerable evidence that respective features of our cognitive physiology (e.g., ventromedial prefrontal cortex, amygdala, ventral striatum) and psychology (decision making, somatic markers, and pleasure and reinforcement) are responsible for affective intuitions that guide moral behaviour, which is sure to contribute to intervention.<sup>24</sup>

We presume that intervention, as a moral behaviour, is guided by intuitions about when one should act but, like other evolved behaviours, is held in check by cognitive mechanisms that measure when it is in one's adaptive interests to do so. In the evolutionary environment of adaptation (EEA), human ancestors would have ultimately profited from intervening in violent altercations amid kin, partners and allies.<sup>25</sup> It would not have been adaptive, however, to do so in all circumstances.<sup>26</sup> It is assumed here that the benefits would have included inclusive fitness or the reciprocated benefits of cooperation, while the threats of intervention would have

been the risk of incurred violence or revenge. As an act of kin selection or altruism, intervention would occur whenever the genetic relatedness combined with the reproductive benefit or promise of reciprocation was greater than the cost of intervening.<sup>27</sup> Nature would have thus selected psychological mechanisms that use proximate cues (i.e., environmental input) to decide when – and when not – to intervene in violent situations (i.e., behavioural output).<sup>28</sup>

This should entail building a moral grammar or a subconscious set of rules for behaviour in moral situations based on recurring or persistent features of the EEA. In such an environment, the ultimate selectors would have been the degree of relation between the victim or perpetrator and the perceived cost of defending the victim and incurring the perpetrator's retaliation. Yet a moral grammar would likewise be based on one's immediate environment such as the prevalence of violence, presence of kin and value of collective action against perpetrators. Additionally, given that the persons involved in the violent acts are intimate partners, potential interveners would also have to consider the likelihood that victims may both forgive their perpetrator and subsequently retaliate against the intervener. Proximate cues often include an array of environmental inputs related to (but certainly not limited by) ecological stability, kin support and reproductive opportunities.<sup>29</sup> As with most behaviours, the basic logic here is that people deal with circumstances – in this case potentially violent interactions – by doing what is usually in the best interest of their genetic fitness. However, given the extreme rates of IPV in nearly *all* communities, the fact that most people in contemporary society do not live within extended kin networks and that most have institutions designed to counteract IPV, such as the police, it suggests that other cues may be regulating important intervention behaviours.

To illustrate, we suspect that bystanders may evaluate the costliness of intervention according to the type of violence exhibited, since a physically violent person may be considered more dangerous than a perpetrator of sexual or verbal abuse. They also must weigh costs of intervening against the potential for victims to ultimately forgive their perpetrators. Moreover, there may be important but unidentified factors involved in the ontogenesis of moral systems devoted to third-party intervention. We know that exposure to violence during organismic development activates anatomical and behavioural features that contribute to dealing with violence in adulthood.<sup>30</sup> Whether these speculations remain open questions, we attempt to answer some of them in the current study.

### C. Forgiveness and Revenge as Moral Decisions

Given clear benefits of forgiveness in terms of fostering cooperation, particularly for closely related exchange partners, it follows that potential interveners must make predictions about perpetrator and victim disputes that include forgiveness. Forgiveness researchers have demonstrated that individuals are more likely to forgive close relationship partners because of the desire to

maintain their relationship investments.<sup>31</sup> This is equally true for victims of intimate partner violence. Whether because of emotional attachments, racial, religious or ethnic concerns, many victims wish to maintain their relationships but end the violence.<sup>32</sup> This is why most victims either stay with or return to their abuser.<sup>33</sup> Yet forgiveness is risky. While victims are likely to forgive and thus return to their partner 5-7 times before ending the relationship,<sup>34</sup> each return increases the level of danger for victims and their children.<sup>35</sup> Victims are therefore always weighing the costs and benefits of ending a relationship; but the costs of losing such relations, escalating violence and even becoming homeless often outweigh the benefits.<sup>36</sup> When considered in light of Kohlberg's stages of moral development, as discussed in this volume by Pinzon-Salcedo, Silva, Martinez, and Patino, forgiving an abuser out of necessity or conventionality is an unsophisticated kind of forgiveness. Hence, it may be prompted more by lack of viable options than genuine reconciliation.<sup>37</sup>

When considering cues to intervention, cultural norms about victim and perpetrator forgiveness matter. For one thing, third parties often feel ambivalent about their role as an intervener or uncritically promote forgiveness whenever they believe the victim caused the violence or the violence occurred randomly.<sup>38</sup> Forgiveness of intimate partner violence is likewise often oversimplified by the putative hardships of the perpetrator (e.g., the abuser *having a bad day*).<sup>39</sup> Such oversimplifications – albeit common to intimate partner abuse – are rarely made for other types of victims such as persons accosted by strangers. In those situations, it is equally as rare to blame the victim.<sup>40</sup> Another factor that contributes to uncritical forgiveness is perceivably uncontrollable intimate partner violence, which also impedes intervention by friends and family members.<sup>41</sup>

When taken together, our starting position is this: intervention (including the promotion of forgiveness from a third person view) in any intimate partner dispute is a moral dilemma. As such, it is the product of a moral grammar. Moral grammarians have shown that normative judgments are the output of a modular system that is housed in the prefrontal cortex and dedicated to computing representations of agents, intentions and causal relations.<sup>42</sup> While moral grammarians stress a third-person view – that is, social reasoning from the vantage point of an independent observer akin to Immanuel Kant's ideal observer – others tend to emphasize a first-person view – that is, self-directed intuition from the viewpoint of oneself akin to David Hume's sympathetic observer.<sup>43</sup> As cognitive research has revealed in recent years, these approaches are entirely complementary.<sup>44</sup> The third-person view is known as *System 2* thinking, which is the reflective side of moral decision-making activated by the medial frontal gyrus, orbital frontal cortex and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. The first-person view is recognized as *System 1* thinking, which is fast and intuitionistic, often activated by the posterior cingulate, superior temporal sulcus and amygdala.<sup>45</sup> The present study takes both forms of reasoning into consideration by identifying *should* statements

as deriving from System 2 and *would* statements as deriving from System 1. In so doing, we are able to identify factors that influence the respective systems and impair the likelihood of engaging in IPVI.

Yet the present study also takes seriously the cognitive mechanism that evolved to avoid revenge-seeking scenarios. Following Michael McCullough, we take revenge to be an evolved behaviour:

To conceptualize revenge as an adaptation, we have to know what social problems it helped our ancestors to adapt to. There are three very good possibilities. First, the propensity for revenge may have been selected because it helped to deter individuals who aggressed against ancestral humans from harming them a second time. Second, revenge may have deterred would-be aggressors from committing acts of aggression against our ancestors in the first place. Third, revenge may have been useful for punishing (and reforming) members of the social groups to which our ancestors belonged when those members failed to “pitch in” and make appropriate contributions to the common good.<sup>46</sup>

Due to the necessity of maintaining cooperative relations, there was an optimal level of revenge in groups to prevent transgressors, ward off would-be transgressors and punish free riders. Over time, then, nature selected persons with psychological mechanisms to infer transgressions and to detect cues in the environment to employ revenge optimally.<sup>47</sup> Still, a highly aggressive person might be overly sensitive to minor trespasses – or, in modern environments, take offense to nonthreatening cues, such as being cut-off in traffic, which may evoke revenge mechanisms – resulting in maladaptive behaviour.<sup>48</sup> As a result, persons are likely to have evolved cognitive mechanisms to avoid the threat of revenge and tit-for-tat violence. We hypothesize that revenge avoidance will thus influence both System 1 and System 2 thinking when confronted with intervention opportunities.

### 3. Current Study

Drawing from the above account, we predict a number of hypotheses. First, there should be a disparity between how individuals claim they should and would execute IPVI behaviours. After all, if there are different modes of reasoning in the first- and third-person views for consideration of IPVI behaviours, there should be significant differences in responses across questions about whether or not people *would* or *should* execute IPVI behaviours, respectively. In other words, persons from a third-person view (such as a moral observer) are likely to say they should / should not help but when considering what they would actually do from a first-person view (such as intervening themselves), say they would / would not.



Moreover, a complex suit of situational, life-historical and other demographic variables should have significant effects on lowering consideration of IPVI behaviours. Second, proximate cues such as the relationship between participants, victims and perpetrators – and the type of violence under question – should affect decisions of whether to intervene. We hypothesize that knowing the perpetrator should decrease the likelihood of IPVI whereas knowing the victim should not decrease the likelihood of IPVI. Participants should also be less likely to intervene on behalf of married victims who are non-kin, particularly given predictions of forgiveness. Bystanders will be less likely to intervene with married couples than unmarried couples, given that the pressure to forgive is greater in institutionalized (marital) relationships. Finally, the kind of violence should underscore the possibility of revenge upon intervention, and thus the stronger the violence, the less likely one will intervene. However, forgiveness may mediate the relationship between type of violence and IPVI. While more severe violence may inhibit intervention due to predictions of revenge on the part of the perpetrator, predictions of forgiveness may inhibit intervening in less severe forms of violence.

#### A. Participants

Participants in ethnographic vignette interviews were recruited from three communities in northeastern Connecticut, including an urban, a suburban, and a rural town ( $n = 26$ , 15 women,  $M_{age} = 24$ ). Recruiting in these areas provided a range of variation in socioeconomic variables, including percentage of population living below the poverty level (30.6% in urban, 8.1% in suburban, 2.9% in rural), median household incomes (\$24,820 in urban, \$41,424 in suburban, \$51,602 in rural), and average education levels (percentage with bachelor's degree are 12.4% in urban, 8.8% in suburban, 20.3% in rural). Forty-six percent reported direct experience with intimate partner violence ( $n=12$ ), 35% had indirect experience ( $n=9$ ), and 19% had no experience ( $n=5$ ). Participants for the second phase of data collection ( $n = 485$ , 357 women,  $M_{age} = 30.84$ ,  $SD_{age} = 13.65$ , 2 did not report age) were recruited through announcements made in several large introductory anthropology classes and by an email sent through the University of Connecticut list-serve for all students, faculty, and staff. Participants were directed to an online survey that included online consent information. One-third of the sample reported having direct personal experience with intimate partner violence, while 34% reported no experience with intimate partner violence.

#### B. Procedures

In the initial research phase, ethnographic vignette interviews were conducted to identify the range of past, current and predicted responses to intimate partner violence by friends and family members and to explore the variation of responses by changing conditions of the scenarios. Participants were asked a baseline victim vignette, 'What would you do if you discovered that your best friend got beaten up



by her husband? Why?’ They were then asked about various changes to the initial vignette. The scenarios varied by characteristics that incorporated findings from preliminary projects and prior research on partner violence, including motivation for abuse (such as accusations of cheating or disrespecting partner), abuse type (including physical, sexual and verbal), blame factors including alcohol use and frequency of violence, closeness of relationship to respondent and relationship type (boyfriend/girlfriend or husband/wife).<sup>49</sup>

After each change, respondents were asked how they would respond. Participants were then asked to imagine their responses to abuse *by* a friend or family member. They were asked a baseline perpetrator scenario, ‘What would you do if you discovered that your best friend beat up his wife?’ and then given multiple variations on the scenario to consider. Finally, respondents were asked to describe any situations they had been in that were similar to the vignette scenarios. Themes that emerged from the ethnographic vignette interviews were explored further in the second phase of data collection, the Internet survey.

Survey participants were asked to envision a scenario of intimate partner violence involving someone they knew. They were then asked about six possible intervention responses drawn from the first phase of ethnographic interviews:<sup>50</sup>

- a) Would / should you call the police?
- b) Would / should you tell the victim to call the police?
- c) Would / should you offer the victim a place to stay?
- d) Would / should you directly threaten or physically retaliate against the perpetrator?
- e) Would / should you organize with others to deal with the perpetrator?
- f) Would / should you suggest counselling to the victim?

Scenarios were randomized across participants. All response options were ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ or ‘I don’t know.’ We excluded ‘I don’t know’ responses from the analyses (see below) as we wanted to assess the factors that unambiguously decrease IPV behaviours. Demographic information and various measures for prior experience with abuse were also recorded.<sup>51</sup>

Scenarios had a number of permutations, reflecting salient issues from intimate partner violence literature and initial ethnographic vignette interviews.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the scenarios varied by whether the respondent knew the victim or the perpetrator, whether it was a friend or neighbour, whether or not the couple involved were married, and whether the violence was physical, sexual or verbal. Scenarios were presented as: ‘*You have just discovered that your* [friend / neighbour] *was* [beaten / raped/ verbally harassed] *by* [her husband / boyfriend].’ Changing only one aspect of this scenario per survey allowed us to isolate important variables and to test for their influence on interventions. In all, there were five basic scenarios:

- (1) Friend beat / was beaten by husband
- (2) Friend beat / was beaten by boyfriend
- (3) Neighbour beat / was beaten by husband
- (4) Friend verbally abused / was verbally abused by husband
- (5) Friend raped / was raped by husband

We then analysed the relative importance of proximate cues on intervention behaviours using logistic regression. Scenarios contained three types of variables:

- (1) Relationship (friend / neighbour and victim / perpetrator)
- (2) Type of violence (physical, sexual, verbal)
- (3) Marital status (husband / wife or boyfriend / girlfriend).

The control scenario was ‘*You have just discovered that your best friend was beaten by her husband.*’ Results were used to construct models for intervention behaviours and regressions were then run again with variables selected from the original model that had p-values below .05. Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) was used to compare the new regression models with the original ones containing all variables.<sup>53</sup> AICs for original models and best models were compared using Akaike weights, which represent the relative likelihood of the model.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. Results<sup>55</sup>

##### A. Interview Data

Although interview data was primarily used to identify constructs further measured in the Internet survey, several themes emerged that are suggestive of the role of forgiveness in IPV. Fifty-seven percent of the female participants who had direct experience with intimate partner violence suggested that abused women should forgive their abusers. The following excerpts are illustrative of these results:

I would tell her to give him another chance. Try to help him. It’s not ok, but people make mistakes. We are human. Nobody’s perfect. I guess just give him another chance. (Female, 36, direct experience with intimate partner violence)

Maybe you should forgive him once but not more than once... I put up with it because I had two small children. You know, the standard. It wasn’t so bad that I felt I needed to leave. (Female, 58, direct experience with intimate partner violence)

I live with verbal abuse, so that’s the norm. And a lot of my friends, they all live with the same exact household situation. You know, because he’s not a bad guy. He’s not an asshole all

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the time. None of us want to leave. We don't want to start over.  
(Female, 55, direct experience with intimate partner violence)<sup>56</sup>

Remarkably, women with direct experience in intimate partner violence were likely to suggest the forgiveness of abusers. It is likely that women who have been abused or are currently in abusive relationships may need to justify or rationalize some of their own behaviors. Other research has demonstrated that while most women do eventually leave violent partners, doing so is a complex process that involves significant risks (as discussed earlier).<sup>57</sup> Although risks were not discussed in these responses, it may be that forgiveness is a default position in many cases to mediate such risks and even absolve third parties from ambiguous interventions.

For some, frequent abuse was interpreted as a sign that the victim did not intend to leave or even want to do so, which may effectively signal that an intervention is neither necessary nor desired by the victim. While most third parties thought the frequency of violence was unimportant (n=22, 85%), a few blamed the victim for abuse frequency (n=4, 15%). In these instances, participants indicated that there could be something wrong with a woman who stayed with a frequently violent partner:

If it happens a lot then at that point it's her own fault that she's there. That's what she wants. (Male, 32, direct experience with intimate partner violence)

If it's a several-times thing, then she should have done something the first time it happened. (Male, 39, direct experience with intimate partner violence)

I would think at that point she's a grown woman, she's choosing to stay in an abusive relationship. (Female, 30, no experience with intimate partner violence)<sup>58</sup>

Some respondents interpreted frequent abuse as an indicator that the woman was somehow content with her situation and thus she herself allowed the violence to continue. This characterizes the documented responses of police officers.<sup>59</sup> For the majority of law enforcement personnel, if the victim does not leave after the first incident, she is to blame. As we observed, many respondents were incredulous even at the thought of a friend or family member staying with a violent husband or boyfriend. This led to participant conjectures that there must be something essentially wrong or defective with the victim rather than the perpetrator:

If she's hanging around with a guy that's getting drunk and beating her, then she's not too smart. (Male, 32, direct experience with intimate partner violence)

I'd ask her why she's staying. Why? There are always red flags but people choose to ignore them. You have to realize that things are just going to get worse. (Male, 46, direct experience with intimate partner violence)

Some women just don't want to be alone. They don't know how to be alone. So they're going to be with somebody even if it hurts them, physically or mentally... I don't know why they can't get out. They are just attracted to that type. (Male, 39, direct experience with intimate partner violence)

I'd say, "Well then why are you there? Do you really want to spend your life being abused? If so, then go for it." (Male, 33, no experience with intimate partner violence)

I would think whatever, she's a grown woman, she's choosing to stay in an abusive relationship. (Female, 30, no experience with intimate partner violence)

You can't stand there and say you forgive him all those times. How many times can you forgive him for that? That's just stupid. (Female, 40, indirect experience with intimate partner violence)

Some people just like that situation. So if your husband doesn't hit you, you do something to make him hit you. They get used to it. (Female, 27, direct experience with intimate partner violence)<sup>60</sup>

Interviews corroborated the fact that whenever participants thought that victims simply make bad choices, third party intervention was unlikely.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, participants were less likely to help victims who they saw as either partially responsible for abuse or hopeless. As illustrated in the first set of responses, it was here that forgiveness entered the repertoire of responses. In terms of intervention, participants felt that it was not worth the risk of getting involved if they thought the victim would or should forgive the perpetrator.

## B. Survey Data

Primary findings from interview data were used to construct the Internet survey, measuring to what extent participants believed they would or should intervene in various intimate partner violence scenarios. Table 1 shows that for all questions other than direct retaliation or threats, people responded that they *should* intervene more frequently than they said they *would*. Chi-square tests revealed significant differences between *should* responses and *would* responses for all interventions. The results show that people indeed feel morally obligated to engage in intervention behaviours, yet understand that they are not likely to do so. This supports the idea that there is a divide between first- and third-person moral reasoning. However, analysing factors that minimize the obligation to intervene (should) and self-assessments of the probability of intervention (would) reveal a number of significant patterns.

**Table 1:** Chi-square analyses of should/would statements;  $df = 1, p < 0.001$

Intervention	$\chi^2$	Should		Would	
		%Yes (n)	%No (n)	%Yes (n)	%No (n)
Call the police?	147.07	78.4(211)	21.6(58)	66.5(179)	33.5(90)
Tell her to call police?	239.27	92.5(360)	7.5(29)	89.2(347)	10.8(42)
Offer place to stay?	229.71	89.3(293)	10.7(35)	87.8(288)	12.2(40)
Directly threaten?	102.07	6.5(26)	93.5(374)	10.5(42)	89.5(358)
Organize with others?	199.04	82.9(232)	17.1(48)	79.3(222)	20.7(58)
Suggest marriage counselling?	285.06	58(198)	42(142)	54.4(184)	45.6(154)

Table 2 details the key factors that decrease the likelihood of answering *should* and *would* responses positively when compared to the baseline scenario (i.e., best friend was beaten by husband). Proximate variables consist of variations in the scenario. Variables marked with (v) indicate that the participant knew the victim whereas those marked with (p) indicate participants knew the perpetrator. Life-history variables include previous experience with violence and demographic factors such as gender, income, education and the presence of siblings. Taken together, we identify a host of significant factors that decrease the likelihood of intervening in intimate partner abuse scenarios.

It is worth noting that many demographic / life-history factors had no significant impact on responses: participants' ethnicity, religious affiliation, marital status, early or current urban/rural/suburban environment, present / past knowledge

of someone involved in an abusive relationship, if participants’ parents had a violent relationship and whether or not they witnessed violence in their home as a child, years where learning would have been critical. This suggests that the factors that affect minimizing reasoning about IPV are not explainable merely by *cultural* phenomena.

**Table 2:** Factors that decrease likelihood of intervention

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Variable Type</b>	<b>Should</b>	<b>Would</b>
Call the police?	Proximate	verbal (p)**	verbal (p)**
		verbal (v)**	verbal (v)**
		rape (v)*	rape (p)**
			girlfriend (p)*
	Life-history	direct*	
Tell her to call police?	Proximate		verbal (p)**
			verbal (v)**
			rape (p)*
		Life-history	brothers**
			direct**
Offer place to stay?	Proximate	neighbour (p)*	neighbour (p)*
		wife (p)*	
	Life-history	education*	
		early econ.*	
		family*	family*
Directly Threaten / Physically Retaliate?	Proximate		rape (v)*
	Life-history	female**	female**
Organize with others?	Proximate		neighbour (p)*
	Life-history	direct**	direct**
Suggest counselling?	Life-history		friends**
** $p \leq .01$ ; * $p \leq .05$			

People responded to proximate cues contained in the various scenarios, revealing important barriers to intervention. If the abuse was verbal, participants

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were less likely to involve the police. Particularly troubling is the fact that in both rape scenarios (whether participants knew the victim or the perpetrator), they were less likely to report that they should or would call the police. Furthermore, knowing the victim minimized feeling that they should call the police and would physically retaliate. Still, knowing the perpetrator reduced the likelihood that they felt they would call the police or would tell the victim to call the police. Participants were also less likely to report that they would call the police if they knew the perpetrator and the perpetrator had beaten his girlfriend. In responding to verbal abuse and to scenarios where the perpetrator of rape was known, the likelihood of participants encouraging the victim to call the police decreased. Likewise, if the perpetrator was a neighbour, the likelihood of offering the victim a place to stay decreased. If the respondent knew the perpetrator rather than the victim, the respondent felt less obligated to offer a place to stay. Moreover, knowing a rape victim decreased the likelihood that respondents would directly confront or physically retaliate against a perpetrator. If participants knew that a neighbour was the perpetrator, this decreased the likelihood that participants would organize with others to intervene. As predicted, in many cases, knowing the perpetrator minimized IPVI. Yet knowing the victim also minimized IPVI, which was contrary to our original predictions, particularly in the case of rape.

With regard to life-history / demography, women were significantly less likely to report that they *should* or *would* directly threaten or physically retaliate against a perpetrator. Remarkably, if respondents had direct experience with violence, it decreased the likelihood that they should call the police, would tell the victim to call the police, and would or should organize with others to confront cases of violence. Further, having a family member victimized by intimate partner abuse minimized the chances of participants offering victims a place to stay, which was contrary to our original hypotheses. Similarly, chances of recommending counselling to the victim decreased if participants had friends who were victims of intimate partner abuse. Perhaps the most remarkable finding is that having more brothers decreases the likelihood of someone encouraging victims to contact police. Finally, education and early economic environment had an impact on whether respondents believed they should offer victims a place to stay.<sup>62</sup> We therefore require more data and further operationalization before further analysing the relationship between education, economics and intervention.

## 5. Discussion

There is no one-to-one correspondence between self-assessments and actually engaging in IPVI. Nevertheless, there is at first blush no *a priori* reason to explain the significant effects we found without making reference to evolutionary psychology. By way of example, situational context plays a significant role in decreasing intervention strategies. Scenarios involving verbal abuse and sexual assault minimized willingness to involve the police. At first glance, there is no



obvious reason why respondents report that they would tell the victim to call the police, but do not think that they themselves *should* tell her to call the police. While the threat of violence may decrease intervention and interventions are more likely when perceived costs are low, it is uncertain how people weigh the costs of various interventions or the likelihood of retaliation on the part of the perpetrator.<sup>63</sup> Future research needs to weigh the perceived costs and risks of IPVI behaviours by looking more closely at the actual cognitive mechanisms underling intervention judgments.

However, we know from recent cognitive science research what happens cognitively when someone engages in revenge or forgiveness, from which we can infer why someone might avoid intervention. When someone undertakes revenge, they are guided by a rage circuit in the hypothalamus. Because the hypothalamus controls bodily desires, such as thirst or hunger, we know that revenge is truly a hunger of sorts, an internal craving to punish another.<sup>64</sup> Once avenged, people experience satisfaction, as evidenced by the activation of pleasure circuits in the brain (e.g., the nucleus accumbens, ventral pallidum, and anterior cingulate cortex). However, we all are equipped with a seeking system that is controlled by the caudate nucleus and activated when social interactions go poorly, essentially conveying a sense of connection with others and the desire to maintain it. This system is also activated when one is excluded from a group, or punished by others, resulting in a keen distress that compels the individual to reconnect with others, thereby serving as the mechanism in the brain that prompts people to seek forgiveness. We surmise that most participants recognize that abusers are less likely to experience the latter set of emotions and more likely to experience the former. Hence, intervention is likely to activate the rage circuit, driving the perpetrator to retaliate against interveners.

While there was some overlap with the factors minimizing IPVI, the disparity between first-person moral sensibilities (would) versus appealing to third-person models (should) of intervention is important. This ambivalence suggests the presence of two psychological systems that influence moral cognition and differentially affect responses to engage in various intervention strategies. While people who have witnessed violence were less likely to feel they *should* call the police and organize with others to intervene, they were also less likely to feel they *would* tell a person to call the police and organize with others. In summary, while features of individual life-history such as direct or indirect experience with intimate partner violence may build moral grammars which influence reasoning, the various proximate, situational factors also have a role.

We believe that being exposed to violence is the main factor that contributes to the realization of the threat of revenge in IPVI situations. Recall that exposure to violence decreased the likelihood that potential interveners would call the police, let alone intervene directly; and having a family member victimized by intimate partner violence was a strong predictor for not engaging in IPVI. The most likely

explanation for this is that victims and their acquaintances discerned the costs of incurring retaliatory violence from the perpetrator in previous experiences of violence. This response is likely strengthened by predictions of forgiveness on the part of the victim. As with other revenge avoidance behaviours, such as evading abusive compatriots, interveners recognize that meddling of any sorts in the domestic affairs of a perpetrator is liable to activate the rage circuit of an abuser. This would explain why most participants were reluctant to even recommend counselling to victims. With that said, our study not only affirms the distinction between the System 1 and System 2 modes of moral reasoning, but also identifies the effects for internal (ontogenetic) and external (proximate) factors that decrease IPVI, namely, exposure to violence and the threat of revenge.

Given the fact that moral grammars are sensitive to external factors, it should be no surprise that exposure to violence affects moral reasoning. However, the fact that such exposure actually *decreases* the probability of intervention – particularly in cases involving engaging with the police – suggests further that police-based interventions may be deeply flawed.<sup>65</sup> Criminalization has been the primary response to intimate partner violence in the United States, but most abusers are not reported, and if they are, they are rarely convicted.<sup>66</sup> Abusers in the United States admittedly do not feel that they will face sanctions for their violence.<sup>67</sup> And while cross-cultural analysis has long demonstrated the importance of effective sanctions for abusers, social sanctions may be more relevant and important to intimate partner violence perpetrators than formal, or criminal, sanctions.<sup>68</sup> Wife abusers assess the indirect costs to their social environments such as personal humiliation and self-stigma to be more meaningful, more likely, and more severe than possible direct legal costs of arrests.<sup>69</sup> Our results suggest that future work must assess, in current contexts, the perceived and actual costs and risks of each intervention strategy. An important contribution along these lines is whether interveners do experience retaliation and whether criminalization processes can prevent such acts.

Most of our sample agreed with all of the *should* statements, with one important exception: ‘Should you directly threaten or physically retaliate against the abuser?’ While only 6% reported that they *should* retaliate, 9% of the sample said that they actually *would* directly threaten or physically retaliate against a perpetrator. And while agreement levels show that most people do not consider this to be a socially acceptable option, this was the only intervention option where more people said they *would* do it than said they *should* do it. The fact that this option was so roundly rejected is an indication of certain ways of framing intimate partner violence. This option, pulled directly from unstructured interviews, is the only behavioural choice that specifically asks members of a social network to punish or sanction an abuser. All other options either rely on police intervention or focus on the protection of victims. There are two rather strong cultural norms about intimate partner violence that could effectively preclude social sanctions for abusers. As indicated by Table 1, most people in this sample either felt they should let the

police handle abuse or they should protect the victim by organizing with neighbours or offer a place to stay. Neither of these ideas addresses the potential for the people within the abuser's social network to sanction him. Prior work has demonstrated that men may be more influenced by the ideas of their peers than their own belief systems.<sup>70</sup> However, intimate partner violence education campaigns usually focus on protection of victims or increasing or improving police response to intimate partner violence, not socially sanctioning perpetrators. The assumption that police will respond correctly and effectively to intimate partner violence may inhibit the pressures necessary for social sanctions against violent perpetrators to emerge.

It is also possible that the format of the study did not provide enough exploration into particular ways to sanction abusers. The study began with unstructured interviews, but all started with scenarios involving victims that they know (e.g., friends or sisters). Perhaps if the first scenarios they were asked about involved perpetrators they knew, the interviews would have produced a wider range of sanctioning behaviours. Directly threatening or physically retaliating implies violence, but there are also nonviolent ways to sanction violent perpetrators. In other areas of the world, perpetrators can be sanctioned through gossip and general disapproval. Given a different interview protocol, other means for sanctioning by a social group or peer could have emerged. Furthermore, because statements implied the use of violence in a survey that quite clearly frames intimate partner violence as a social problem, respondents may have felt pressured to answer the questions in a socially acceptable (nonviolent) manner. It is clear that intimate partner violence is framed negatively. Given the confines of this study, then, our measure of how people think about themselves threatening and/or retaliating may be primed to be especially low.

However, provided that these results are beyond chance and indicate individual variation in moral sensibilities, future investigations will do well to address these factors in assessments of domain-specific moral systems. The main moral systems at work are the third-person recognition of aiding another and the first-person calculus of altruism measured against the threat of revenge. The cognitive mechanisms behind these systems are in turn triggered by proximate stimuli such as the perpetrator's tendency toward rage and/or violence. The current study also allowed both contextual, scenario factors and intervention behaviours to emerge from ethnographic interviews.<sup>71</sup> The extent to which new research can approximate lived experiences of violence can potentially uncover valuable intervention cues.

Because community action is known to minimize violence, encouraging individuals to organize networks of support and communication is inherently valuable. It has been demonstrated that women with strong social support networks from friends, family or their work environments are more likely to end violent relationships.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, places that provide sufficient support networks and effectively sanction violent perpetrators have lower rates of intimate partner

violence.<sup>73</sup> Evolutionarily speaking, this makes sense in terms of revenge. In his recent book *Moral Origins*, Christopher Boehm argues that humans evolved to combat violent men by organizing into social networks that sanction collective punishment, protect themselves from retaliation and construct rules or laws that prevent such violence from occurring in the future.<sup>74</sup>

Recent research also reveals that health care settings are likely place for victims to disclose abuse. As hospitals began routinely screening women for victimization, identifications of IPV increased, and more victims were connected with intervention services through these contacts. One study showed that women who talk to their health care provider were four times more likely to use an intervention and 2.6 times more likely to exit the relationship.<sup>75</sup> Yet studies on dentists who detect intimate partner abuse among their patients, largely due to chipped teeth, broken jaws and noticeable abrasions, find that dentists often recognize abuse but believe that intervention is too risky.<sup>76</sup> The most common rationale is uncertainty about how to intervene, indecisiveness about one's role and fear of retaliation from the perpetrator. Similar explanations are found among professionals in other fields.<sup>77</sup> All of this underscores the fact that revenge is a primary factor preventing most professionals from intervening on behalf of abused patients.

Finally, in terms of forgiveness, our results complement those discussed in this volume and, specifically, issues concerning the quantity of mercy. For instance, we see our results as being reflective of the results found by Pinzon-Salcedo and colleagues in this volume. In addition to moral reasoning, a victim is likely to weigh forgiveness against the severity of the abuse, intentions of the abuser and reparations made by the abuser.

In particular, our interview data suggest that forgiveness and mercy for the perpetrator in intimate partner violence situations are likely the result of reconciling with the intent of minimizing violence as opposed to forgiving with the intent of reconciling a reciprocal relationship. Provided that forgiveness evolved and we inherit a moral grammar for it, then forgiveness should occur when (a) the victim feels emotionally proximate to the perpetrator, (b) the relationship between the two is beneficial or neutral, and (c) future harms are precluded by the act of forgiveness.<sup>78</sup> Based on our knowledge of intimate partner violence, the only condition met in most cases is (a). This raises the question: what is the *function* of forgiveness in on-going intimate partner violence? We suggest that it is not to grant mercy to the perpetrator – or to overlook his abuse – but rather to signal *benign intent*. Put simply, if the woman cannot escape the relationship or she considers it valuable despite the abuse, she needs to signal to the abuser that she is tired of fighting and hopes for a reciprocal relationship.<sup>79</sup> However, unless the above conditions are met, forgiveness should neither be pursued nor encouraged by third parties.

## 6. Conclusion

The evolutionary and cognitive underpinnings of revenge-avoidance behaviours and forgiveness are not the only preventive factors of IPVI. Like all evolved behaviours, context shapes evolutionary tendencies into phenotypes that are most adaptive to local conditions. The same is true for intervention: experience with former incidents of violence and the success of intervening strongly determines whether someone will engage in IPVI. A nuanced understanding of the contextual variables that inhibit intervention in contemporary contexts can lead to the development and implementation of more effective campaigns to encourage action when friends, family members and neighbours become aware of violent relationships. Our data suggest that exposure to violence or violent individuals decrease IPVI and bystander research will do well to incorporate the insights drawn from evolutionary approaches to understanding the moral systems that guide our decisions. By ensuring local accountability and promoting collectively shared models of response, intimate partner violence can be both minimized in frequency and effectively confronted.

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<sup>63</sup> Chabot et al., 'Sex, Attribution, and Severity,' 1696-1713; Louis Penner et al., 'Prosocial Behavior: Multilevel Perspectives,' *Annual Review of Psychology* 56.14 (2004): 1-28.

<sup>64</sup> McCullough, *Beyond Revenge*, 137.

<sup>65</sup> Hoyle and Sanders, 'Police Response to Domestic Violence,' 14-36; Renée Römkins, 'Protecting Prosecution: Exploring the Powers of Law in an Intervention Program for Domestic Violence,' *Violence against Women* 12.2 (2006): 160-186; Joyce Stephens and Peter J. Sinden, 'Victims' Voices: Domestic Assault Victims' Perceptions of Police Demeanor,' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 15.5 (2000): 534-548.

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<sup>71</sup> DiVietro, 'Sanctions and Sanctuary Revisited,' 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Bhuyan and Senturia, 'Understanding Domestic Violence Resource Utilization,' 895-901; Hoyle and Sanders, 'Police Response to Domestic Violence,' 14-36.

<sup>73</sup> John Braithwaite, 'A Future Where Punishment is Marginalized: Realistic or Utopian?' *UCLA Law Review* 46 (1999): 1727-1743; Meghan Condon, 'Bruise of a Different Color: The Possibilities of Restorative Justice for Minority Victims of Domestic Violence,' *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy* 17 (2010): 487-500; Erik Luna, 'The Theory and Jurisprudence of Restorative Justice: Punishment Theory, Holism, and the Conception of Restorative Justice,' *Utah Law Review* (2003): 205-228.

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