Understanding School Sabotage Among Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence from Diverse Populations

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Abstract

Education is an important pathway to safety for survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV). Recent work documents tactics of school sabotage (behaviors aimed at sabotaging education) identified by school staff and advocates. However, more needs to be known about the perspectives of survivors. As part of a multiphasic study of 435 female community college students, 20 semi-structured interviews with IPV survivors were conducted. Identified tactics included disrupting child care, emotional abuse, and using manipulation to limit access to campus or resources. Identified impacts include preventing focus, diminished academic achievement, emotional or mental health challenges, and instilling a desire to overcome.

Key Words

Intimate partner violence, dating violence, academic achievement, higher education, coercive control
**Background**

The consequences of physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse at the hands of an intimate partner are far-reaching and long-lasting. At the national level, IPV is a factor in 16.5% of all homicides in the United States, with a cost to society in terms of medical and mental health care and lost productivity of $8.3 billion annually (CDC, 2014; Rivara et al., 2007). Survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) face substantially increased rates of mental health disorders including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders, along with increased rates of economic hardship and decreased employment (Adams, Bybee, Sullivan, & Greeson, 2008; Black et al., 2011; Golding, 1999; Jeweks, 2002). IPV has been identified as a major barrier to employment, and survivors cite economic dependence on their abusive partner as a primary limiting factor in establishing safety outside of an abusive relationship (Adams et al., 2013; Kimerling et al., 2009; Tolman & Rosen, 2001).

Given its role in enhancing women’s economic security, higher education is an important pathway to safety and stability for survivors of IPV (Adams et al., 2013; Pandey & Zahn, 2007). However, it has been suggested that those seeking to maintain power and control over their partners can undermine this educational pathway through various forms of school sabotage, defined as behaviors aimed at sabotaging survivor’s efforts to gain educational credentials (Sanders, 2015; Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2017). Recent work has documented tactics of school sabotage identified by school staff and IPV advocates. However, little is known regarding the tactics and dynamics of school sabotage from the perspective of current students who are survivors of IPV. To fill this gap, the current study documents the perspectives of 20 female community college students who are survivors of IPV surrounding the tactics and impacts of school sabotage in their lives and the lives of their classmates.
School Sabotage

School sabotage is defined as coercive controlling tactics that directly impact a survivor’s efforts to obtain educational credentials (Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2017). A collection of previous studies have identified such tactics as a serious barrier to the successful completion of educational programs, and ultimately the economic independence and safety of survivors (Brush, 2008; Raphael, 2000; Sanders, 2015). In a study of IPV advocates and college staff, Voth Schrag & Edmond (2017) identified disruption of financial aid, physical violence or stalking at school, disruption of academic efforts, and inducing guilt related to academic efforts as tactics of School Sabotage. Practitioners further identified decreased emotional well-being, decreased self-efficacy, and academic impacts including dropping out and loss of focus as the consequences of such tactics, with partner’s responding to women’s educational efforts with jealousy, resentment, and insecurity. Similarly, Collin-Vezina and colleagues (2006) suggest that abusive partners may demean educational goals in an effort to prevent academic success. Finally, Sanders (2015) qualitatively explored the coercive controlling experiences of women receiving services from an IPV service agency, finding that the partners of service recipients frequently prevented or disrupted their employment or education as a means for furthering their own power and control. However, no studies to date have investigated these dynamics within a sample of current students.

Intimate Partner Violence Among Collegiate Women

Data suggest 22% of college women have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their collegiate careers (Hossain, Memiah, & Adeyinka, 2014). Identified consequences of IPV and sexual assault for collegiate survivors include increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance use (Overup, Dibello, Brunson, Acitelli, &
Neighbors, 2015; Zinzow et al., 2010), as well as increased risk for future victimization (Walsh, DiLillo, & Messman-Moore, 2012). A number of national studies looking at the dynamics of abuse have found a nonlinear relationship between IPV and education (Breiding, Black, & Ryan, 2008; Coker et al., 2002). For example, Breiding, Black, and Ryan (2008) found that women who started, but did not complete college, are more likely to have experienced IPV than either high school graduates who did not go on to any college or college graduates. While initial data suggest a link, the extent to which IPV was a direct barrier to college completion for these women needs additional attention (Mengo & Black, 2016). Kaukinen (2014) underscores this point in her systematic review of risk and protective factors for dating violence in college when she points to the lack of data regarding the link between dating violence and student’s academic engagement.

Obtaining higher education can be an important pathway towards economic stability, employment, and increased lifetime earnings, and has been demonstrated to be particularly impactful for women (Adams et al., 2013; Cancian & Meyer, 2000; Pandey, Zahn & Kim, 2006; Pandey & Zhan, 2007). Data from the 2009 U.S. Census underscores the importance of higher education for women in particular. As analyzed by Adams and colleagues (2013), “When compared with women with less than a high school education, women’s earnings increased by 57% with a high school degree, 81% with some college education, 181% with a college degree, and 318% with an advanced degree” (p. 3284). For IPV survivors in particular, access to the economic resources that come along with higher education can expand their opportunities, increase their self-sufficiency, and buffer against dependence on an abusive partner. With these potential benefits at risk, attention to factors that may impact survivors’ retention and success in higher education is clearly warranted (Adams et al., 2013; Raphael, 2000).
Attention to tactics of school sabotage is particularly warranted within a Coercive Control Theory (CCT) framework of IPV. CCT outlines how an abusive partner obtains micro-control via a range of coercive tactics, including but not limited to violence. It identifies the breakdown of a survivor’s autonomy and self-efficacy as the ultimate goal of such tactics, which include threats, intimidation, psychological and verbal abuse, and physical violence (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Stark, 2007). CCT is particularly applicable when seeking to understand the tactics and impacts of school sabotage because of its emphasis on the destruction of women’s autonomy (Postmus et al., 2012). As argued by Arnold, “Coercive control subverts this process of self-determination and undermines women’s personhood” (p. 1434, 2009).

Coercive Control Theory posits that IPV survivors will have lower levels of economic stability compared to other women, as an abuser uses various tactics to increase her economic dependence, enhancing control over all aspects of her life (Stark, 2007; Postmus, et al., 2012). Given that women who are pursuing higher education are engaging in activities explicitly designed to enhance their economic independence and long-term security, CCT suggests that schooling may be a ‘critical period’ for survivors in the face of coercive control. Student-survivors are obtaining new skills, seeing their identities and goals shift, and enhancing their economic power through education. This disrupts cycles of abuse and dependence, and may cause abusive partners to take additional steps to undermine the educational success of survivors in order to prevent their increased autonomy. While theory, advocates, and school personnel all suggest the existence of school sabotage in the lives of survivors of IPV, no study to date has sought to explicitly understand the perspectives of students who are survivors of IPV.

Research Questions
Given the importance of survivor voices in anti-violence work, and the need to develop frameworks and interventions that support those seeking to enhance their economic power through education, the current study asks the following questions: 1) What tactics of school sabotage do survivors identify? 2) What do survivors perceive as the impacts of school sabotage?

Methods

Sample Selection

Participants in the study \((n = 20)\) were part of a larger multiphasic mixed-methods study of female community college students, which sought to assess their experiences and needs around intimate partner violence, and aimed to provide information to support campuses in addressing the needs of student-survivors. Using a list of all student e-mail addresses, credit seeking female students from 4 campuses in one Midwestern metropolitan area were randomly recruited to complete an online quantitative survey \((n = 435)\), which included the Abusive Behavior Inventory (ABI) (Sheppard & Campbell, 1995). At the end of the survey, they were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow up qualitative interview. Interview participants for the current analysis were purposively recruited from among those who indicated willingness to be contacted and who indicated experiencing IPV in their current or most recent relationship based on their ABI score being above the pre-established cutoff \((n = 112)\). Initial recruitment e-mails were sent to 70 potential participants. Following this e-mail, 27 students contacted the study team by e-mail or phone to discuss participation, and 20 eventually participated in an in-person semi-structured interview. To protect participant safety, participants were only contacted using their school assigned e-mail address, and only those who indicated a willingness to be contacted were included in recruitment. Further, in all public communication the study was described as an investigation of factors influencing the college experience for
female community college students, without mention of IPV. The Institutional Review Boards of the sponsoring university and the four participating community colleges approved the study protocol prior to the beginning of data collection.

**Interview Protocol.** The first author, who has experience in both IPV services and qualitative methods, conducted all twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews. They took place at a location of the participant’s choice in the winter and spring of 2015-2016, usually a private space on the community college campus or in the participant’s home, and lasted 60 minutes on average. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the start of the interview, and a $25 gift card was offered to compensate participants for their time. Interviews were audio-recorded, and de-identified transcripts made from the audio files were used for data analysis. The research team developed an interview guide based on a literature review and the results of the quantitative portion of the study. That guide was then pilot tested and refined with a community advisory board of IPV survivors, and included questions and prompts designed to gather rich data regarding survivors’ experiences. The guide covered domains including experiences with IPV while in school, resource use, need for services, and perspectives on the educational journey.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis began with the first author reviewing transcripts in their entirety, with attention to any discontinuities in the text such as contradictions in the narrative or situations in which a question was misunderstood or a participant was unable to answer (Lehrner & Allen, 2008). Memo-writing was used to document discrepancies identified or issues raised by this first round of holistic analysis. Memo-ing continued throughout the analysis to document the process of interaction with the data and to identify key emerging themes and codes. Two coders, the first
author and an additional PhD level coder with experience and training in qualitative methods but no history of work or study with IPV survivors, worked independently to review all 20 transcripts. They developed categories and themes, exploring themes emerging from the data using content (occurrence of specific ideas) analysis. Analysis included a combination of “coding down” from pre-established categories based on key research questions and themes from the literature and “coding up” from themes that emerged inductively as concepts arose from the qualitative data (Padgett, 2010). Dedoose qualitative data analysis software was employed for ease of coding and to print coding reports, as well as to organize data and track memos. After initial coding was complete, a second round of focused coding sought to refine the analysis, winnowing down or aggregating thin codes while identifying key themes, continually referencing any discrepancies and understandings gained through initial holistic analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Padgett, 2010). After two independent rounds of coding, the two coders came together to review their work and develop a mutually agreed upon coding scheme through negotiation to consensus Conclusions were drawn based on the themes arising from the data. The analysts considered negative cases, and identified that a group of participants \( n = 7 \) reflected positively on the support that their intimate partner provide to them as students. This is reflected in the final theme ‘my supportive partner.’ Along with key themes, sub-themes and definitions, exemplar quotations that represent main ideas were identified for use in reporting.

Patton (2002) describes several means to maximize the credibility of qualitative studies. First, we utilized analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002) with multiple coders and analysts. Secondly, we employed expert audit review (Patton, 2002) towards the end of data analysis when the second author who had not been part of the initial analysis examined transcripts as an independent audit of the themes developed. Thirdly, researchers are the
instruments of qualitative research and the experiences and biases of the research team ought to be transparent to enhance credibility (Patton, 2002). The first author is a feminist researcher with a PhD in social work. She is a licensed clinical social worker and spent the majority of her practice career working with survivors of intimate partner violence. The second author is a feminist scholar with over thirty years of combined research and practice experience with survivors of violence against women. The third author is an experienced qualitative social worker who is trained in anthropological and social science methodologies. She teaches doctoral seminars in qualitative methodologies and regularly consults on grants and manuscripts as she did in this case.

Description of the Participants

Mirroring national averages for community college students, interview participants were 28 years old on average (Mean= 27.9, SD=10.2) (AACC, 2016). They were on their third semester at community college (Mean=2.8, SD=2.6), and most had children currently at home (n=12). The sample was racially diverse, including 40% who identified as African American, 35% who identified as White, and 25% who identified as another racial group. Participants had a range of current relationship statuses, with 30% having broken up in the past year, 25% currently dating but not living together, 45% living with their partner.

Results

Tactics of School Sabotage

When asked how their partner helped or hindered their schooling, participants identified a range of coercive controlling tactics related to education that were occurring in their relationships. Themes included partners purposively disrupting child care, expressing feelings of jealousy or resentment regarding the student’s new skills, emotional abuse tied to school or
failing to be supportive, and using threats or manipulation to limit a student’s access to campus or other needed resources.

*Disrupting Child Care.* Students shared a variety of experiences with partners who actively made it harder to balance being a student and caring for young children. Tactics ranged from repeatedly failing to follow through on previously agreed upon plans to being absent as a caretaker and explicitly expecting the student to juggle parenthood and school without assistance. One student shared about her struggles in trying to return to school after the birth of her child stating “It was really hard going back because he was like ‘you’re only taking two classes, why can’t you do all of this? He didn’t understand why I can’t study or do my papers with her there crawling in my lap. I can’t even take [a] shower or go to the bathroom, how am I supposed to do a paper?” Another student talked about needing to take semesters off because her abusive partner wouldn’t help with child care. She said:

> I kind of stayed home a lot more, reduced the classes that I would take, because we had four semesters...Sometimes I would take off winter, and not go for summer....[I asked if] he could give a little more of his time or help or whatever and his suggestion was that I sign my parental rights over to him. Which really didn’t make any sense.

*Academic Jealousy.* A common theme arose that survivor’s partners were threatened by, or jealous of, their advancement through school, and anxious or mad at the thought of their increasing academic and vocational qualifications. One student felt that her boyfriend was intimidated by her desire to learn, and that this led to many of the challenges in her relationship. She stated “I think part of it, he just felt intimidated …. We didn’t really talk about it. I just think it made him feel like what he was doing wasn’t good enough, even though that was his decision not to do that. He still felt like I was making him look bad, which says more about him…” Similarly, one participant talked about how the emotional abuse in her relationship
intensified after she went back to school, stating that “He said that he was happy, but you can tell when someone says that they're happy for you, and they see that you're trying to better yourself, and they don't want you to be.” Along the same lines, a survivor said: “Sometimes I feel like he feels ... I don't want to say ... I don't know. I don't know if he feels left out, or if he feels like, with me being in school, that I'll be smarter, and that getting a career I would make more... That's why I feel like he's jealous or he feels threatened or feels like I think I'm better than him.”

*Emotional Abuse/Lack of support.* Survivors talked about the direct verbal and emotional abuse they experienced that was tied to their schooling. For example, one student talked about her partner always telling her she was going to fail before important tests, and another talked about receiving constant and sometimes threatening text messages while in class. Another stated:

> It was so frustrating because my classes were interesting and I felt like I was learning but because of time, not getting assignments in or not getting to tests or whatever and that really, really affects grades. Then when I wasn't getting any support from him, he said that he did not care whether or not I went to school, so I was like, “I have to be really selfish and move on and get it done.

Along with these abusive tactics, survivors also talked about how a healthy intimate relationship can be a critical buffer against the emotional and psychological difficulties of school. For some, their partners’ use of emotional abuse was a double loss--not only did they have to deal with the abuse, but they were missing this important potential support. Students shared that they felt a positive relationship could help offset the stress and challenges of student life, so being in a challenging relationship impacted them doubly. A good example comes from the student who reflected on her partner telling her that she was going to fail before major exams. She deeply wished that instead he was saying good luck and telling her she was going to do great. Similarly,
a student reflected on a previous abusive relationship and a current relationship she defined as much better:

“I never felt safe in my bad relationship, and I do now. I feel more safe when I'm with him than when I'm not. That's definitely probably the biggest difference. I'm not on my toes, I'm not worried ever, and that's the greatest difference, and probably the most important. I feel 100% comfortable…When I get up in the morning, like, today I was like, "I'm so tired. I don't really want to go to class." Got up, and my boyfriend had texted me, and he's like, "I hope you have a good day at school."

Controlling Access To and Time for School. A frequently mentioned tactic was abusive partners who would actively disrupt a student’s studying or keep her from having access to materials or campus. Students frequently reported that their partners made it difficult to study at home, demanding attention and disrupting household functioning in ways that required the survivor’s attention. One student talked about how the increase in time she spent at school in fall and spring would be mirrored in increased fighting in her relationship, stating:

The more I got into school as the semester started moving on and moving on, every fall and spring I’m at school, so that’s less time I could spend with him. In the summertime everything would go fine, but as soon as school would start back up here would come the arguments.

Similarly, a student discussed how her partner would accuse her of cheating during the time she was at school or working on school projects, stating, “It takes away a lot of time from your social life. You have homework. I don't have a computer at home, so my life is at this school…I have to come here to use the computer or go somewhere to work and everything. He couldn't understand that. It's always I'm sneaking off, seeing somebody. I just got sick and tired of that.”

Impacts of School Sabotage

Participants identified several ways in which these experiences of school sabotage impacted their lives. Impacts identified by multiple participants included preventing focus on
homework or impacting concentration, facing diminished academic achievement, dealing with emotional or mental health challenges, and creating a desire to overcome.

*Impacting Focus in School and Class Work.* Students talked about the ways that experiencing abuse, particularly psychological abuse related to school, impacted their ability to concentrate, both in class and when studying or doing homework. One student talked about it this way:

If we argue that morning or the night before, I'm still very upset, so I'm not really concentrating. Or if we're texting back and forth, I'm not being able to concentrate in school…and you can always feel the buzzing…and I'll get upset, and then want to respond.

Another said “I try not to let it cause such a distraction, but sometimes it does. If we argue or something, about something that I don't agree that he's doing, then I come to school and try to work, it just doesn’t work.” One student said “I think that was really what kind of distracted me from school, and made it a little difficult,” while another noted, “[relationships] can be hard and get in the way of things…It was hard to study. It was terrible.”

*Diminished Academic Achievement.* A number of participants talked about how experiences of IPV had direct impacts on their academic progress, including having to drop out for a semester or longer, or dropping classes to decrease the burden of school on their life. They also talked about delaying going back to school or not doing as well as they felt was possible in coursework due to ongoing abusive situations. One student talked about a friend whose situation mirrored her own, stating:

She, as a kid, was really into school and really into learning, and whenever she got into an abusive relationship she stopped going to college. I think she was going to…and she actually moved back here because her partner forced her to essentially. She came back here and she dropped out for a couple semesters and ended up going back after she got out of the relationship.
Another participant talked about her experience going to school while dealing with the academic impacts of abuse, and how it impacted her choice to drop out for a period, saying “I felt that it just came to the point where I had to take a break because I was not emotionally stable enough to even think about school or anything, you know?”

One participant reported that she dropped out of school three times while dealing with and eventually leaving an abusive relationship. She reflected that it not only impacted her time to completion and path towards her desired career, but also added additional barriers because she had to address her poor academic record when she returned. She stated:

My GPA was just garbage. It was awful because I took a break twice but I didn't finish those semesters out. It was just bad, so most places I would have needed a better GPA to transfer, which makes sense because mine was not good. I made a plan to take classes at the community college and then, when my GPA was good, apply to another nursing school.

Another student commented on how the repeated experience of being told she should give up impacted her academically, stating: “School is challenging and you need support throughout, at all times. It can be very stressful, too. If you're on the verge of wanting to give up and someone keeps telling you to give up, then you're more likely to just stop.”

*Emotional Impacts.* Many students talked about the emotional impact of school sabotage in terms of reduced self-confidence in their academic and personal self-efficacy, lowered self-esteem, and feelings of worry, depression and anxiety. One student talked about somatic symptoms, stating “I had a lot of headaches. I couldn't focus when I tried to, and…I'm getting sleepy.” Another reflected on how her abusive relationship shaped her feeling of academic self-efficacy, sharing that: “I was in this relationship, I definitely felt like going to college would be pointless because I didn't feel like I was going to get anywhere with it. I felt like I wasn't going to get anywhere with anything I did.” Along with feeling less capable, students reflected on the
increased anxiety caused by their partners and how that anxiety bleeds over into school. One student shared that she felt anxiety about others in school learning about her situation, and felt internal pressure to prevent others from knowing about her abusive relationship, stating: “It's a lot of stress that you have to deal with. It's a lot of emotions that you have to control even to the point of where when we do activities at school, you talk about stuff like this. It will be touching. You know how you don't want everyone to be in your business, so you try to make up lies about something.” Another survivor talked about hiding the emotional scars so no one at school could see them:

It was a challenge. It was hard. It was stressful. It was a show to me. I had to put up a show for them. No one ever knew how I was, because how I smiled when I went to school, how I participated, how I was so in to my work. You would never think that a person like that is ... When you leave out of school you think that, "Oh, she's happy. She does this. She does that." You would never think that I'm a person that had to cry myself to sleep sometimes or worry about if I let my baby go with him, because it's like if you'll hit me, no matter if she's a baby, if she does something to tick you off, what would you do to her? Those are the things that I thought about.

*Desire to Overcome.* A final ‘impact’ of school sabotage that students reflected on is that their partner’s tactics were a catalyst for change in their lives. Many used their experiences as survivor/students as motivation to overcome abuse and start on a new path. One student talked about using her partner’s frequent demeaning of her academic ability as motivation to do better. She shared: “In my...class that he had said that I was going to fail, I wrote down on the front page of it, you're going to fail that class, just from what he said. I just wanted to be like, fuck you.” Another stated “It's just been like I'm going to prove you wrong. I know that everybody thinks that I can do it and I know I can.” Many talked of biding their time in their current relationship- recognizing that while they were in school was not the right time for leaving, but
that when they had their degree their power would increase and so would their chance of leaving successfully. One survivor said:

If we were to actually live apart, I don't know how I could do school and work because I could not trust him. Right now, that's probably the reason we still live together because it's beneficial. It's a big deal for us to stay together and live together so I can go to school. It's more stressful but it's just a period. That's how I look at it.

Additional Theme: My Supportive Partner

In reviewing the interviews as a whole, a final salient theme arose: a minority of survivors had many positive things to say about how supportive their partners had been of their academic efforts. Students talked about these partners encouraging them when they felt discouraged, picking up household tasks to allow them work time, or helping them study. One student talked about the emotional support provided by her partner this way:

If I'm just getting so frustrated with homework, he tells me to take a break, do something else and then go back to it, because I do get stressed out pretty easily and very quickly if I don't understand something, I'm not getting it immediately. If I take a break and then I come back to it, it's a lot easier. I know he helps me with that a lot. He calms me down. He's the one that says, ‘Take a break. You need to calm down.’ He is very positive in my educational area.

Another talked about her family support this way: “In my situation, everybody in my family is supportive. Husband is big… I tell them I need to work on homework or schoolwork they're good. They move on and do their own thing… I couldn’t imagine not having the support.”

The main findings and themes emerging from this study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Findings

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<th>Tactics of School Sabotage</th>
<th>Impacts of School Sabotage</th>
<th>Additional Theme</th>
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<td>• Disrupting childcare</td>
<td>• Diminished focus on school</td>
<td>• Partners who may use abusive tactics in other life domains</td>
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<td>• Expressing Jealousy</td>
<td>• Decreased academic achievement</td>
<td>can be key supports to</td>
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• Emotional sabotage/lack of emotional support
• Disrupting access to materials and campus

• Emotional harm
• Instilling a desire to overcome

students in their academic efforts

Discussion

Students identified a range of tactics, including partners who disrupted child care, expressed feelings of jealousy surrounding the student’s new skills or knowledge, were unsupportive or hostile during difficult times in school, and used threats or manipulation to limit a student’s access to campus and resources. Women were clear that their partners’ attitudes and actions had a direct impact on their emotional and academic well-being, and that these impacts not only affected their current well-being, but also impacted their ability to enact their plans for a safe and economically stable future. These findings underscore that survivors are clearly able to articulate how their partners take active and deliberate steps to prevent their academic success and perpetrate acts of academic abuse.

These observations regarding the dynamics of school sabotage are clearly in line with an understanding of IPV rooted in coercive control theory. Evan Stark (2007) highlights the similarities between survivors of IPV and other ‘capture crimes’ (i.e., hostages), suggesting that hallmarks of both types of crimes are isolation and constraints on individual liberty. Stark points out the “structural dimensions of battering that allow controllers to regulate a woman’s behavior, including isolating them from sources of support, taking their money; depriving them of… necessities;….closing off opportunities for escape, communication, or transportation” (2007, p. 205). Considering severe IPV as a capture crime provides a clear rationale for including discussion of forms of IPV such school sabotage in legal proceedings, and underscores the necessity of describing and documenting these tactics in both scholarly literature and outlets.
designed for broader audiences. These efforts should highlight how tactics of school sabotage constrain both current freedoms and survivors’ efforts to shape a safe future, and underscore the link between tactics that control a survivor’s autonomy and the threat of physical violence.

However, it was also clear that not all abusive partners are perpetrating such acts. Even among women who reported a range of other abusive behaviors perpetrated by their partners, a sizeable minority had many positive things to say about their partners’ academic support and encouragement. One potential reason for this difference could be differences in the types of IPV that were being captured in the sample, with some participants experiencing relationships that could be characterized as situational couple violence while others were experiencing dynamics that resembled intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2008). School sabotage could be viewed as a quintessential tactic of an intimate terrorist, who seeks to control not only the present but also the survivor’s potential futures. If this is true, dynamics like school sabotage may demarcate more severe forms of IPV and serve as an important warning sign of risk and lethality.

The findings have important implications for IPV advocacy. Advocacy has long been a core service provided both in shelters and by other community-based IPV service agencies (Macy et al., 2009). Survivors who participate in IPV advocacy have reported greater levels of social support, enhanced access to community resources, and greater quality of life, as well as decreased levels of victimization (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Evidence regarding the dynamics of school sabotage suggest a need to develop advocates’ skills in educational advocacy and academic safety planning (Davies & Lyon, 2014). Empowering advocates with information about the nature of school sabotage along with tools for addressing the impacts of academic disruption could be an important step in moving community and school-based IPV services forward. The development of educational safety plans to address specific tactics such as
destruction of homework, constraining access to class/campus, and emotional manipulation could be important tools for advocates in their work with survivors. Participants reported making individualized and tactical decisions regarding staying, leaving, and disclosing their situation to best meet their needs for both safety and educational success. Advocates in community based and educational settings can turn to work such as Jill Davies’ *Advocacy Beyond Leaving* (2009) to gain additional tools for working with survivors who may be making a strategic choice to stay in a relationship for the duration of their educational journey.

Recognizing that getting out of an abusive situation may not be a survivor’s top priority will help build a stronger alliance between survivor and advocate and open up new avenues for safety planning and strategizing.

Likewise, it will be important for educational institutions to learn about the tactics of school sabotage and the steps they can take to support survivors in their classrooms. On-campus resources, such as Title IX offices and counseling centers, can support students in identifying and acquiring needed accommodations and services to address the tactics and impacts of school sabotage. This could include supporting survivors in finding child care or transportation arrangements that are not dependent on an abusive partner, or working with faculty to consider accommodations related to destruction of books or homework. In this work, attempting to prevent unintended consequences will be critical. Many faculty and staff are mandated reporters under Title IX. Given that many participants were choosing to stay for strategic reasons, ensuring students have access to confidential resources that put them in the driver’s seat regarding disclosure should be a priority (Holland & Cortina, 2017).

The pathways through which IPV and school sabotage impact survivor’s educational outcomes also require additional investigation. The current findings point to partners directly
undermining students’ attendance and scholastic efforts, as well as the deeper emotional and mental health impacts of living with abuse. The psychology literature also suggests that beyond such direct sabotage, survivors may also face neurobiological consequences that can slow progress and hamper educational efforts. A substantial literature underscores the link between trauma and deficits in short term memory, which is a key component of the learning process as new information is digested IPV (Bremner et al, 1995; Shear, 2002; Uddo et al, 1993). Trauma cues have been demonstrated to have a unique main effect on memory, with students less able to perform important learning tasks in the wake of such traumatic reminders (Kolts, Lombardo, & Faulkner, 2004). Study participants talked about their partner’s constant text messages in class being a distraction or source of emotional pain. This suggests that such actions could also be directly impacting their ability to learn in class. Advocates must be able to normalize these challenges and work with the survivors to develop an academic advocacy plan that helps them manage the emotional and psychological impacts along with the direct tactics of sabotage.

One factor that impacts the mental health of IPV survivor specifically is the on-going nature of IPV, both while in and after leaving the relationship, which creates additional mental health risk. While many trauma survivors, such as combat veterans, may attain a state of safety after the traumatic event (i.e., a deployment or specific violent incident) has passed, survivors of IPV face on-going stalking, harassment, threats and physical and verbal violence (Herman, 1992). This prevents the reaching of a safe ‘post-trauma’ mental and physical state, and limits the usefulness of many current PTSD treatment modalities that emphasize recognizing the participants’ current state of safety (Edmond, Boland, & Yu, 2013; Mechanic, 2004). Given that survivors in this study talked about making strategic choices to stay in dangerous relationships in
order to obtain educational credentials, the usefulness of such trauma interventions for this population deserves careful consideration.

As coercive control theory becomes a critical framework for understanding the experiences of survivors, scholars should investigate the coercive controlling tactics of IPV across life domains and intersections of identities. Work on collegiate IPV seeks to influence intervention and prevention strategies on college campuses and make recommendations regarding educational policy. Among participants in the current study, discussions of abusive tactics were often more similar to what survivors have said in the past about employment or workplace abuse than what other groups of students have said about campus based violence (Moe & Bell, 2004). Taking an expanded lens requires scholars to move the discussion beyond the Greek system, alcohol culture, residence halls, and on campus bystanders, to better relate to college students for whom these are not salient domains.

Doing so could have a cascade of benefits for survivors and the educational institutions with which they interact. Higher education comes with increased economic power, enhanced professional opportunities, a wider and more diverse social network, and ultimately a key pathway to long term safety and security for survivors. For institutions of higher education, school sabotage presents a real threat to retention and completion, and thus to the mission and bottom line of the institution. Building preventative dollars in on the front end, seeking to identify and support survivors who may be at risk of dropping classes or dropping out, would be beneficial to institutions and survivors alike.

For community colleges in particular, the current study reveals that students may benefit from institutions providing the supports that will allow them to be successful in the face of various challenging life situations. Institutions can focus on developing support systems that
address the unique needs of their students, including building programming specifically for survivors into universal resources (child care, financial support programs) and thinking about alternative methods for service provision for online and part-time students, among others. For policy makers, a broad interpretation of Title IX and the Campus SaVE act that allows for such a universalist approach to campus based services would allow for community colleges to better meet the needs of survivors and non-survivors alike. Future work should explore the dynamics of IPV among a range of understudied collegiate populations in order to identify key services for survivors (Voth Schrag, 2016).

The current study also suggests that alterations in state level TANF policy could be uniquely supportive to survivors seeking to further their educational credentials. The welfare reform legislation of 1996 significantly curtailed the available support for postsecondary education for single mothers with children to a maximum of 12 months, and focused on the work-first approach to poverty reduction (Pandey and Kim, 2008). For the survivors in this study, states that place work requirements excluding higher education on access to public assistance benefits including child care vouchers and cash aide are missing an opportunity to promote survivor’s safety and their longer-term economic viability. Welfare policy that takes a long-term view towards decreasing poverty should include supports for those who desire to gain educational credentials, rather than placing time limits on education that may promote drop out. While an educational path out of poverty may not be workable or useful for all, a policy that actively limits educational attainment is short sighted. Some states have opted into a Domestic Violence Waiver program, which allows TANF workers to waive some requirements (including work requirements or limits on child care assistance) for survivors of IPV (Postmus & Hahn, 2007). Expansion of these programs in light of evidence that abusive partners may use coercive
controlling tactics such as child care disruption to impact survivor’s educational efforts could be an important state level step to support survivors in their educational ambitions.

Limitations.

When considering these implications, important limitations should be noted. First, it is important to keep in mind that participating students were all attending community college in the same Midwestern metropolitan area, and as such they reflect the demographics of such institutions. Compared to four-year campuses, they are older and more are living with long-term partners and engaged in the task of parenting. Because of this, their risk profile and experiences are likely different than younger students. Community college women constitute a unique population, and their relationship dynamics may be similarly distinct from “traditional” college women, as they are less likely to be “going away” to college, more likely to be in long term relationships, more likely to have financial dependents, and more likely to be single parenting, all of which could have important implications for their experiences of IPV (Authors, forthcoming; Kaukinen, 2014; Mullin, 2012). For campuses, this points to the need for further work to untangle these issues and how they relate to the development of effective prevention and intervention techniques for diverse groups of students.

These interviews aimed to collect rich data from a small group of students. Future work that seeks to quantitatively document the prevalence and tactics of school sabotage among the general population of students is needed. Such work could begin the process of understanding how school sabotage does or does fit within established typologies of IPV, and start to identify key risk factors which could be useful to practitioners and policy makers who are seeking to effectively target intervention and prevention dollars.

Conclusions.
The opportunity to pursue higher education can be a ‘golden moment’ for breaking out of the isolation and cycles of dependency that often accompany IPV. Building new social networks while gaining critical economic leverage can disrupt patterns of power and control, if these changes are able to take root and thrive. But coercive control theory also sheds light on the ways in which aiming to obtain higher education puts survivors of IPV at unique risk, as abusive partners may retrench and double down on controlling tactics in the face of a survivor’s new empowerment. By understanding, addressing, and preventing school sabotage, scholars, institutions of higher education, and their community partners have an opportunity to make an important contribution to the well-being and safety of students.

References


