

The Dual Use of Religious-Faith in Intimate Partner Abuse Perpetration: Perspectives of Latino Men in a Parish-based Intervention Program

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Little is known about the role that religious faith plays in the lives of men who have acted abusively against an intimate partner. Studies report mixed findings about the relationship between religious-faith and intimate partner violence/abuse (IPV/A) perpetration. This study explored the perceptions of Latino men involved in a parish-based partner abuse intervention program (PAIP). Two focus groups were conducted with members of the PAIP (N=18). Two major themes emerged. Participants reported using religious faith as a mechanism for ending violence. However, participants also reported past misuse of religion in order to gain control over their intimate partners. These apparently conflicting roles of religion were further elucidated in several sub-themes. Religious faith is complex; however, this study offers insight into how faith may serve as both a risk and protective factor for IPV/A perpetration. Implications on how intervention programs may address participants' religious faith during treatment and social workers' roles in related topics are discussed.

Keywords: religion, faith, spirituality, intimate partner violence, domestic violence

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AND ABUSE (IPV/A) perpetration, which is often referred to as domestic violence (DV), takes many forms and may manifest as physical, emotional, spiritual,

psychological, economic, or sexual abuse. No community is unaffected by IPV/A. It occurs in every racial/ethnic group, faith community, in every socioeconomic status, in all geographical areas, and across all other demographic areas. IPV/A is the most common form of violence against women worldwide with serious, physical, mental, and economic consequences. Nearly one in three women and one in 10 men in the United States have experienced rape, physical assault, and/or stalking by an intimate partner (Black et al., 2011). While women have been shown to assault their partners at similar rates, they remain the primary victims of harm related to IPV/A due to greater physical, financial, and emotional injuries experienced (Arias & Corso, 2005; Archer, 2000). Women are also more likely to be victims¹ of *severe* physical violence, to experience multiple forms of IPV/A, need medical care due to abuse, and be more fearful of their abusive partner when compared to men (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014). For these reasons and more, IPV/A has been described as one of the most harmful, yet preventable global public health problems (García-Moreno et al., 2013; Rothman et al., 2003), with a lot of attention placed on the male to female IPV/A perpetrated in heterosexual relationships.

Men who use violence and/or act abusively towards a woman intimate partner are sometimes portrayed in the media as unidimensional monsters (Dutton & Golant, 2008). However, for most partner abusive men, this characterization is a fallacy and it fails to embrace the fullness of their personhood. Reducing men who act abusively solely to their behavior erases a necessary part of what is needed for holding them accountable for their actions—their humanity (Corvo & Johnson, 2003). Most men who act abusively are functional members of society, serving as doctors, lawyers, social workers, parents, pastors, scientists, artists, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. While there is no single “cause” for IPV/A perpetration, research studies have identified risk factors that contribute to one perpetrating abusive behavior. For example, engaging in substance abuse and having attitudes that condone violence are significant risk factors for men using physical violence against partners (Stith et al., 2004). According to a meta-analysis reviewing 85 studies, the most salient predictors of perpetration can be examined as occurring at the macro-level and micro-level. Those at the macro-level seem to have the smallest effect on individuals, while factors at

¹ Language of domestic violence advocacy vs. criminal/legal system: Advocacy model language defines one who has experienced a pattern of power and control by another as a “survivor,” whereas the legal system refers to one who has experienced criminal violence as a “victim.” The two terms are used interchangeably throughout this work. The criminal justice system refers to those who have been convicted of a crime as “perpetrators,” whereas domestic violence agencies and victim advocates refer to them as “abusers” or “batterers.” It should be acknowledged that there is substantial debate and critique in the IPV/A research field about overuse of the term “batterer” when describing those who do not exert a pattern of abuse and coercive control. However, unless otherwise noted, the three terms are used interchangeably throughout this work.

the micro-level seem to have the most effect in predicting perpetration. At the macro-level, lower education/income and being younger had significant but weak effects on perpetration, while general stress was shown to have a medium effect on men's using physical violence. At the micro-level, having a history of violence in the family of origin (Costa, et al., 2015), being generally violent towards non-family, and having low marital satisfaction were shown to increase one's risks of being physically abusive (Stith, et al., 2004). Depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, childhood sexual abuse and failure to form positive attachments are also some of the most salient issues of men who batter (Costa et al., 2015).

Understanding contextual factors that increase the risk of someone using violence are key to developing effective prevention interventions. Likewise, understanding factors that inhibit violence are important as well, because they may uncover elements of social life that should be promoted or nurtured in order to reduce risk. While religious faith and spirituality are often noted as protective factors in health research (Levin, 2010; Powell et al., 2003), the story is much more nuanced than simply stating that religious involvement is good for one's health. For example, increased religious involvement (e.g. frequency of church service attendance, etc.) has generally been shown to have an inverse relationship with depression-related symptoms because of increased social support and stress prevention (Taylor et al., 2012). However, it depends on the quality (i.e. negative vs. positive) of social interactions experienced and other elements such as, whether one is a supplier or receiver of emotional support in a church setting (Oh, Waldman, Lloyd, & Lincoln, 2019). Therefore, there is much more to be learned about the relationship between health in general and religion. Considerably less research has examined the relationship between religious factors (e.g., attendance at worship services, prayer frequency, and religious beliefs) and IPV/A perpetration. Even though the findings from studies are mixed, the existing literature does somewhat address connections between religious involvement, religiosity and IPV/A perpetration, as further discussed in the following section.

Religious Involvement, Religious Identity & IPV/A Perpetration

The debate on how religion interacts with IPV/A is growing and is primarily led by two main perspectives. One line of thought is that when religious ideology encourages loving behavior and anti-violence, religious involvement serves as a protective factor, reducing a person's likelihood of acting abusively. Ellison and colleagues (2007) analyzed data from a large national survey (N=3,134), conceptualizing church attendance as religious involvement. They found that religious involvement was generally associated with reduced IPV/A perpetration, with the strongest relationships

occurring among Black and Latino² men. Every one-unit increase in religious involvement was associated with a 9% reduction in the odds of committing abuse, “suggesting that men who attend religious services several times a week are 72% less likely to abuse their female partners” (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1105). Church attendance, however, is considered a very limited measure of religiosity, begging the question of whether the relationship between violence use and religious involvement may differ with alternate measures. While several scholars have posited that religion has the capacity to encourage resistance of abuse by confronting violence and facilitating abusers’ recovery (Hoeft, 2009; Hubbert, 2011), little is known about how this may occur.

Conversely, others suggest that when men hold religious ideas that value rigid gender-roles or expectations that privilege male power, high religious involvement may facilitate IPV/A perpetration (Koch & Ramirez, 2010). Renzetti and colleagues (2015) found that men (N=260) who reported higher religious commitment (e.g. spending time understanding faith, in religious thought, etc.), were more likely to perpetrate physical and psychological abuse (Renzetti et al., 2015). This finding, however,

² Hispanic/Latino people are not a monolithic group, but are often treated as one in health disparities research (Rodriquez, 2015) despite the fact that “race” is entirely socially constructed and has no biological basis (Sussman, 2014; Zuberi, 2001). People categorized as Latino or Hispanic differ in country of origin, language, racial identity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, acculturation, and in many other areas. Even use of the terms Latino and Hispanic are debatable and certainly not always interchangeable. The U.S. government first designated “Hispanic” as an official racial categorization in 1978. The term changed to “Hispanic or Latino” in 1997 and the definition from race to ethnicity (Office of Management and Budget, 1997). The latter has remained and the U.S. Census Bureau currently designates “Hispanic or Latino” people as those “of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (Ennis et al., 2011, p. 2). Latino/a is used to refer to people having ancestry from Latin America, whereas Hispanic refers to those whose origin lies in a Spanish speaking country. Although many countries in Latin America are Spanish speaking, some have other official languages. Furthermore, some people resist the term Hispanic as a negative one since it could represent the colonialism of Latin American countries by Spain. Neither of these terms is entirely satisfactory, but both are often used interchangeably in defining a group of diverse people usually with origins in Spanish-speaking countries, residing in the U.S (Cobas, Duany, & Feagin, 2015)(Cobas et al., 2015). National data reveals that when asked which term they prefer (Hispanic or Latino), most (51%) have no preference and prefer to be described by their families’ country of origin (i.e. Guatemalan, Chilean, Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, etc.) Of those who do have a preference between the two pan-ethnic terms, Hispanic (33%) is preferred over Latino (14%)(Taylor et al., 2012). We have elected to refer to the population of study as Latino men. Careful considerations were taken before this decision was made. The primary author evaluated demographic data collected from program participants, consulted with Latcrit literature, Latcrit scholars, and listened to the language used by group participants, staff, and clergy serving the HOPE program. She also asked the group facilitator (a Puerto Rican man) directly for advice on how she should describe the men in group.

depended upon the degree to which one was intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to engage in religious practices. Furthermore, the sample was comprised of mostly White men (80%), making it difficult to compare to studies with more diverse populations. Finally, Todhunter and Deaton (2010) explored the potential relationship between a variety of religious factors (i.e. self-perception of religiosity/spirituality, prayer frequency, religious service attendance) and IPV/A perpetration in a national sample (N=3,652) of young men (ages 18-26) reporting Christian identity. Their findings revealed no significant relationship (positive or negative; Todhunter & Deaton, 2010). This indicates that the operation of religious faith as a clear risk or protective factor in IPV/A perpetration remains unknown (Cunradi et al., 2002; Todhunter & Deaton, 2010).

Nonetheless qualitative data from clergy and survivors of IPV/A lends support to the idea that men who act abusively can and do use religion to legitimize their behavior and maintain a positive self-image (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Simonic et al., 2013;). In such cases, their religious beliefs may play a key role in facilitating violence instead of preventing such behavior (Bottoms et al., 1995; Sharp, 2014). Religio-spiritual (R/S) abuse takes advantage of the religious or spiritual commitment of the victim for the purpose of gaining or maintaining control. This form of abuse can be exercised through restricting one's access to faith communities and houses of worship, manipulating sacred text to justify abuse, and/or spreading fear of moral failure (e.g. pressuring one to forgive an abuser's prior behavior (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Davis, 2015; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001; Miles, 2000). Despite some reluctance to accept the idea of religious abuse, faith communities have indicated that highlighting IPV/A-related religious abuse may encourage faith-based communities to address IPV/A perpetration more openly (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006).

On the other hand, there is some evidence from interviews with partner-abusive men that they tend to find solace in God when experiencing social isolation or other difficulties (Levitt et al., 2008). Spirituality is important in the lives of many men who have acted abusively (Freeman, 2001), as evidenced by their own report and the fact that these men often seek help from clergy (Rotunda et al., 2004). Yet, outside of IPV/A survivor populations, religious-based spirituality has received little research attention in the field of IPV/A, and the perspective of men who have acted abusively is rarely explored in these contexts

Methods

Purpose

The aim of this study was to understand the intersection of religious faith and IPV/A perpetration among Latino men from their perspectives.

Because 60% of Hispanic adults and 47% of young Hispanic adults say religion is very important in their lives (Martinez & Lipka, 2014), Latino men are an ideal population to further explore these constructs. Specific research questions were: 1) How and to what extent is religion, faith, or spirituality used to facilitate cessation of abusive behavior? 2) How and to what extent is religion, faith, or spirituality used against a partner as a form of control?

Study Design & Intervention

This work draws on data from a large case study (Davis et al., 2020) exploring the activities and function of a voluntary, parish-based partner abuse intervention program (PAIP) serving Spanish-speaking Latino men, known as The Men's Group (TMG). Outlier (also known as "extreme or deviant") sampling was used in selecting the program itself because of the unusually high numbers of voluntary participants it attracts, the focus on Latino men, and affiliation with a parish.³ We report here on one part of the qualitative work collected during participant focus groups that were convened as part of a community based participatory research (CBPR) project. This exploratory cross-sectional qualitative study employed a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Procedures

Inclusion criteria for participation in the focus groups required men to be at least 18 years old and have attended at least one session of TMG as a group member. Each of the two focus groups consisted of nine participants. Both were conducted in September of 2016 and each lasted approximately 2.5 hours. Announcements were made at TMG sessions by program staff, notifying group members of the study. Flyers were posted at the site in which the group meetings were held. Men who were interested called a research study-specific phone number and were given further details about the aim of the study and assured that study involvement was completely voluntary and separate from participation in TMG. Potential participants were asked to self-select into a focus group for "senior" members of TMG or a focus group for "new" members of TMG. Little guidance was given during recruitment as to what the terms "new" or "senior" meant outside of thinking about how long they had been part of TMG. This was done deliberately to evaluate

³ A Catholic parish is "the most local unit in the hierarchical Roman Catholic Church...following the Catholic Code of Canon Law, a parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor...under the authority of the diocesan bishop. Catholic parishes achieve unique identities by gathering specific communities of Catholics in a physical church structure over the course of time" (Adler, et al., 2019, p.2).

how members of TMG viewed themselves. Focus groups were intentionally held away from the parish site to allow participants' freedom of expression regarding their experiences with TMG. The focus groups were held on the campus of a Midwestern university School of Social Work.

Upon arrival, participants were given the option to be consented in Spanish or English, based on their own preference. Of the 18 participants, one elected to be consented in English and all other participants were consented in Spanish. All participants were individually consented in person by a member of the research team who reviewed the purpose of the study and conveyed that participation was entirely voluntary and confidential. Conducting research with vulnerable populations such as Mexican immigrant and U.S. Latinx⁴ persons requires special attention, beyond that usually afforded when discussing sensitive topics like IPV/A (Kyriakakis et al., 2014). A short informed consent quiz, suggested for use when conducting research with men enrolled in partner abuse intervention programs (Crane et al., 2013) was administered to ensure subjects understood that participation was voluntary. Participants were provided a \$50 cash gift for their time, an amount that has been paid in previous studies for IPV/A related interviews of similar lengths (Potter, 2008). Participants were also provided a \$10 cash stipend for travel expense. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Washington University in St. Louis (IRB #201607054).

A semi-structured questionnaire guide with 11 questions was developed by the principal investigator (PI) in collaboration with a partner from the parish. The complete focus group questionnaire is available upon request. Two of the eleven questions asked during the focus group centered on faith and religion. They were as follows:

- 1) Has faith or religion influenced you to stop abusive treatment of your partner? —If so how?
- 2) Were there times that you used faith or religion to control your partner? —If so how?

Both focus groups were facilitated in Spanish by a bilingual (Spanish-English) Latina woman (unaffiliated with TMG or parish). The facilitator had extensive previous experience leading batterer intervention program groups. She was interviewed and collectively selected by the community collaborative board (CCB) that guided the larger study. The decision to select the appropriate person(s) to facilitate the focus groups was not taken lightly given the sensitivity of the topics that were planned for

⁴ Latinx is a gender inclusive term used by scholars and activists as part of a "linguistic revolution" to move beyond gender binaries. It is an alternative to Latino and Latina when the gender identities of the population being described is unknown. Using the term Latinx acknowledges gender queer, gender non-conforming, and transgender people.

discussion. Of the applicants for this role, the person selected was the most qualified and demonstrated qualities that were important to the CCB (e.g. respectful positive regard for participants). The CCB aimed to hire a male co-facilitator with similar strengths to replicate the mixed gender dual facilitator structure pre-noted as ideal by the CCB, but despite multiple interviews the team was unable to hire a person that met the needs of the CCB. The PI was present in both focus groups alongside the facilitator and, although the PI was not fluent in Spanish, she was able to ask follow-up questions during the focus groups as needed. Two bilingual MSW-student researcher assistants (RAs) who also had IPV/A training (one Latino man, one Latina woman) observed both focus groups. Notes were taken by RAs on non-verbal expressions and the content of discussions. At the end of each focus group, RAs summarized and stated the main points communicated by the participants as a means of member-checking. Participants were then asked to clarify any part of the summary that they felt was misunderstood or inaccurate. In both groups, participants affirmed that the immediate summarization accurately reflected the discussion. Both focus groups were audio recorded, then translated to English by the focus group facilitator, and transcribed verbatim by a professional service.

Data Analysis

The PI listened to (English) audio files and read the transcripts multiple times to familiarize herself with the data before beginning the coding process (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Saldaña, 2015). A web-based program, Dedoose Version 8.0.35, was used for data management of focus group transcripts and reflective memos. An interpretive content analysis was conducted in order to gain a rich understanding of the data (Baxter, 1991). An inductive approach was used to develop categories and subcategories through open coding, a process that organizes data into “boxes” as transcripts are reviewed line-by-line (Miles et al., 2013). The PI coded the data for this study independently, then another team member reviewed the data and codes. The PI and research team member then engaged in discussions about the data and code applications as a mechanism to improve credibility (Hill et al., 2005; Saldaña, 2015). This process was then followed by axial coding, a process that begins to “fit the pieces of the data puzzle together” (Miles et al., 2013). Once the PI identified themes and sub-themes, the PI searched for dissenting viewpoints as a form of negative case analysis. Themes and sub-themes were then examined closely for how they related to one another, a qualitative strategy used to move analysis beyond rich description of data into a deeper understanding of meaning (Bazeley, 2009). Data collection for this study stopped after the second focus group because data saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1409). Quotes representing the essence of

themes and sub-themes were selected as data-centered illustrations of the constructs. Two other members of the research team were provided with the final analyses and encouraged to rigorously review findings (Saldaña, 2015).

Results

Demographics and Length of Time in Treatment

The age of focus group participants ranged from 33 to 48 years ($M=41$, $SD=6.08$). All participants self-reported Latino, Hispanic, or Mexican identity ($N=18$). Although all participants reported having Catholic identity on a demographic form, two men later revealed during focus group discussion that they did not fully consider themselves to belong to any particular religious tradition. During focus group discussions, participants shared that not all members of TMG are Catholic, belong to a religious group, or identify as men of faith. At the time of the focus groups, participants reported length of membership/attendance to TMG ranged from three sessions to eight years. Five participants had completed 3-8 sessions, two participants had completed 15-16 sessions, two participants had been attending group for 5-6 months, three participants had been attending for 1-2 years, two participants had been attending for four years, and three participants had been attending from 6 to 8 years. None of the focus group participants were seeking help from TMG due to a court-mandate or any form of criminal justice referral.

Findings

Theme #1: Religious faith as a source of support/help in stopping abusive behaviors

When asked if faith or religion were used (previously or currently) as a source to help stop abuse towards a partner, 12 of the 18 participants across the focus groups verbally responded with “yes” and extended explanations. Six of these 12 men identified as being new to TMG and the other six identified as being senior members. Two of the focus group participants cited that the reason they sought help from TMG was a direct result of hearing a sermon on domestic violence that was given by a priest. In this sense, religious-faith engagement directly facilitated help-seeking if not actual change in behavior.

While most of the discussion was focused on intimate partners, religious faith as a source of support was also noted as important to men’s relationships with their children. One participant shared,

I think that, yes, I've always had Him [God] in me because if it wasn't for Him [God],... I wouldn't have stopped myself... Because I'm a believer... I think He's the one who has stopped me, and has put the sign of 'change or you lose [your] family.

This point of God's direct influence was also echoed by another man who stated:

God has influenced [me] because, it was Him who helped me have calm. He helped me understand my wife, and now he helps me understand my children because I have a teen son [who is] semi-rebellious, so I have to be tolerant. I ask Him [God] for lots of faith to be able to carry that out.

Interpretations of biblical scripture emphasizing the expectation of loving actions within marriages were credited for fostering attitudes of respect and facilitating peaceful behaviors. As one participant expressed,

For me I think, yes, [religious faith] does influence in not being aggressive towards your partner because when we go to church, we hear part of the Bible... and, I don't think in [any] part of the Bible it tells you that the man has to treat the wife badly. So, for me, going to church and listening to what the priest is saying and trying to translate it, I think does influence [my behavior], and it helps to not be abusive towards your partner.

While clergy interpretations of scripture were discussed, anti-oppressive interpretations of scripture and individual faith were viewed as a personal responsibility. As one participant noted,

... my faith in Christ has helped me, [it's] taken me to another superior level that I know how to treat my wife. Like the Bible says, 'love your wife like Jesus loves the church.' At some point I wasn't as strong in my faith. And so, I went to go look in the scriptures [for the answer] how to love my wife--how Christ loved the church and that's what took me to love her more. Because, it gave me a new point of view--how to see my wife. And yeah, that was obvious in the books, it says how to love your wife...and it's made me be more compassionate with my wife.

Another man shared his experience of religious faith influencing his interactions with his wife, with particular focus on how he spoke to her. He said,

In my point of view, it [has] influenced a lot in my problem. The religion, God, because there has been a small reconciliation with my wife. There hasn't been a domestic [physical] aggression, but yes [it was] verbal and infidelity... Now all that I ask her, I ask her with grace, 'with grace of God, with a God bless you, with hope you have a good day, hope God watches you in your way.' So, it has influenced me in my problem. Yes, God has influenced me.

Not all participants viewed religious faith as a key factor in ending violence or engaging in healthy relationship building; rather, two participants noted the importance of faith in one's own ability to change behavior. One stated,

It's not necessarily faith or spirituality, or a superior being. Like, someone said before, it's the trust in yourself. You have to have faith in yourself. If you have it, it influences positively. A lot of times, it's not necessarily the physical violence but the way that you talk. And even if you don't yell, the words can end up hurting.

Another participant felt that spirituality (not religion) was a key facilitator of positive change for men in the program. This participant shared:

I'm not so convinced that religion has helped me. On the other hand, faith that's understood as the belief in something I don't see and is unknown, that is there for me. I could describe it almost like my spirituality. It's important in this process of change [for] all people that attend [TMG].

Sub-theme 1.1 Turning/Returning to Prayer & Faith to cope during personal struggle. Internalized religious self-regulatory actions, such as prayer, were described as helpful in implementing strategies learned from the intervention program. One participant shared,

It [prayer] has helped me a lot ... Even to talk to [my partner] about anything because I calm myself a lot before...When I feel bad I go into make a prayer or whatever in my beliefs and if I'm mad for something of hers I didn't like, or she didn't respond to me, the first thing I do is put myself in my [faith] belief, and what I think is necessary to calm my soul, and have peace, and be calm, and not fall into the..."She didn't answer me anymore"[thinking]. Like [group facilitator] says," It's always better to lower the hands, calm oneself, and

think before trying do to another attempt.” Thanks to God this helps me.

Participants reported prayer as an essential tool in dealing with separation from an intimate partner. These prayers consisted of requests for reunification and guidance on broader personal problems. The process of engaging in the act of prayer was highlighted for its positive effects in coping during difficult situations. The following two participants shared their experiences by stating:

I was in my house two or three months, and, I would kneel towards the Virgin that I had in my room, and I would ask for her to help me to return her to my home. And in that time, it helped me. So, for me, the spiritual helped me.

I had been lost but I believed again that there is a superior being and one that I can talk to....I can support myself [from] Him. In my house, I can ask Him about my problems, and I know He is going to listen to me.

Sub-theme 1.2 Faith & Religion as a compliment to TMG (Intervention). Several men agreed that religious faith is not forced upon group members, yet many end up going on a personal journey to build a relationship with God or lean on some form of spirituality, as a result of engagement in TMG. One participant shared,

In the group we find a lot of inner peace. When I went to group, I thought it was a religious group but no, I found out it wasn't. Because they say openly, the group is not religious. Then we decide individually, a few get close with the group who decide individually if you get closer to God. Normally, the majority of us do it because it's a big compliment.

Another participant had difficulty pinpointing exactly how his faith acted as a supportive factor in his journey towards peaceful living, but shared the degree of significance it played in his life and the necessity of maintaining faith in conjunction with group attendance by stating,

Faith and religion [are] very important...I can't explain a lot, but I have a lot of faith, in God. I believe in my religion and that helps me a lot because I have principles in my faith. I can say it's not [easy], and that's why I go to group. But the first thing, I have faith in God and in the religion.

Sub-theme 1.3 Acknowledging the slippery slope: Harmful Interpretation of Religious Teachings. During the focus group with senior members of TMG, two participants noted (without inquiry from the focus group facilitator) the slippery slope that can emerge if scriptural text or interpretations are misused. One participant noted,

Religion can give you (in certain areas) tools to have a better relationship with your partner. And in others, not so much. For example, I can say, "Marriage is for all life," but in an abusive relationship, in extreme cases, it cannot be for all of your life. It gives you certain masculine privileges. In other senses, it tells you how to practice a good relationship or how to be compassionate.

Another participant later also highlighted the problem with hierarchical, patriarchal beliefs that can exist amongst members of faith communities by stating,

Religion in general, it teaches: "The men, and then the women and then everything else that follows," even though I don't see it like that. I think, that influences in the negative.... They don't explain it directly [but] they give more, in general that the man first and then everything else.

Theme # 2: Misusing religious faith against a partner as a form of control through manipulation

Eleven of the 18 participants of the focus groups affirmed that they have used religion to control a partner. As one person stated, "*I did use it. In that moment I used it because I needed things in my favor, and I could do it to excuse myself.... When one feels that one is losing, to grab on to whatever.*"

Several participants noted that their motivation for using religion to control a partner was done in order to benefit themselves and accomplished by manipulating religious ideals. There was wide consensus within each focus group that this was a harmful and an unacceptable abuse of religious faith. The following four accounts illustrate the range in which participants used religious faith in order to manipulate an intimate partner:

It was my infidelity. I told her, Forgive me. In seriousness I will change. Let's get closer to the church. Let's try to be okay with God.

For an immediate reaction we also do it. To say you know what, I swear to you it won't happen again, and by God it'll never happen again.

Yes I did end up using it [religion]. Like it's mentioned before, like as a way to manipulate. Not so much as in wanting a healthy change as much as like manipulating....What you're doing is using it to your favor.

"Yes...a lot of times we've used passages from the Bible, and say, You're telling me this, this and this, but look here. It says what you have to do. You have to act a certain way, or you have to keep going this way." Someone once in one of the [group] sessions [said], We have to learn to not be an opportunist. We don't have to be manipulators." You have to learn to be able to divide or remove that from you, because one sees opportunity and we can, you know, hurt...a partner. And if one knows how to manipulate, we can do even more damage. And so, I do think that the messages don't go directly, or we might not understand them, and we use them at our convenience.

One participant described using his wife's connection to faith as a tool to mediate her desire for divorce, but also as a mechanism for encouraging her to seek domestic violence counseling for the hurt that he caused her.

I used it...not practically to control her in [every] part of our lives, but yes, a little in the moment we have problems. I looked for the people who sent me where I'm attending now because they were very close to the church and to our religion, and they are our wedding Godparents. They're familiar because one is a deacon, and so this person had always been helping me and my wife when the problem that we had happened. She didn't want to talk to me since the problem happened. She wanted a divorce. She didn't want to see me. Whatever I asked her, she responded with such hate, that she didn't love me anymore, that she had never loved me. I think everybody tells me it's probably because she's mad or offended, and like everything right, we have to give time. But I did ask a lot to talk to her because I would tell her, "Let's go to church" when this happened. And she would say, "No, I don't want anything with you, nothing." So I had to talk to them, and they were the ones that got close to her slowly, slowly. And they started to talk to her based on the beliefs and faith they have in our religion. Slowly, slowly she too came later (due in part to this). She got closer to there, where I'm going, where we're going together. She's with the women [survivors support group] and me with the men, but yes, I had to make use of that for her to

also start to heal from her heart a bit. And from the damage I had to cost her.

In this sense, the use of religious faith was much more nuanced than previously described examples. The participant described behaviors that may have been a form of control involving the religious faith of his wife, even if the intent was positive (e.g. getting her help).

Two participants described examples in which they perceived using clergypersons or their homilies manipulatively as a form of religious abuse. One participant shared,

I did use religion because, when I was in the middle of all of this, I took her with the priest from my church so that he could talk with my wife, so he could put her in reason, could give me time to start to work on my problem.

Another participant recounted his attempt at controlling his partner by emphasizing his position as aligned with that of a priest by sharing,

I told her, "Okay, we have these problems, did you hear what the priest said today in his, when he was giving his talks? You see that I was right," or whatever. And so yes, there were times I tried to control her like this, but it wasn't every time.

Sub-theme 2.1: A "Lack of understanding, lack of training, lack of wisdom." Study participants attributed the perpetration of IPV/A-related religious abuse to desire for personal gain, but also attributed it to improper information and misinterpretation of biblical texts. One participant described this by sharing, "I have also on one occasion [used faith or religion to control a partner] many years ago. I had a lack of information, and for one's own convenience. So yes, yes I did use it." Another participant suggested that some may engage in committing religious abuse without fully understanding why such beliefs are acquired in the first place or the consequences of engaging in this type of abuse. He shared,

Well sometimes...we manipulate according to religion, but sometimes, many times we do it subconsciously without knowing that we're doing the things because we read something and we misinterpret things...Just like my colleague was saying, you use it to your convenience. Perhaps because we want to save our relationship, but we don't know how, and so we use all that to our favor and sometimes we don't even know that we're hurting our family.

Ultimately, participants perceived this behavior as being driven by both a misunderstanding of biblical scriptures and a desire to control. One participant highlighted this by saying,

[For] me like everything else it's lack of understanding, lack of training, lack of wisdom... But when you have that understanding, that knowledge about what the Word says, you know what a marriage is. You know that it's not just what is convenient to you....I [got] to that point where I wanted to control my wife based on the scriptures, but then ... based on scriptures, I [also] got to a point where I'm like, "Well, I need to see what this says. I can't just get what is my convenience." ...thanks to God, through my understanding and my training I went beyond that...and I stopped being a manipulator and using the Bible to [do] things that, you know, were convenient to me.

Table 1. Results Summary Table

Theme	Meaning	Sample evidence from the data
Theme #1 Religious faith as a source of support/help in stopping abusive behaviors	Most participants viewed religious faith as an instrumental part of helping them end violence and engage in health relationship practices	<i>I went to go look in the scriptures [for the answer] how to love my wife--how Christ loved church and that's what took me to love her more.</i>
Sub-theme 1.1 Turning/Returning to Prayer & Faith in order to cope during personal struggle	Some men noted that prayer serves as a useful coping tool in dealing with relationship distress or personal struggles	<i>[Prayer] has helped me a lot ...even to talk to [my partner] about anything because I calm myself a lot before.</i>
Sub-theme 1.2 Faith & Religion as a compliment to TMG (Intervention)	Several men viewed drawing on a strong spirituality as a result of engagement in TMG, noting it as a compliment	<i>In the group we find a lot of inner peace</i>

Sub-theme 1.3 Acknowledging the slippery slope: Harmful Interpretation of Religious Teachings	A few men highlighted that there could be some danger in allowing religious teachings to guide behavior in martial relationships if the interpretation was harmful	<i>Religion can give you (in certain areas) tools to have a better relationship with your partner. And in others, not so much.</i>
Theme #2 Religious faith used against a partner as a form of control through manipulation	Most participants shared that they had at some point used religion against an intimate partner. Men revealed that misusing religious faith was achieved by manipulating religious ideals.	<i>I did use it [religion] because I needed things in my favor. It was my infidelity. I told her, Forgive me. In seriousness I will change. Let's get closer to the church. Let's try to be okay with God</i>
Sub-theme 2.1: A "Lack of understanding, lack of training, lack of wisdom"	Participants disclosed beliefs that misusing religion was in part due to a lack of comprehensive biblical training.	<i>Sometimes we manipulate according to religion, but many times we do it subconsciously without knowing that we're doing the things because we read something, and we misinterpret things.</i>

Conclusion, Discussion, & Implications

Religious-faith and IPV/A are independently complex domains. Studying the interplay between these concepts further compounds difficulty in efforts to understand their relationship. While the evidence on the relationship between IPV/A perpetration and religious involvement is mixed, the prevalence of IPV/A amongst Christians is undeniably concerning. Most IPV/A experienced is non-physical (e.g. psychological or emotional aggression; Drumm, et. al, 2006), but knowledge on some forms is more robust than others (e.g. religious/spiritual abuse). Scholars have explored religious/spiritual abuse (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006) and suggested how male partners across a variety of faith traditions may invoke religion against their female partners as a way to exert power and control

(Jankowski et al, 2018). Likewise, scholars have also brought attention to the powerful ways in which men of faith highlight the significance of their relationship with God in efforts to end IPV/A (Bent-Goodley et al., 2015). Even though there are a few exceptions (see Pyles, 2007), studies focused on examining the multiplicity of religious faith in relationship to IPV/A perpetration are limited, especially those regarding men's perspectives. The purpose of the current study was to explore the ways in which men seeking help for IPV/A perpetration perceive the impact of religious faith on their behaviors. The findings of this study support the theory that a system of dualities exists when considering the interactions of family members and their religious-faith, having both negative and positive impacts. Study participants have the ability to use rR/S a positive tool for change, as well as a tool to support continued abuse (Dollahite, Marks, & Dalton, 2018; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001).

In the present study, however, the majority of the focus group participants indicated that their faith, religion or spirituality (72%; n=13) served as a source of help in seeking and/or maintaining the cessation of IPV/A. Religious faith and spirituality were also viewed as a complement to the intervention program, indicating that there may be a combined effect in having both a group and a strong spirituality as supportive tools for ending abuse and achieving peaceful living. This lends support to the idea that faith-based intervention may provide a leverage point for change among partner-abusive men who find R/S to be important. While most of the participants and the program leadership identified as Catholic, there was a strong consensus that a person of any faith or persons without religious faith were welcome and would benefit from TMG.

Survivors across several studies have described emotional and psychological forms of abuse as being more detrimental and damaging to their lives than physical forms of abuse (Bhandari et al., 2015; Potter, 2008). R/S abuse may be considered a form of emotional/psychological maltreatment worthy of more attention. Many of the focus group participants (n=11) revealed that, at some point, they have used faith or religion to control an intimate partner, indicating that the relationship between religiosity and IPV may be much more nuanced than previous research findings have indicated. However, R/S abuse has received little attention in research compared to other forms of IPV.

Focus group participants discussed how R/S abuse may manifest (i.e., using scripture or faith traditions to assert dominance or justify behavior, etc.). A secondary point emerged around turning to R/S abuse only as a last resort of control to maintain the relationship, when other tactics were no longer effective. Misusing religious faith or religion to control partners was perceived as an effective, yet harmful form of abuse. Men suggested that lacking information about how to properly interpret religious teachings

contributed to one embracing oppressive religious beliefs. Participants also believed R/S was preventable by obtaining more insight into the meanings and intention of scriptures.

Church leaders and congregants have reported that if faith-communities had a better way of understanding or describing IPV/A related religious abuse, it would be discussed and addressed more often (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). The findings within this study provide a degree of insight into why the problem may exist and examples of its manifestation. Several participants discussed misunderstanding and misinterpretation of biblical text as a factor in the misuse of religion, suggesting that this problem might be remedied, at least in part, with theological re-education on the topic. This study illuminates a need for clergy to educate parishioners with a feminist theological lens (Hoeft, 2009). Guiding congregations with scriptural interpretations of biblical text that reject control of intimate partners and endorse messages of peace may be beneficial in deconstructing views of women as subordinate to men. Given that many Christian clergy report a lack of confidence in responding to IPV (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019), information from empirical work like the present study and other related studies should be incorporated into training for clergy and laity so that they are prepared to address this issue (McAllister & Roberts-Lewis, 2010). Given recent findings of positive immediate and longitudinal impact of IPV/A clergy training outside of seminaries (Drumm et. al, 2018), such efforts demonstrate promise in improving the preparedness of church leaders as they address IPV/A.

Implications Specific to Social Work

The standards of quality social work practice require cultural humility and competence which, in this case, is facilitated by understanding how religious faith and/or spirituality influence decision making and behaviors within the romantic relationships of clients (Jankowski et al, 2018). Social work educators agree that it is important to teach students about FBOs within social work curricula (Crisp & Dinham, 2019; Pandya, 2016).

Faith based organizations (FBOs) are key providers of social welfare services in the U.S and globally. With the rise in faith-based social service initiatives, social workers need to be trained to be leaders who can also evaluate service effects. The need for faith-based social services to be evidence-based in order to maximize their impact is essential for advancing the goal of providing meaningful and effective services. This may be facilitated through developing social work practitioners who can serve in FBO administration and conduct rigorous evaluation to meet accountability standards for outcomes (Smith & Teasley, 2009).

For secular social service providers, holding a better understanding of the complex role that religious faith plays in the lives of men who act

abusively may help social workers engage in more meaningful conversations with clients about how they use religious ideals in their lives. Social workers who have more knowledge in this area may be more comfortable in engaging in discussions that foster positive change or challenge misuse of religion. Several scholars have called for better coordination between secular service providers and FBOs because of the interface between spirituality and IPV/A (Dyer, 2016; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2016;) however for this praxis to occur, the former needs a richer understanding of the various roles religious-faith plays in peoples' lives and IPV. This knowledge provides the foundation to allow social workers to partner with, and train, clergy in their local regions. Christian social workers or social workers of other faith-traditions (e.g. Muslim, Jewish, etc.) may hold a particular advantage in being able to relate to the explored topics, but it is just as important for social workers who do not have connections to religious faith to be well-versed in these areas in order to provide quality care or service.

Strengths & Limitations

Focus groups offer an environment that allow participants to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable and can provide some participants with a level of emotional safety that contributes to open discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2010). The size of each focus group in this study fell within the recommended guidelines (6-12 persons) for facilitating discussion and diversity of opinions (Fusch & Ness, 2015;.Lasch et al., 2010). However, focus groups can also limit expression by individuals as compared to interviews. Although dissenting opinions were expressed, there may have been different perspectives that went uncaptured by the researchers. The research team attempted to capture non-verbal indicators of agreement or disagreement through note-taking, but they did not implement a specific or systematic procedure for assessing and capturing these cues in response to each question posed by the facilitator. A more rigorous method of capturing non-verbal responses could have strengthened the study (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009).

Finally, another limitation of this study was that it did not contain a measure to assess the severity of IPV/A in which these men had previously engaged or were currently involved. Further research examining whether the perceptions of men differ by types and severity of abuse perpetration histories may be beneficial in broadening the understanding of these topics within and across populations. Translating the focus group data from Spanish to English may have resulted in misinterpretation or loss of information. In order to prevent information from being lost during translation, two bilingual members of the research team who were present during the focus groups independently assessed the translation and were

able to consult with each other and the PI if necessary. The PI of the study was a Black woman who was not immensely familiar with Mexican culture; therefore, there was risk for meaning interpretation errors during data analysis, making this an important study limitation. Additionally, the focus group facilitator and PI were both women, and while this was not a limitation, per se, it may have influenced what a group of all men participants were willing to disclose in a conversation about personal and familial issues.

The focus on Latino men is a strength given the dearth of information on this population, but it is not clear that other Latinx groups with differing religious affiliations would express similar opinions. There may also be specific aspects of the neighborhood in which the program is located that had distinct influence on participants' experiences of help-seeking. Latino men in this geographical location may have different perspectives than men of similar backgrounds who live in other regions of the U.S. Therefore, without further research, we do not know how generalizable these findings are. More research is needed to understand how Latino men of different faiths or communities may perceive the role of religion in IPV/A.

The role of faith and R/S abuse in IPV/A is understudied. The present study data provided insight into how R/S abuse manifests among Latino men in an urban region. A richer understanding of IPV/A related R/S abuse can be used by clinicians, researchers, and clergy to develop more effective interventions. This may be particularly critical in understanding the complex role that R/S abuse may play in the lives of ethnic minorities who are most strongly attached to faith traditions. We hope the present study will encourage further research into the use and misuse of religion in IPV/A (among populations for whom faith is a central part of their identity) to help improve outcomes for survivor-centered programs and programs serving men who have acted abusively. ❖

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