


# How Does Denial, Minimization, Justifying, and Blaming Operate in Intimate Partner Abuse Committed by Men: A Systematic Review of the Literature

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## Abstract

Intimate partner abuse (IPA) is widespread, and denial, minimization, justifying, and blaming (DMJB) are common among people who have committed IPA. Views on the function of DMJB in IPA are mixed, often based on the theoretical standpoint of the authors. This systematic review brings together the knowledge of how distorted accounts operate in IPA committed by men. A systematic review of primary research related to DMJB in heterosexual men who have committed to IPA was conducted. In all, 31 papers were found to meet the inclusion criteria (adult, male-to-female abuse, in western culture, peer reviewed and published in English) and were quality appraised. Data were extracted and analyzed using narrative synthesis. The findings indicate the way DMJB operates in this group is complex. It can represent facilitators of abusive behavior, a way to protect the individual's identity and self-esteem, and a tool men use instrumentally to achieve goals. Themes were present within and between studies highlighting the complex function of DMJB. A model representing the hypothesized intertwined function of DMJB for IPA is proposed. The limitations of the review are discussed and implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research are proposed.

## Keywords

intimate partner violence, denial, minimization, justification, blaming, perpetrators

There has been much debate within the intimate partner abuse (IPA) literature regarding the definitions attributed to various forms of avoiding responsibility or providing a distorted account (see Mullaney, 2007, for a review). Distinctions have been made between excuses (saying the behavior is not their fault) and justifications (acknowledging they did it, but believing they were justified in doing so) as proposed by M. B. Scott and Lyman (1968). Blaming appears to straddle excuses and justifications, depending on whether the person is blaming *something* (e.g., alcohol or being out of control) or *someone* (e.g., the victims of IPA [VIPA]). Minimization can take various forms, minimizing the frequency, severity, or consequences of abuse (e.g., K. Scott & Strauss, 2007). Definitions of denial range from the denial of an event occurring or that one was involved with it to denying harm or intent, as seen in Hearn's (1998) category "repudiations." The debate around definitions is borne from a desire to categorize and understand the accounts of people who have been abusive to a partner, but the disparity is impractical for understanding the phenomenon on a broader scale. For this review, definitions are collapsed and any accounts that avoid

responsibility, in whatever form, are considered. As regularly used terms in the IPA literature are denial, minimization, justification, and blaming, the concept is referred to as DJMB in this review.

## Denial, Minimization, Justification, and Blaming, and IPA

Research into IPA, both with people who use it and victims of it, tells us that DMJB is a common occurrence (e.g., D. G. Dutton, 1986; Eckhardt & Dye, 2000). The evidence of a potential link between DMJB and IPA recidivism is mixed, perhaps due to the various forms the constructs can take, the

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differing potential motivations, and the difficulty in measuring them (e.g., Dutton & Starzomski, 1997; Henning & Holdford, 2006; Loinaz, 2014). There are different theoretical viewpoints on the meaning and purpose of DMJB (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Hansen & Harway, 1993; Papps & O'Carroll, 1998; K. Scott & Strauss, 2007). One of the difficulties with understanding DMJB is that it can be used as an abuse tactic to control the response of the VIPA (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Not understanding the role of providing a distorted account impacts on the manageability of risk and the usefulness of rehabilitation attempts. But are these accounts constructed consciously and deliberately or a result of subconscious processes?

The feminist perspective views denial, minimization, and blaming as a way for abusive men to avoid the consequences of their behavior (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and the product of a patriarchal society that allows men to be aggressive and dominate women (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 1981). Psychoanalytic theory considers it to perform a self-defensive function to protect the inner sense of self (e.g., Papps & O'Carroll, 1998) and systems theory considers blaming to be a function of the relationship between the couple (e.g., Hansen & Harway, 1993), which contributes to relationship dissatisfaction (see K. Scott & Strauss, 2007, for a review). A self-determination model put forward by Neighbors et al. (2013) found that childhood exposure to IPV was related to having a controlled orientation, which, in turn, was associated with higher levels of justification for IPV and overestimations of the prevalence of IPV generally. Cochran et al. (2017) found evidence for the role of Social Learning Theory (Akers et al., 1979) in IPV, for both onset of the behavior and its ongoing reinforcement of itself.

In a multinational study of 17 countries (both developed and undeveloped), Asay et al. (2016) found there were "*deep and long-held cultural beliefs, including the notion that patriarchy makes a family strong*" (p. 352). The social acceptance of abusive behavior is seen in the complexities of coercive control; many of the behaviors constituting coercive control may be seen as acceptable and desirable in an otherwise healthy relationship, which can make it difficult for juries and the judiciary to recognize (and thus give sanctions for) abusive behavior (Bishop & Bettington, 2018). There is broad cultural acceptance of IPA and gender roles (e.g., Gracia & Lila, 2015) and men protecting their male power and authority from a woman who challenged it (Dungee-Anderson & Cox, 2000), as seen in media portrayals (e.g., Lee & Wong, 2020; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). This cultural support may serve to justify abusive behaviors for both parties. From an evolutionary perspective, sexual conflict is relatively common and pervasive (Buss & Duntley, 2011), which may serve to justify it.

Conversely, there is evidence of social stigma attached to IPA (e.g., LeJeune & Follette, 1994; Panuzio et al., 2006), which may provide a motive for men to use DMJB. Men

often present their abuse as out of character (e.g., Lau & Stevens, 2012; Mullaney, 2007), and do not seek help for fear of being embarrassed/ashamed or due to considering their abusive behavior as normal (Hashimoto et al., 2018). Walton (2019) discussed the evolutionary basis for denial and its potential function as an adaptive process to remain part of the "in group."

Research has identified a clear link between attitudes that support or justify the use of violence in relationships and IPA (e.g., Capaldi et al., 2012; Eckhardt & Dye, 2000; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000). It may be that people who have been abusive to a partner believe their distorted views due to their underlying attitudes. Men who have been abusive can overestimate the prevalence of IPA by others (Neighbors et al., 2010; Senkans et al., 2020). Childhood exposure to IPA is related to having a controlled orientation, which, in turn, was associated with higher levels of justification for IPA and overestimations of the prevalence of IPA generally (Neighbors et al., 2013). Both men and women with a history of IPA were found to perceive hypothetical situations as less controlling than those without an IPA history (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1999), suggesting a distorted view of what constitutes abuse.

There is also evidence of men who have been abusive to a partner perceive others to be hostile (e.g., Bernard & Bernard, 1984), which may mean their account of the offense is an accurate description of their perception of what happened rather than a deliberate attempt to avoid consequences. In their Aggressive Relational Schema model, Senkans et al. (2020) propose that aggressive relational schemas present in men who have used IPA result in them distorting social cues and events in ways that result in aggression and violence.

### *Aims and Objectives*

The literature on DMJB and IPA has never before been brought together, resulting in differing perspectives and theories presenting a mixed picture of its importance for treatment and risk management. This review will bring together the evidence relating to distorted accounts of men who have been abusive to a partner to answer the question "How does DMJB operate in IPA committed by men?" Answering this question will support the field in appropriately addressing DMJB in both treatment and risk management as necessary.

## **Method**

### *Protocol and Registration*

The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2015). The protocol was registered ("PROSPERO—International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews") after the initial data search was complete but prior to the sifting of studies.

## Search Strategy

The Cochrane Library and PROSPERO register were checked to ensure there were no existing reviews of this nature. Pilot searches were run on a variety of databases to identify the most appropriate search terms and databases. A systematic search was completed in May 2022, which included the following databases: Cochrane library, Criminal Justice Abstracts, ProQuest, PsychInfo, PubMed, Science Direct, and Scopus. The search terms used were: *(dating OR domestic OR partner OR spous\* OR wife) AND (violence OR abuse OR battery OR aggression OR assault OR homicide OR murder) AND (deni\* OR deny\* OR minimize\* OR justif\* OR blam\*)*. Targeted searches were conducted on the Correctional Service Canada, Ministry of Justice, Women's Aid and RESPECT websites, and prominent authors in the field. In addition, hand searching of reference lists of articles included and the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment v.3 manual (Kropp & Hart, 2015) took place. Results were limited to peer-reviewed academic journals in English.

## Study Selection

After removing duplicates, 3,620 unique articles were identified for title and abstract screening. Eligibility criteria for inclusion in this systematic review were empirical studies, available in English, which considered the role of DMJB in the participants' own abusive behavior; eligible studies had to include samples of male abuse against a female partner, aged 18+ years, and lived in a westernized culture, where societal and judicial expectations relating to IPA are broadly similar. The exclusion criteria included same-sex relationships and female or adolescent people who have been abusive to a partner, potentially impacting the generalizability of the results. As the majority of people who commit serious IPA are male (e.g., Warner, 2010) and there are differences and similarities between risk factors for IPA perpetration for women (Capaldi et al., 2012), people who are abusive in same-sex relationships (Rollè et al., 2018) and adolescents (Glass et al., 2006) it was considered prudent to begin with the group who have been subject to the most research. As IPA is often unreported, data from those who have yet to be convicted are important in helping us to understand how DMJB operates within IPA. To facilitate this, both convicted and unconvicted samples were included. A review of titles and abstracts resulted in 3,530 articles being excluded and 90 being subject to full-text review. Only studies that clearly did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded prior to the full-text review. Of the 90 reviewed, 31 were eligible for inclusion (see Figure 1). The selection of studies was completed by the primary author. Studies that could not be clearly determined were discussed by the review team to reach a consensus. Authors of foreign

language studies that were eligible for full-text review via an English abstract were contacted to request a translation. No authors responded.

## Quality Appraisal

Each of the 31 included studies was subject to a quality appraisal. Studies were not selected or deselected based on quality during the search process to protect against bias (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), but results were used to weight findings. Qualitative studies were assessed for methodological quality using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP, 2017) quality assessment, quantitative studies using the AXIS (Downes et al., 2016), and mixed-method studies via the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). A quality rating was determined by considering to what extent the paper had met the criteria provided by the relevant tool, resulting in a percentage score, thus enabling comparison of quality across methodologies. It should be noted, however, that not all items are of equal importance and therefore the rating alone was only used to guide weighting.

## Data Extraction

Data relevant to the research question were extracted from each paper by the primary author, and each study was reviewed multiple times throughout the analysis to ensure all relevant findings had been extracted. Data from qualitative studies were extracted as interpreted and presented by the primary authors (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

## Analysis

There was significant heterogeneity across epistemology, methodology, and analysis, making direct comparison difficult. Narrative synthesis is a useful method for diverse data sets as it allows for the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data (Popay et al., 2006) and was therefore used for analysis. Individual findings from each paper were placed on individual post it notes. Post it notes were then sorted into relational themes, for example, any findings relating to the perceptions of the situation by the person being abusive, qualitative or quantitative, were clustered together. The theming process was repeated several times to ensure consistency in the placement of individual findings. Once themes had been identified, contradictions and similarities between the content of individual findings were considered within each theme to provide meaning. The primary author developed an initial synthesis, which was considered by the review team. The relationships in the data between and within data were considered, resulting in the development of themes that represented the findings. The robustness of the synthesis was considered and is discussed in the study limitations.

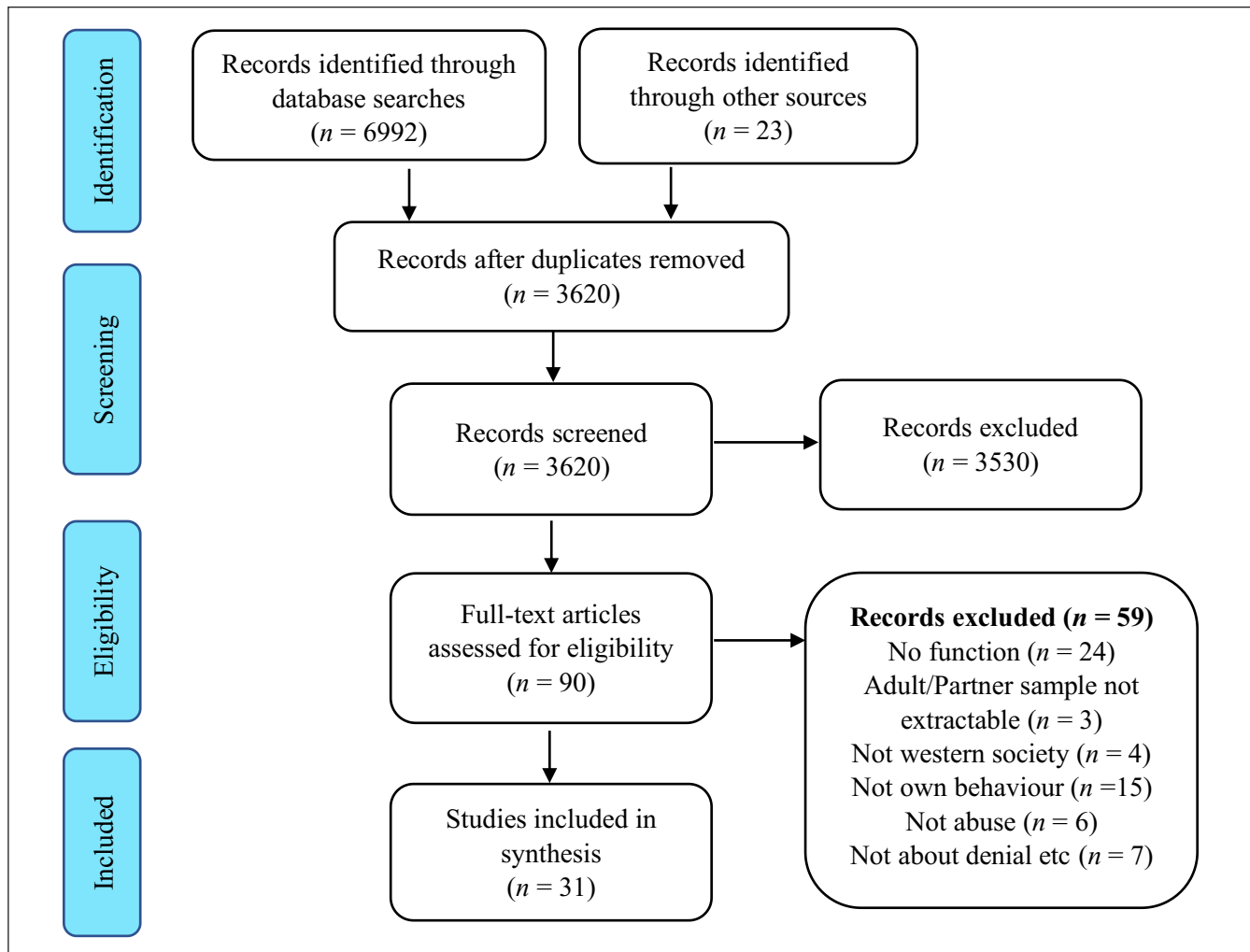


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart.

## Results

### Study Characteristics

A total of 31 studies met the inclusion criteria, most of which adopted a qualitative approach. Data describing the studies, their strengths, weaknesses, and quality rating, and the data extracted from each study are shown in Table 1.

### Quality of Studies

Overall, quality was higher in the qualitative studies. Across the qualitative studies strengths related to recruitment strategies (95% fully achieving this criterion) and clear statements of findings (95%). Weaknesses generally related to consideration of the impact of the researcher (37%; with their relationship to the participants rarely being mentioned), sufficient rigor within analysis (50%; e.g., simply stating data were “analyzed” or “coded”), and consideration of ethical issues (51%; generally due to an absence of information). With

regard to rigor, the word limits relating to publication may have contributed to the lack of information resulting in an inconclusive result for five of the studies (25%). Three studies achieved a full score on the CSAP [22, 26, 27], with two studies achieving observably lower scores than the others [17, 23].

Strengths within the quantitative studies included study design (100% fully achieving), appropriate sampling (86%), providing results for the proposed analyses (100%), and conclusions being justified by the results (86%). Weaknesses related to justifying sample size (0%), describing basic data (29%; with few providing more than the outcome of tests), considering nonresponders (43%; with many not stating whether or not there were nonresponders), internal consistency (29%; most did not provide sufficient information for this to be determined), ethical considerations (14%; generally due to an absence of information), and discussion of limitations (43%; with more than half omitting this aspect). One study was of notably higher quality than the others [18], with three being observably lower [3, 8, 14].



**Table I. Summary of Studies, Data Extracted, and Quality.**

(Study ID) Authors, date, country	Sample and setting	Measure or data collection	Analysis	Relevant findings	Strength and weaknesses
[1] K. L. Anderson and Umberson (2001), US	33 men recruited through the batterer's program, most courts mandated	Interviews and demographics	Descriptive comparing the study group to the general population attending service, thematic analysis of interviews	Construct accounts as though rational response to provocation, loss of control or something blown out of proportion to save face due to behavior that brings social sanctions, describe partners as irrational to show their own superior rationality, describe partners as dominating and position themselves as a victim of masculinized women, descriptions of women as controlling due to fear of being controlled by a woman, focus on gender bias in the system allows men to deflect attention from their own perpetration and victimization. Constructions of bias allow them to preserve a sense of self as rational, strong, and nonviolent and therefore rational masculinity, men use cultural discourses of unstoppable masculine aggression, female weakness and men's rights, through their speech, men presented themselves as rational, competent, masculine actors, described their violence as rational and effective, while women's was hysterical and ineffective, try to convince a partner to shoulder some of the blame for the abuse	Strengths: Good sample size, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample. Consideration of the impact of researcher characteristics. Good use of data to illustrate findings. Weaknesses: Limited description of the analysis. Quality rating: 85%
[2] Bonomi et al. (2011), US	25 heterosexual couples, remanded perpetrators and their partner victims where the victim has gone on to recant/drop charges	Prison transcripts of telephone conversations between the couple	Grounded theory	Repeated use of minimization and avoiding responsibility lessened the victim's perceptions of severity and wore down their agency, leading them adopting a modified account of what happened, redefining the abuse narrative while making a plan to recant was a continuation of minimizing violence and redefining roles in the incident, minimization, and sympathy appeals used by the abuser served to keep the relationship intact	Strengths: Robust analysis, a large amount of data, novel approach—use of real-life conversational data so not vulnerable to impression management as may be with an interview. Weaknesses: Not able to ask exploratory questions to check assumptions of meaning, not compared to remanded couples who did not recant, ethical concerns re-consent. Quality rating: 94%
[3] Cantors et al. (1993), US	139 couples mandated to attend treatment programs for IPV, army base	Conflict tactics scale (CTS), dyadic adjustment scale, and interview with the couple to identify who they believe was to blame for violent incidents and the severity of the injury	Significant differences between husbands and wives, ANOVAs to determine the relationship between blame for dependent variables for husbands and wives	No variables related to the husband's attribution of blame for the first violent incident, for the latest violent incidents, husbands blaming of wives increased as and her marital adjustment scores decreased: dislike of a spouse seems more likely to perceive the cause of negative events as internal to them. Latest episode—self-blame increased with the degree of alcohol intake; attributing blame to a transient state, men blaming wives for repeated violence are likely to feel threatened by accepting blame and resistant to having their beliefs refuted	Strengths: Good sample size and was ethnically diverse, allowed for both parties to be blamed simultaneously, data collected soon after the most recent incident. Weaknesses: Participation was mandated, husbands and wives interviewed together, questions were dichotomous, no exploration occurred, no rationale for military sample, no rationale for chosen methodology. Quality rating: 55%
[4] Catlett et al. (2010), US	Men mandated to attend batterer program: 154 quantitative and 34 qualitative	Demographic data, sex-role egalitarianism scale, brief symptom inventory—hostility subscale, Conflict tactics scale (CTS)2	Content analysis, correlation, and regression model	Men attach nonviolent meanings to their abusive behavior—do not see it as worthy of Criminal Justice System attention, abuse viewed as a rational response to a threat (physical or to dominance)—no alternatives, perception of a biased system that criminalizes their normal male behavior; men who drop out of treatment cling to the idea they are a nonviolent person, minimize the significance of their abuse by contrasting it with "real" violence like hitting and punching, men feel entitled to dominance and respect in relationships and when this is threatened or not received they view it as her fault for not following those rules, men who drop out of treatment cling to the idea of themselves as nonviolent while men who do complete are able to self-reflect and give more complex meaning to their violence	Strengths: Good sample size, clear rationale, gender and ethnicity of the interviewer matched the participant. Weaknesses: In the quant phase used CTS2 to measure denial based on assumptions of what abusive behaviors they have likely engaged in, sample predominantly African American, no discussion of rigor. Quality rating: 88%
[5] Cavanagh et al. (2001), UK	122 men involved in IPV intervention and 136 female partners (95 couples)	Data taken from a large study which included interviews at time 1, postal questionnaire at 3 and 12 months, T1 interviews of men were used for this study, and women and qual data were used as supplementary	Unclear—responses have been sorted into "remedial work" categories	Defining abuse as not violent implies violence against a woman is different from other types of violence, usually accompanied by the judgment of her behavior. Women/wives do not count in defining something as violent, denial through "selective amnesia" allows men to exercise power through the meaning of their violence. Often do not remember things about injuries etc., which are difficult to define away, silence as a form of selective amnesia suits their accounting purposes as means they are not spoken about so cannot be interpreted. Blaming allows men to admit acts of violence at the same time as absolving self of most/all responsibility, by blaming women, making abuse a problem for women not for them and therefore they are not responsible, by denying their own agency and blaming external factors (including inanimate objects), men detach themselves from their behavior and the fact they exercised choice, by construing abuse as a fight, a responsibility shared between them and then acceptable to consider it violence, reduced competence due to alcohol and temper—not the real them, rationalizations used to excuse behavior often masked the purpose and intent inherent in requests (e.g., stop nagging), contradiction: men attempt to mitigate and obfuscate their culpability while also wanting forgiveness for behavior they denied, men's accounts seek to neutralize and eradicate women's experience of abuse and control the ways they interpret and respond to it	Strengths: Large sample size, using data to assess the appropriateness of the remedial work model to IPV. Weaknesses: No information on researcher impact, analysis method, or rigor, no demographic information was presented. Quality rating: 70%

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

(Study ID) Authors, date, country	Sample and setting	Measure or data collection	Analysis	Relevant findings	Strength and weaknesses
[6] Dempsey and Day (2011), Australia	8 male community corrections clients, during or post-IPV treatment	Interviews	Grounded theory	Men generally feel threatened by others, and violence is viewed as an effective way of settling disputes. Men felt attacked if people disagreed with them and needed to defend themselves, childhood trauma resulted in men feeling misunderstood, abused, or abandoned, leading them to retreat from life stressors, saw themselves as moral people who tried to do the best they could and were misunderstood. Struggled to reconcile their abusive behavior with these beliefs about themselves. Through this mechanism minimized nature of harm	Strengths: Themes supported by a high frequency of presence of data, rationale for research and approach well-grounded in literature. Weaknesses: Very limited description of the analysis and none of the rigor, limited quotes to support themes, and states interviewer has a feminist perspective but no consideration of how that may have impacted. Quality rating: 80%
[7] Dobash and Dobash (2011), UK	Subset of 104 male IPV perpetrators in custody taken from larger murder in Britain data set	Prison caselle information (e.g., police reports, trial documents, prison records, psychological assessment reports)	No identified approach, data from case files coded and then analyzed via software. The reflexive process to identify themes	For IPV men, minimization of violence, denial of responsibility, and victim blaming are normative and deeply enmeshed views about women and intimate partners. This orientation serves to justify abusive behavior and negate responsibility, sees their partner at fault because of her flaws in fulfilling her role as a woman, justifying his violent response as the role of a man, complete denial way to avoid intervention and treatment in prison	Strengths: Good sample size, description of the process for generating themes from coding, indicating rigor. Weaknesses: Primarily based on the opinions of professionals, no consideration of potential bias/influence of professionals, interviews with subjects part of the original dataset, so unclear why not incorporated into the analysis. Quality rating: 67%
[8] Dutton (1986), Canada	Two demographically matched groups of men self-referred to the batterers project (n=25) and court referred (n=50)	Conflict Tactics Scale, interviews with comments used to categorize subjects in terms of locus of attribution, excuses vs. justification and minimizing	$\chi^2$	Self-referred men acknowledge more personal responsibility but compensate for it by minimizing incidence, severity, and impact, if view wife as a cause of violence, more likely to minimize severity, frequency, and impact, when accepting responsibility, justify it as acceptable via cultural norms, the court referred men did not realize they had a causal role in their violence, while men who were self-referred highly minimized the offense, men who were court referred and self-attributed responsibility did not minimize the assault, suggesting a "conviction induced motive to come clean"	Strengths: Compared court referred and self-referred, interesting to consider how the different dependent variables interact. Weaknesses: No discussion of rigor given qualitative data were being coded to be quantified, no mention of ethical issues or interview factors. Quality rating: 58%
[9] Goodrum et al. (2001), US	33 men with recent IPV history, 25 men with no IPV history, demographically matched, community	Conflict Tactics Scale, interviews	Symbolic interactionist framework	Did not think of terms abusive or violent reflected their true selves. Saying separate to "real me" allows them to uphold a positive self-view despite evidence to the contrary, batterers use extreme measures to disassociate from violent selves (construct a nonviolent self in relationships), indicating a psychological pathology, use denial and blame to dismiss suggestions by others that they are violent people, batterers view their partner's behavior as threatening or challenging and feel they need to respond while the control group does not, batterers deny criticism while control used it for self-improvement, batterers say partners made unreasonable and unnecessary attempts to control their behavior, control do not, dismissing the batter label allows disassociation from it and stalls self-change, avoiding seeing the consequences of violence allows the construction and maintenance of a nonviolent self-view, constructions of nonviolent self creates contradictions which make it difficult for them to take on the role of other (partner), some men have limited ability to role take partner's emotional state which may be why they do not recognize the potential for the emotional impact of abuse, others emotionally role take but not viewpoint as emotional does not challenge your position in an argument	Strengths: Comparator group, comparator group checked for IPV history, practice interviews conducted to ensure the neutrality of interviewers. Weaknesses: 4 of the comparison group committed "very minor" violence (pushing and shoving) but remained in the comparison group, no rationale for assumptions about responsibility taking based on socioeconomic status, no information regarding rigor. Quality rating: 85%
[10] Heckert and Gondolf (2000a), US	840 men court ordered to attend batterer program, female partners of sample	Men, partner, and police reports of incident, men and partner's reports of re-assault during 12 months follow up using Conflict Tactics Scale, telephone interviews every 3 months	Concurrent validity of self-reports using cross-tabulation, qualitative assessment of narratives	Men more likely to minimize severity of violence than victims, and more likely to minimize than deny, men underreport when relationship is over because consider the matter behind them, male underreport increased sharply at follow-up, thought to be because at start still involved in Criminal Justice System so may think verifying what is on record will lead to leniency, in men's rational interest to deny violence at follow up to avoid further consequences, the program may have increased awareness of abusive behavior so at follow-up feel more shame and socially desirable responding may increase, underreporting may be a situational response	Strengths: Large sample size from a range of areas, coding of statements incorporated interrater reliability, use of police reports to verify both men and women's accounts, followed up with new partner if necessary. Weaknesses: No significance testing, no rigor detail for: qual, no consideration of ethics or researcher impact. Quality rating: 56%
[11] Heckert and Gondolf (2000b), US	144 men court ordered to attend batterer program and female partners to	Perpetrator, partner, and police accounts, men: Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS), alcohol screening, personality inventory, demographic information. Both: telephone calls using CTS every 3-12 months	Predictive modeling of underreport using logistic regression	Cannot assume denial and minimization just dispositional or due to personality, as social background, situational factors, and assessment of consequences of reporting are relevant, in clinical samples, underreporting may be more likely to be influenced by perceived consequences than personality traits, personality traits and situational factors may interact in clinical sample, once caught, tend to shift from denial to minimization and justification: most likely lying is situational and depends on consequences	Strengths: Triangulated with police reports, good sample size for model testing. Weaknesses: No consideration of ethics or researcher impact. Quality rating: 73%

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

(Study ID) Authors, date, country	Sample and setting	Measure or data collection	Analysis	Relevant findings	Strength and weaknesses
[12] Hemming et al. (2005), US	1267 male and 159 female IPV perpetrators mandated to attend DV assessment center	Secondary use of data collected, demographic, attribution, denial, minimization, and justification scales developed by researcher, socially desirable responding (self-defensiveness from SASSI-III and Crowne-Marlowe scale)	t-tests comparing male and female perpetrators	Both men and women more likely to blame victim than self, both genders more socially desirable responses than norm comparator, men working to present overly positive image of self in assessment, self-reports by batterers influenced by socially desirable responding, minimization, denial, and external attributions, incidents result from partner's poor behavior	Strengths: Large sample size, internal consistency of measures acceptable. Weaknesses: Sample mostly African American, not examined relationship between variables. <i>Quality rating: 68%</i>
[13] LeCouteur and Oxlad (2011), Australia	9 attendees at batterer program (8 self-referred, 1 court)	Interview	Discursive psychology	Men highlight how partner has deviated from common sense, moral order of proper behavior for the various categories of woman, and this is used to justify violence. The temporal order of their stories constructs a situation where their behavior is understandable and category appropriate (husband), men used every day discursive practice of gender membership to justify violence—need to maintain moral order of gender roles	Strengths: Description of ethical considerations, theoretical basis for analysis clear, well evidenced by data. Weaknesses: No description of analysis or rigor, no consideration of researcher impact. <i>Quality rating: 80%</i>
[14] Lejeune and Follette (1994), US	465 male and female undergraduates, of which 31% reported violence	Dating violence survey incorporating demographics, blame for violence, and Conflict Tactics Scale	$\chi^2$ comparing men and women	Women more likely than men to take responsibility for initiating violence. Women may be socialized to accept responsibility for relationship conflict while men less likely to take responsibility due to stigma attached to being seen as an "abusive man." Men who report initiating violence more likely to report alcohol/drug use than female initiators. Men may be more likely to attribute blame to intoxication	Strengths: Large sample. Weaknesses: Inconsistent analysis, reasons for differences in responsibility taking not related to data gathered, no discussion of validation of blame scale, no discussion of ethics or rationale for sample. <i>Quality rating: 55%</i>
[15] Levitz et al. (2008), US	12 low-income IPV perpetrators, community	Interview, Conflict Tactics Scale used for screening	Grounded theory	Blame because they experience their partners as "willfully and skillfully" trying to upset them rather than trying to meet their own needs, see anger as the only way to gain respect and avoid threats to masculinity, one participant altered his partner's gender to permit his choice to assert his own masculinity through aggression	Strengths: Steps to assure rigor, including credibility checks with participants, saturation reached, interesting angle considering interplay with religious beliefs. Weaknesses: Quite homogeneous sample. <i>Quality rating: 90%</i>
[16] Lila et al. (2013), Spain	314 IPV perpetrators court mandated to attend a batterers program	Close and intimate companions scale, formal social support from community organizations, center for epidemiologic studies depression scale, Rosenberg self-esteem scale, victim-blaming scale from responsibility attribution scale	Correlations and structural modeling	Victim blaming negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to depressive symptoms. Low self-esteem and depressive symptoms = more likely to perceive situations and behavior of others as threats. Blaming others helps to protect self-image	Strengths: Clear rationale for study, good sample size, examined relationship between variables. Weaknesses: No data for ethnicity, victim blaming assessed by only three questions. <i>Quality rating: 80%</i>
[17] Mullaney (2007), US	14 men either pre-(11) or post-(3) IPV treatment	Interviews	No information	Overwhelmingly justified rather than excused, for example, I did it but in response to her behavior, the things they don't do count more than the things they do because that shows they are not batterers and allows them to uphold image of men as protectors of women, not interested in saving face generally (i.e., by excusing or denying), justifying allows them to save face as men; violence presented as positive as restoring their rights and privileges. They focus on the unjust ways others (women, Criminal Justice System) have emasculated them. Feel justified in violence because they are doing what men should do and women are not thankful, when men blame women, are upholding a dichotomous view of gender where women are unruly and unable to control themselves, men saw their partner's hurtful decisions as the reason their violent responses were appropriate, men continued to exert power over their partners by the way they apologized (only after she had), blamed or refused to account for their violence at all, by refusing to account to their partner men invoke their male privilege of not needing to account for their actions	Strengths: Discussion of limitations, data supports identified themes. Weaknesses: No information on analysis method, judgmental language used in researcher's analysis of comments suggesting bias, no consideration for ethics or researcher impact. <i>Quality rating: 55%</i>
[18] Panuzio et al. (2006), US	303 men in alcohol abuse treatment and their partners	Conflict Tactics Scale, alcohol dependency scale, Michigan alcoholism screening test, marital status inventory, dyadic adjustment scale, males only: structured clinical interview for DSM-III-R antisocial personality disorder module, California personality inventory socialization scale	Estimates, correlates, and direction of partner concordance	Higher alcohol problem severity and poorer relationship adjustment correlated with higher concordance of psychological aggression at bivariate level, higher antisocial and psychopathic personality features correlated with higher concordance of male perpetrated physical and psychological aggression, antisocial personality only significant predictor of concordance when others accounted for, higher Anti-social Personality Disorder traits may be more accepting of violence and identify more strongly with masculine gender roles, so do not feel they need to conceal violence, men may underreport their aggression to avoid negative evaluation	Strengths: Clear rationale and methodology, considered female perpetration in the couple. Weaknesses: No mention of ethics, entire sample were help seeking rather than some mandated. <i>Quality rating: 93%</i>

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

(Study ID) Authors, date, country	Sample and setting	Measure or data collection	Analysis	Relevant findings	Strength and weaknesses
[20] Reitz (1999), US	9 men attending community IPV program	Interviews	Existential phenomenology	Men value being dominant but violence is seen as "bad," so construct an out of control, not me narrative where violence is a forced choice and therefore they are not accountable, thus avoiding conflict between violence bad, dominance good, men saw their relationships as fundamentally adversarial where they would win or lose, which justified their aggression, men tried to position themselves as good by stopping the "evil" they saw in others, especially partners, men remember their violent behavior but find it inconsistent with who they think they are and rationalize it as being out of control to relieve the internal conflict, believe violence is justified because partner has triggered a chain of events, justify abusive behavior due to cultural beliefs and values about roles of men and women (e.g., can shout at wife but not boss)	<i>Strengths:</i> Very robust methodology and clear description of steps to ensure rigor; consideration of researcher impact. <i>Weaknesses:</i> All participants involved in treatment and volunteered for altruistic reasons. <i>Quality rating:</i> 100%
[21] Rodriguez et al. (2020), US	20 heterosexual couples from a health clinic who reported IPV—15 completed study and included in final sample	Daily telephone surveys for 8 weeks (touch tone responses) and post-study interviews	Descriptive analysis of demographics and daily abuse reports, sort data into pre-identified themes, create additional themes and subthemes. Sort quote by couple to assess concordance	Hesitant to call their aggressive behavior abuse or violence, suggesting a boundary on abusive behavior that they had not crossed, two main themes in male accounts: disassociation from identity of an abuser and justification for abuse. Indirect language is used to disassociate and remove men from the story, male participants made use of six types of justification, all blaming partner or substance use	<i>Strengths:</i> Consideration of participant safety, use of data to support findings. <i>Weaknesses:</i> Representativeness of sample: all Latina, participants in dangerous relationships excluded, researcher built relationship with participants over the 8 weeks, but only considered them as positive and not potential bias. <i>Quality rating:</i> 95%
[22] Smith (2007), US	24 men about to start batterer treatment, most courts ordered	Interviews	Existential phenomenology	Did not feel remorseful, felt abuse was normal, justified, or not a big deal, all men emotionally defend and protect themselves through self-deception, due to childhood trauma have deficits in emotional skills needed to recognize and cope with strong feelings such as fear, shame, and vulnerability, so have to defend against these feelings with denial, rationalization, and projection, saw themselves as law-abiding citizens so rejected the interpretations that their behavior was criminal and focused on how they had been victimized	<i>Strengths:</i> A clear rationale for the methodology, some description of rigor; good use of quotes to support findings; interesting intertwining with self-deception theory. <i>Weaknesses:</i> All participants were White. <i>Quality rating:</i> 85%
[23] Stamp and Sabourin (1995), US	15 men mandated on the batterer program	Interviews	Constant comparison	Attributional processes reinforce behavior and need to be considered in treatment, experience powerlessness in the abusive situation, and lose control over the violence, so managing the account allows them to have control over how their violence is represented, seem to be seeking understanding because alleviating so much personal responsibility in the narrative, and the narratives they construct are understandable because work within dominant metaphors of American life, emphasis on what they did not do (restraint) allows them to reconstruct it as them having control and makes it more palatable (could have been worse), minimize the amount of violence so are not categorized as abusive, resulting injury is described as a result of an accident, not his behavior	<i>Strengths:</i> Use of data to support themes, interesting inclusion of the entire narrative to show themes working together. <i>Weaknesses:</i> Interviews are very short (4–19 minutes), with no information regarding ethics or researcher impact. <i>Quality rating:</i> 60%
[24] Tilley and Brackley (2005), US	16 men on mandated batterer's program	Interviews	Grounded theory	Men did not recognize behavior as abusive, thought it was appropriate and did not think about the consequences of their behavior, which contributed to their abuse, justifying includes beliefs that people deserve to be hurt and violence is a normal response, one person consciously justified to not feel bad about it, model of the violent family, where justifying and minimizing violence are primary elements and contribute to the development of family violence, desensitizing of violence over time allowed perpetrators and victims to justify violence or dismiss it as normal	<i>Strengths:</i> Ethical considerations, develops a model of the violent family. <i>Weaknesses:</i> No description of analysis methods to ensure rigor, no consideration of researcher impact, no supporting quotes. <i>Quality rating:</i> 80%
[25] Weldon and Gilchrist (2012), UK	6 male IPV perpetrators in custody	Interviews	IPA	A clear theme of violence is acceptable, women are seen as provoking and responsible for abuse because men needs to regain control, violence is due to external factors and therefore out of the participant's control, violence justified as a way to put a woman in her place so she cannot hurt him, disassociate from batterer identity, and do not want the interviewer to see them as one	<i>Strengths:</i> Description of analysis detailing rigor; provides quotes to support themes. <i>Weaknesses:</i> Participants were identified by staff, and no data regarding ethnicity. <i>Quality rating:</i> 90%
[26] Weldon (2016), UK	11 men in custody with current or previous convictions of IPV and sexual offenses	Interviews	IPA	Minimization and denial serve a protective function and are linked to "I'm not like that," have a perception of themselves as not inherently bad and cognitively distance themselves from the acts they committed; narcissistic coping mechanism to protect the belief they are not bad, view partner as provoking, which leads to his behavior, minimized or denied the sexual conviction, which may reflect a desire for the researcher not to see them as bad	<i>Strengths:</i> Ethical considerations, robust methodology and rigor, selection method (all eligible approached), good use of data to support themes. <i>Weaknesses:</i> All participants post-treatment, no ethnicity data. <i>Quality rating:</i> 100%

(continued)



**Table 1. (continued)**

(Study ID) Authors, date, country	Sample and setting	Measure or data collection	Analysis	Relevant findings	Strength and weaknesses
[27] Whiting et al. (2012), US	13 men and 16 women who have been the perpetrator of IPV, victim, or both, and completed some form of treatment, community	Interviews incorporating example vignettes	Grounded theory	Denial, minimizing, rationalizing, and blame are used as techniques during abuse to influence the appraisals of the victim, denial involves a refusal to accept the truth from others or hide it from self, minimizing directly to partner and in mind, blame sometimes used to soothe feelings of guilt, some refused to admit blaming even though apparent they were, objectify victims and stop seeing them as people, exaggerating their negative qualities. Use denial, rationalization, and minimization to deflect responsibility, justify their actions, and reduce dissonance so can maintain the image of themselves as someone who would not be violent without good reason, blaming served to dehumanize and objectify the partner, able to keep power by finding evidence to support the decisions you have already made, contextual factors (e.g., family of origin and cultural beliefs) can disguise power and excuse responsibility	Strengths: Robust methodology and rigor, ethical considerations, considered interaction between perpetrator and victim, ethnically diverse sample, model development. Weaknesses: All participants post-treatment (although this was intentional for safety). Quality rating: 100%
[28] Wood (2004), US	22 men in custody about to start an IPV intervention	Interviews	Grounded theory	Violence is viewed as a legitimate response to being disrespected as a man, excuses part of larger systems of justification that make their behavior reasonable, distance self from real abusers by disassociating the act from being an abuser; saying they do not enjoy it; attributing violence to external causes, external causes do not excuse actions, separate them from their "real selves" and provide a legitimate, reasonable explanations of why they are not really abusers, the things they do not do mean they are not real abusers, because real abusers do not limit their violence, justification resists seeing the action as harmful or abnormal, saw victims as provoking them into their abusive behavior, conflict between the idea of a real man as dominant and superior (and entitled to enforce that) and a protector of women (who does not hit them), when thinking of men as protectors of women, tend to apply it to other women or women in the abstract rather than their partner	Strengths: Ethical considerations, rigor, focus on function from the perpetrator point of view. Weaknesses: No consideration of the researcher impact, and limited details of the analysis. Quality rating: 85%
[29] Worley et al. (2004), UK	7 men engaged in community court ordered IPV intervention	Adult attachment interview (AAI), and questions exploring IPV history	AAI coding system, unclear if questions about IPV history were coded as part of AAI	Due to their internal working models of relationships and narrow perspectives and expectations of the world, emotional development and interpersonal skills are undeveloped so have poor insight into their relationship difficulties and their violence (lack of reflective function)	Strengths: Consideration of victim safety, use of data. Weaknesses: No ethnicity details, unclear why AAI and blame go together and how the findings of the two parts of the interview were incorporated. Quality rating: 70%
[30] Barbaro and Raghavan (2018), US	81 men on a batterer intervention program	Interpersonal relationships rating scale, interview	Interviews coded to identify the presence of coercive, controlling behaviors (CCBs) and denial and minimization	Only three participants admitted to or acknowledged fault in their treatment relationship, the majority denied or minimized the use of control, perpetrators seem to employ more denial tactics when describing a more recent fight than one from an earlier relationship. Denial and minimization are crucial to understanding how perpetrators understand their abuse, lower recall of CCBs in narratives compared to questionnaires may be due to participants' defending their own use of CCB and other abusive behavior and the cognitive load of having to recall it rather than being presented with options, when they did describe their controlling tactics, they did not take responsibility for them, suggesting they fail to recognize their use of CCBs	Strengths: The rationale for mixed methods and incorporation of both aspects, ethnically diverse sample, use of data. Weaknesses: Limited details of qualitative analysis, lack of consideration of researcher or analyst impact. Quality rating: 76%
[31] Guerrero-Molina et al. (2020), Spain	129 men convicted for IPV and in prison	Attribution of responsibility and minimization of harm scale, ambivalent sexism inventory, Rosenberg self-esteem scale, functional social support questionnaire, social desirability scale	Correlations and linear regression analysis	Positive correlation with ambivalent sexism and lack of attribution of responsibility ( $p < .001$ ), minimizing harm done ( $p < .001$ ), blaming the victim ( $p < .024$ ), and self-defense ( $p < .002$ ); positive correlation with hostile sexism and lack of attribution of responsibility ( $p < .001$ ), minimizing harm done ( $p < .001$ ), blaming the victim ( $p < .005$ ), and self-defense ( $p < .001$ ); positive correlation with benevolent sexism and lack of attribution of responsibility ( $p < .016$ ) and minimizing harm done ( $p < .034$ ); negative correlation between self-esteem and self-defense ( $p < .31$ ); negative correlation between perceived social support and blaming oneself ( $p < .030$ ); no correlation between attribution of responsibility and social desirability, ambivalent, hostile, and benevolent sexism predict lack of attribution ( $p < .01$ ; $p < .001$ ; $p < .007$ ) and minimization of harm done ( $p < .001$ ; $p < .001$ ; $p < .033$ ), ambivalent and hostile sexism predict blaming the victim ( $p = .25$ ; $p = .005$ ) and self-defense ( $p = .002$ ; $p = .002$ ), self-esteem predicts justifications based on self-defense ( $p = .044$ ), perceived social support predicts blaming oneself ( $p = .012$ )	Strengths: Appropriate sampling, variables appropriate for aims and clearly measured, data and analysis clearly described, and conclusions well justified by the data and results. Weaknesses: No data for nonresponders or discussion of how they were addressed. Quality rating: 85%
[32] Leclerc et al. (2021), Canada	81 mixed-sex couples cohabiting for $\geq 6$ m, general population, data gathered as part of a larger study	Demographic information, justification for partner psychological aggression scale, experiences in close relationships scale—12	Path analysis based on the actor-partner interdependence model	For men, a significant association between attachment anxiety and the use of internal justifications ( $p < .001$ ) and attachment anxiety and the use of external justifications ( $p = .002$ ), no significant actor effects between attachment avoidance and justifications for either gender	Strengths: Analysis of missing data, detail reanalysis and assumption testing demonstrate the robustness of analysis, conclusions supported by results. Weaknesses: No data for nonresponders or discussion of how they were addressed. Quality rating: 92.5%

IPA = intimate partner abuse.

Of the three mixed-methods studies, one [4] was considerably higher scoring than the other two [10, 30]. While all three studies included a clear rationale for a mixed-methods approach, limited detail in studies 10 and 30 made it difficult to appraise the qualitative aspect. Studies 4 and 30 clearly integrated the findings of both aspects of the study, while Study 10 did not.

As there was considerable consistency within the findings of the papers, the weighting of studies was rarely required. Where two papers gave conflicting views, their quality rating combined with their areas of weakness was considered. If, for example, one paper had a lower quality rating, but the only weakness was that one had not provided information about ethical approval, no weighting was applied, however, if one had weaknesses in its methodology weighting was applied, for example in theme 2c: influence how they are seen.

### Narrative Synthesis

Narrative synthesis (Popay et al., 2006) was used to analyze the data extracted from the 31 studies. This synthesis of the data resulted in three overarching themes being identified: facilitators, self-protection, and instrumental. Each theme comprises several subthemes. The themes are presented in Table 2 in order of frequency within the sample.

**Theme 1: Facilitators.** This theme represents the characteristics of men who have been abusive to a partner that facilitate their use of DMJB, and includes four subthemes, supported by 24 studies. These traits result in the man believing his minimized and justified account as it is consistent with the way he views and experiences the world. Rather than the man deliberately denying, minimizing, or justifying his behavior, his account represents his truth.

**1a. Perceptions.** This subtheme reflects how DMJB is driven by a skewed perception of events and is supported by 16 studies [1, 3, 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31]. This perception results in an account that appears to use DMJB but is in fact a true reflection of how the man views events. Their perception of the incidents leading up to and during an abusive incident involves perceived threat and is real for them, resulting in using violence to protect themselves. Men who have been abusive to a partner are prone to perceiving others as threatening generally [6, 16], and see violence as the only possible response, justifying their use of violence against a partner [4, 6]. Men who have been abusive view their relationships as fundamentally adversarial and a setting in which they could win or lose, which justifies their behavior [20]. Fear of being hurt [25] or controlled [1] by their partner were justification for being abusive.

Men who have been abusive appear to perceive their partner's behavior as the cause of the abusive incident and something that is deliberately *done to them* that they react to [9, 12, 15, 17, 22, 26, 28]. Men were found to interpret their

**Table 2.** Themes Identified in Analysis.

Theme number	Overarching theme	Subtheme
1	Facilitators (n*=24)	Perceptions (n=16) Gender and cultural norms (n=13) Violence is normal (n=8) Lack of awareness (n=6)
2	Self-protection (n=23)	Protect self-image (n=13) Avoid negative emotions (n=9) Influence how they are seen (n=9)
3	Instrumental (n=10)	Avoid consequences (n=4) Influence victim (n=4) Regain power and control (n=4)

\*n= number of studies the theme is identified in.

partner's behavior as controlling and threatening while controls with no IPA did not [9]. Having low self-esteem was related with a greater tendency to perceive situations with their partner as threatening [31]. Men who had been abusive considered partners to be "willfully and skillfully" (p. 438) trying to upset them [15] and viewed the cause of negative events as being internal to their partner as their marital dissatisfaction increased [3]. Men who had been abusive exaggerated VIPA-negative qualities [27], resulting in a seemingly blaming account.

**1b. Gender and cultural norms.** DMJB was found to be a result of believing in and enforcing gender roles and cultural norms in 13 of the included studies [1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25, 27, 28, 31]. Accounts justified and blamed through gender and cultural norms, with abuse considered a rational response. Men's justifications for violence were driven by a perception that women had deviated from expected gender roles and a belief that the correct male response was to regain control and maintain the order of said roles [4, 7, 13, 17, 25, 28]. Dichotomous gender roles were upheld, for example women being out of control and needing to be dealt with or unstoppable masculine aggression and female weakness [1, 8, 17, 25, 28]. Some men reversed these gender roles to justify their violence, describing VIPA as dominating, and positioning themselves as victims of masculinized women, where violence was their only recourse [1, 16]. Minimization of violence, victim blaming, and denial of responsibility [7] represented stable attributions and deeply enmeshed views about women and intimate partners. Contextual factors such as cultural beliefs served to disguise power and excuse responsibility for men who had been abusive to partners [27], men used their belief in a culture of family and community violence to justify their own [5] and having sexist attitudes increased the use of DMJB [31]. Men who had been abusive to a partner demonstrated a fundamental belief that violence toward women is different and does not count as "real" violence [5]. Justifying their abuse may allow them

to save face as men as it presents violence in a positive light and is something that restores their rights and privileges as men [17]. Men who have been abusive focused on how VIPA and the Criminal Justice System had emasculated them [17]. By refusing to account for their violence to their partner, men are asserting their male privilege [17].

*1c. Violence is normal.* DMJB were found to be representative of underlying attitudes that violence is normal and acceptable in eight studies [4, 6, 16, 18, 22, 24, 25, 28]. Violence was perceived as normal and an acceptable response to resolving a dispute or being disrespected [6, 16, 24, 25, 28]. Study 4 found men did not see their behavior as worthy of criminal justice attention and felt their normal male behavior had been criminalized, while study 22 found men simply did not consider their violence to be a “big deal” (p. 199). Female victims and men who have been abusive may be desensitized to violence over time, allowing them to justify violence and consider it normal [24]. Higher levels of antisocial personality disorder traits were associated with greater levels of agreement about abuse between men and female victims; antisocial men may be more accepting of violence and identify more strongly with masculine gender roles, so do not feel the need to conceal their violence [18].

*1d. Lack of awareness.* Six studies suggested that a lack of awareness about themselves, others, or abuse resulted in a distorted account of IPA [4, 8, 9, 24, 25, 30]. The court referred men did not realize they had a causal role in their violence [8]. Men may use DMJB because they do not have the ability to critically reflect on their behavior due to their developmental experiences, internal working models of relationships, and view of the world [29]. Without critical reflection, they do not have the ability to consider alternative perspectives or provide an objective account of their behavior; they are not deliberately using DJMB, their account is their truth. Men who complete IPA treatment are more able to self-reflect and give alternative meanings for their violence than those who drop out [4]. Some men did not recognize their behavior as abusive at all [24, 30] or consider it to be “real” violence [4], while others struggled to consider their partner’s emotional state, resulting in them not considering the potential for emotional abuse, and thus providing a minimized account [9].

*Theme 2: Self-protection.* This theme represents the way men who have been abusive to partners use DMJB to protect themselves and includes three subthemes supported by 23 studies. This theme represents the ways in which using distorted accounts of their behavior allows men to protect themselves emotionally and psychologically. The first two subthemes appear to be subconscious, with the third lacking clarity regarding whether it is a deliberate tactic employed by abusers.

*2a. Protect self-image.* This subtheme comprises two factors that are intertwined (distancing the “real” them from the batterer identity and managing their masculinity) and was supported by 13 studies [1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 16, 20, 21, 22, 26, 27, 28].

Participants wanted to distance themselves from the batterer identity, perceiving the lower frequency and severity of their behavior as not meeting the threshold for being an abuser [5, 17, 23, 28] or not naming their behavior as abuse or violence [21]. Participants disassociated themselves from the abuse and characterized it as behavior that did not represent the “real” them [5, 6, 9, 20, 26, 27, 28]. Men experienced conflict between their behavior and the reasonable person they perceived themselves to be, who would not be violent without good reason [6, 9, 26] and rejected the criminal interpretation of their behavior [22]. They perceived and positioned themselves in their narrative as good (or at least not bad), which meant they needed a justification for their behavior [6, 20, 22, 26]. External attributions allowed men to provide a legitimate account of their behavior that reinforced their view of themselves [3, 5, 27, 28], as did avoiding seeing the consequences of their behavior [9]. For some men, blaming others helped to protect their self-image [16]. By considering violence against women as not “real” violence, men may be able to maintain their view of themselves as nonviolent [5].

Men experienced discord between their behavior and their identity as a man [1, 20, 28]. A conflict arose between their perceptions of them embodying rational masculinity [1], and their out of control, irrational actions, which were soothed using DMJB about their behavior. Similarly, men experienced a conflict between wanting to be a “real man” who, while being dominant and superior, is simultaneously a non-violent protector of women [28]. Acknowledging they enforced their dominance through violence and hurting women would conflict with their identity as a “real man” and they used DMJB to resolve this conflict.

*2b. Avoid negative feelings.* The use of DMJB to avoid experiencing negative emotions was identified in nine studies [3, 5, 9, 10, 22, 23, 27, 28, 32]. The reconstruction of events as being not harmful or abnormal [28], one they had control over [23] and a fight between them where responsibility was shared [5] made the situation more palatable for men who had been abusive. Blame soothed feelings of guilt [27], and self-deception emotionally defended them [22]. Both internal and external justifications for psychological abuse were used by men with attachment anxiety to relieve cognitive dissonance caused by their behavior and prevent the emotional bond with their partner from being threatened [32]. Childhood trauma left participants unable to cope with strong negative feelings, so they defended themselves with denial, rationalization, and projection [22]. In one study [9], compared to the control group, men who had been abusive were found to deny criticism rather than use it for self-improvement. Men may also feel threatened by accepting blame and having their accounts challenged [3].

**2c. Influence how they are seen.** This subtheme represents the potential of men using DMJB to influence how they are seen by others. It is closely linked to, and likely reinforces, 2a: protecting self-image. It was unclear from the studies whether this was a conscious process deliberately chosen by the men. It was found in nine studies [1, 12, 14, 17, 18, 23, 25, 26, 31]. Men were concerned about the social stigma associated with IPA [14] and were thought to underreport their violence so as not to be categorized as an abuser [23] and avoid negative evaluation [18], particularly by the researcher [12, 25, 26]. Men worked to present themselves as rational by presenting their partners as irrational [1] and focused on the things they did not do so they could uphold the image of being a protector of women [17]. Men who had been abusive were thought to be seeking understanding from others by presenting a culturally reasonable narrative of their behavior [23].

In contradiction to this subtheme, study 17 concluded that men who had been abusive were not interested in saving face generally as they did not excuse or deny their abusive behavior in interviews but acknowledged being abusive then justified it. The nuances of definitions were highly relevant to this study, and the study's author considered the use of justification rather than denial and excuses to be an indication that men are not concerned with presenting a positive image. In addition, there were issues with the quality of this study, indicating its negating impact on the theme may be minimal. Study 31 found social desirability was not correlated with the use of DMJB.

**Theme 3: Instrumental.** This theme represents the way men who have been abusive to a partner use DMJB to achieve goals and includes four subthemes, supported by 10 studies. In contrast to themes one and two, this theme represents a conscious choice on the part of the men to use DMJB. Support for this theme is lower both in terms of quality and quantity of findings.

**3a. Avoid consequences.** This subtheme represents DMJB as a tool that men deliberately use to avoid sanctions for their behavior and is supported by four studies [7, 8, 10, 11]. Altering the narrative allowed them to avoid further judicial consequences [10, 11]. While one study found underreport (i.e., denial and minimization) to increase at follow-up [10], another found the opposite to be true [11]. Despite the studies coming from the same dataset, they provided different explanations for their observations. Those who initially admitted violence in study 10 were thought to believe confirming official accounts may lead to leniency, while at the follow-up stage it was no longer in their best interests to be honest as they may face further sanctions. In study 11, men were seen to move from denial to minimization and justification after being caught, which they concluded was due to having already faced the consequences (i.e., they got caught). Providing a more honest account post-conviction was found

in one study [8] where self-referred abusers who accepted responsibility highly minimized their accounts while court referred abusers who accepted responsibility did not. For those in prison, complete denial can be a way to avoid treatment [7]. It is of note that two of the four studies comprising this theme achieved a quality rating of below 60% [8, 10].

**3b. Regain power and control.** Four studies identified DMJB as a way the men who had been abusive to regain power and control [5, 17, 23, 27]. It was not clear in the studies whether this represents a conscious decision as the others do. Through their accounts to partners (or lack thereof), men continued to exert power over them [17]. Through "selective amnesia" men were able to exercise their power by controlling the meaning of their violence [5] and compensate for the loss of power and control in the abusive incident by controlling the narrative surrounding it [23]. Study 27 identified that men were able to retain power by finding evidence to support their decisions to use violence and blaming allowed them to dehumanize and objectify the VIPA. It is of note that two of the four studies comprising this theme achieved a quality rating of 60% or less [17, 23].

**3c. Influence victim.** Four studies identified DMJB as strategies men who have been abusive used to influence the perceptions and accounts of their female victims both during and after abusive incidents [1, 2, 5, 27]. Men tried to get the victim to shoulder at least part of the blame for their abuse [1] and control the way they interpret and respond to it [5, 27]. In one study, such strategies allowed men to reconstruct the narrative of the abuse, leading to the victim recanting, and along with garnering sympathy worked to keep the relationship intact [2]. Study 5 found that men's rationalizations served to hide the way they had manipulated a situation in the first place.

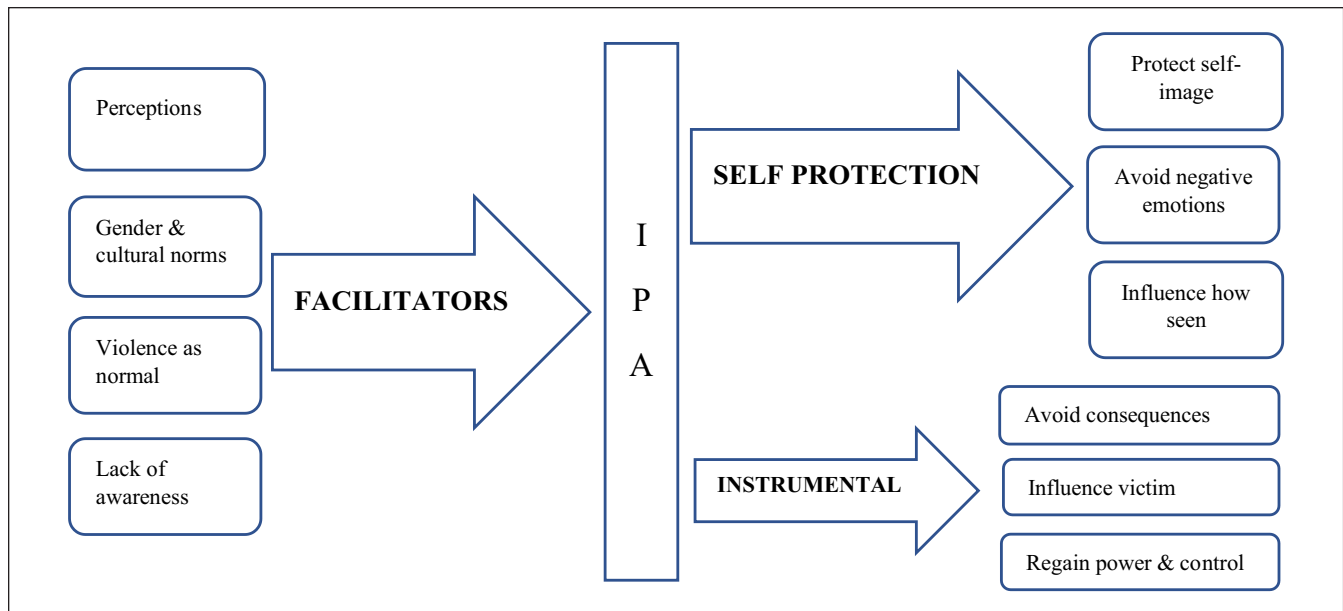
### *Model of How DMJB Operates for Men Who Have Been Abusive to a Female Partner*

It was notable that themes were evident both within and between studies, indicating that an individual men's distorted account may serve multiple functions. As described earlier, the quality of the studies varied. Despite these issues, the number of studies supporting the dominant themes identified within this review suggests some homogeneity in findings, lending support to their reliability. Figure 2 represents a model of the different ways DMJB is hypothesized to operate in IPA based on the synthesis of data in this review.

## **Discussion**

This review addressed the question "How does DMJB operate in IPA committed by men?" In all, 31 studies met the inclusion criteria and were synthesized in this review. The critical findings of this review are summarized in Table 3.





**Figure 2.** Proposed model of how DMJB operates IPA committed by men. DMJB= denial, minimization, justifying and blaming; IPA= intimate partner abuse.

**Table 3.** Critical Findings.

#### Critical Findings

- DMJB serves a complex function for men who abuse female partners; it facilitates abuse, while also serving a self-protective function, and can be used instrumentally
- DMJB can serve multiple functions for the same individual, and therefore needs to be explored with them
- An overactive threat system influences both the cause of IPA and the way it is justified
- Cultural beliefs and gender norms are relevant to how IPA is seen and justified by the men who are abusive
- Research into DMJB of IPA adopts an adversarial approach to men who abuse female partners

DMJB= denial, minimization, justifying, and blaming; IPA= intimate partner abuse.

#### Summary of Findings

The themes identified within this review support a model of DMJB that is multi-faceted and complex. The primary theme *Facilitators*, which indicates the accounts of men who have been abusive can represent their truth and are part of what drives their abusive behavior is consistent with the potential applicability of the General Aggression Model (GAM; C. A. Anderson & Bushman, 2002) to IPA, where these facilitators may represent the cognitions of the people who are abusive in relationships. Similarly, the role of cognitive distortions in persistence in ex-partner stalking (MacKenzie et al., 2013) is supported by this theme, as are previous findings relating to people who have been abusive in relationships having a

limited understanding of what constitutes abuse (e.g., Barbaro & Raghavan, 2018; Dutton & Goodman, 2005) and perceive others to be hostile (e.g., Bernard & Bernard, 1984). Much can potentially be learned about the facilitators of their abuse therefore, by accepting their accounts as their genuine perception of events.

The theme of *Self-protection* identifies the (often subconscious) work done by men to protect their sense of self, avoid negative feelings, and manage how they are viewed by others. Studies have found that perpetrators often present their abuse as an exceptional event and one that was out of character (e.g., Lau & Stevens, 2012; Mullaney, 2007). Vecina et al. (2016) proposed both self-deception as a form of self-protection and deceiving those who judge them were relevant motives for distorted accounts in IPV offenders. Smith (2007) proposed that men emotionally defended themselves through self-deception as they were unable to cope with strong negative feelings. This difficulty with strong emotions may be further evidence of an overactive threat system (Gilbert, 1993) and parallels the difficulty managing emotions seen in the abuse itself (Whiting et al., 2014). The conflicting roles masculinity plays in abuse were also supported (e.g., Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Levitt et al., 2008).

While acknowledging the deliberate attempts by men who had been abusive to a female partner to avoid sanctions, influence the victim and regain power and control by managing their accounts, the lower level of support for the *Instrumental* theme suggests the assumption that men are deliberately manipulating their accounts to others often found in policy and feminist research (e.g., Pence & Paymar, 1993) should be made with caution.



**Table 4.** Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research.

Policy	Practice	Research
Policy should encourage addressing the underlying drivers of IPA	Accounts of IPA should be explored rather than accepted at face value	Research into DMJB for IPA as a protective strategy is needed
We cannot assume a distorted account is a deliberate attempt to avoid responsibility	Underlying drivers should be addressed in a way that does not threaten the individual's sense of self or induce shame	Ways of addressing underlying drivers of IPA while protecting the individual's sense of self should be researched
Cultural beliefs supporting IPA should be addressed on a community level, including early intervention with children and adolescents	It is important to address underlying drivers in addition to building strengths	The role of an overactive threat system in both driving IPA and contributing to distorted accounts should be further explored The function of DMJB for other subgroups of people how abuse partners should be studied further

DMJB = denial, minimization, justifying and blaming; IPA = intimate partner abuse.

Overall, this review highlights the importance of exploring distorted accounts to understand their function as they may differ between and within individuals. Curiously exploring an individual's account may help us to understand why the individual engages in IPA and what prevents him from changing.

### *Strengths and Limitations of the Review*

It is important to consider the strengths and limitations of the review itself. The systematic search process limited bias (Sayers, 2007), and search terms included a wide range of variations of terms for the different concepts. The search did not include unpublished sources, such as doctoral thesis, which may have garnered relevant findings, to ensure the quality of the articles included. Similarly, articles were only included if they had been published in English, potentially excluding data from countries that do not routinely publish in English. Several relevant articles published in other languages were translated, so the impact of this limitation is considered to be minimal. Hand searching of reference lists for relevant articles, author-specific searches, and gray literature sources aimed to reduce potential publication bias; however, unpublished theses were not included, and may potentially provide further useful data. Abstracts were read in full to reduce the risk of excluding relevant studies, and if there was any uncertainty the full text was reviewed. A focus on westernized populations meant several studies were excluded, generally from Africa and Asia, impacting on the potential generalizability of conclusions. The rationale for this was the relevance of cultural influences on the perpetration of and attitudes toward IPA and therefore appears justified given the aim of the review was to inform policy and practice in a westernized country. This approach, however, did not consider the potential impact of other cultures in very multi-cultural western countries, such as the UK. A useful topic for further research may be how a similar review of non-western populations might compare. Finally, limitations

to the review process itself were present, due to the majority of study selection and data extraction being completed solely by the primary author.

### *Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research*

The findings of this review have a number of potential implications for policy, practice, and future research, which are summarized in Table 4.

The strength of the first theme highlights the importance of engaging with the accounts of perpetrators in a non-judgmental way to ascertain potential treatment needs. The strength of the second dominant theme of self-protection highlights the importance of addressing these factors in a way that does not further threaten the individual's sense of self, particularly given that shame and threat to the sense of self is linked to abusive behavior (Brown, 2004; Lawrence & Taft, 2013) and violence generally (e.g., Velotti et al., 2014). The current strengths-based approach (e.g., the Good Lives Model, Ward & Gannon, 2016) has merit as a method of facilitating the construction of a positive, non-abusive identity, but this review suggests it should be combined with developing the ability to tolerate acknowledging and addressing underlying unhelpful beliefs and attitudes. Navigating a confused sense of masculinity and building tolerance for experiencing strong negative emotions appears likely to be helpful. Given the complexity of the function of DMJB, an integrated perspective such as the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone et al., 2018) may be appropriate when treating and assessing IPA.

There was an inherent bias in the literature and the included studies, which was distinctly adversarial toward individuals who have been abusive in relationships. Future research may benefit from adopting a more compassionate approach, to develop understanding of the self-protective aspect of DMJB.

Future research concerning the function of DMJB for non-western people and those of different genders and sexualities would be beneficial to determine the generalizability of these results. Practitioners may benefit from studying ways of addressing IPA supportive attitudes and beliefs to determine their impact on sense of self and self-esteem. Further work on the role of an overactive threat system in IPA generally would be beneficial, as this review indicates it is both a driver of abuse and a reason for inaccurate accounts.

## Conclusions

As the first of its kind, this review has shown that DMJB in relation to IPA can serve multiple functions both between and within individuals. It has highlighted the error in assuming men who have been abusive to female partners deliberately manipulate their accounts to avoid responsibility and revealed these distorted accounts can in fact expose the underlying drivers of the abuse itself, while serving an unconscious self-protective function. The need for interventions to consider the impact of any work to address distorted accounts on self-esteem is also emphasized. This review has shown the importance of practitioners exploring distorted accounts to assess their function to identify treatment targets and inform risk management.

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