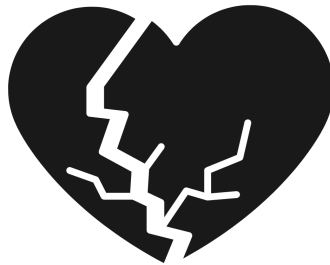


THEORETICAL STUDY

INVISIBLE PARTNER CRIME



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Abstract

This theoretical study introduces and defines the idea of “Invisible Partner Crime” (IPC), setting it apart from more familiar concepts like psychological abuse or manipulation. IPC is seen as a series of subtle, everyday transgressions - actions that may not have legal consequences but can deeply affect a person’s sense of self. These actions gradually chip away at the victim’s mental well-being and their ability to tell their own story. By examining this phenomenon closely, we uncover its key elements - Epistemic Erosion, Affective Vandalism, and Identity Counterfeiting. I suggest that IPC isn’t just a problem in relationships; rather, it’s a form of everyday crime that exists in the gray areas between ethics and the law.

1. Introduction: beyond psychological abuse

While we often hear about domestic violence and psychological abuse, there’s a more subtle and elusive form of harm that can occur in intimate relationships. This is what we call “Invisible Partner Crime” (IPC). Unlike overt acts of aggression, IPC is characterized by an “existential micro-criminality” that manifests through small gestures, omissions, and language that often go unnoticed by the law. The aim isn’t to dominate outright, but rather to gradually dismantle the partner's sense of self.

2. Definition and fundamental mechanisms

So, what exactly is IPC? It’s a continuous cycle of actions and communications that, whether intentionally or through sheer negligence, undermines the very foundations of a partner’s identity, agency, and basic trust in their own understanding of reality.

Here are its three main mechanisms:

2.1. Epistemic erosion: In this scenario, the invisible perpetrator chips away at the victim’s ability to trust their own perceptions and judgments. It goes beyond classic gaslighting (“that didn’t happen”) to a more nuanced approach: contextual micro-distortion. This can look like consistently dismissing shared emotional experiences (“You’re overreacting, it was just a



joke”), subtly altering shared memories, or constantly invalidating feelings. The ultimate goal is to create deep-seated insecurity about one’s ability to understand the world.

2.2. Affective vandalism: This mechanism involves intentionally damaging the partner’s emotional connections and processes in a way that can be easily denied. It’s not about having a disagreement; it’s a symbolic act of disrespect. For instance, it might involve using a shared secret to mock a vulnerability, draining the meaning from a loving ritual with detached irony, or crossing a clearly stated emotional boundary while claiming the partner is just being “oversensitive”. This form of vandalism doesn’t break physical objects; it shatters the relationships and meanings they represent.

2.3. Identity counterfeiting: The unseen criminal partner doesn’t just impose their will; they create a distorted version of the victim’s identity. Through manipulative projections, twisted attributions, and coercive narratives, they pressure the victim into adopting an identity that isn’t theirs: “you’re irrational,” “you’re too needy,” “you wouldn’t cope without me.” To keep the relationship intact, the victim ends up playing a caricature of themselves, leading to a split between their true self and the persona they feel forced to present.

3. The specificity of IPC: a crime without law

IPC stands out due to three distinct features:

1. Plausible deniability: each action is crafted to seem trivial or harmless to outsiders, making it hard for the victim to believe their own experiences.
2. Weaponized intimacy: the abuser leverages their deep understanding of the victim -their fears, dreams, and past- not to build a connection, but to deliver precise emotional blows.
3. Absence of a “Smoking gun”: there’s no single piece of evidence to point to. The harm comes from the ongoing patterns, the underlying dynamics of the relationship, rather than from any one statement.



4. Consequences: ontological harm

Those affected by IPC don't just struggle with low self-esteem or anxiety. They experience something deeper: ontological harm. This shows up as:

Narrative depersonalization: a struggle to weave together a coherent story of one's own life.

Atrophy of agency: a profound loss of trust in one's ability to act effectively in the world.

Emotional discrediting: a deep-seated belief that one's own feelings are fundamentally invalid.

5. Clinical implications and conclusion

Understanding IPC as a unique concept carries significant weight. Therapists need to shift their focus from just addressing “codependency” or “low self-esteem” to seeing their clients as individuals who have survived an unseen, harmful system. The goal of intervention isn't merely to “enhance communication,” but rather to help the victim regain their sense of self and reality, allowing them to dismantle the false narratives that have been imposed on them.

In summary, “Invisible Partner Crime” is a type of modern violence that flourishes in a landscape where there are no laws recognizing the psychological damage it inflicts. Examining this issue helps illuminate a quiet crisis that leaves lasting scars, precisely because, to the outside world, it seems as if it never occurred.



Glossary

Affective vandalism

The deliberate, yet plausibly deniable, damage to a partner's emotional attachments, meaningful symbols, and relational rituals. It constitutes a profanation of shared intimate meanings rather than a direct physical or verbal assault.

Epistemic erosion

The systematic undermining of an individual's capacity to trust their own perception, judgment, and interpretive frameworks. This occurs through subtle, cumulative invalidation and contextual distortion, making the victim doubt their own reality-testing abilities.

Identity counterfeiting

The process by which a perpetrator imposes a false version of the self onto the victim through coercive narratives, projections, and distorted attributions. This forces the victim to perform an inauthentic identity to maintain the relational bond.

Invisible Partner Crime (IPC)

A perpetual system of existential micro-transgressions that, by exploiting privileged access to a partner's psychic universe, systematically corrodes the foundations of their identity, agency, and basic epistemic trust, while remaining largely undetectable to external observation.

Narrative depersonalization

A consequence of IPC manifesting as the victim's inability to construct a coherent, trustworthy narrative of their own experience and identity, leading to a fragmented sense of self.

Ontological harm

The profound damage to an individual's fundamental sense of being and selfhood resulting from IPC. It extends beyond psychological symptoms to



affect the core foundations of identity, agency, and the ability to trust one's own existence in the world.

Plausible deniability

A defining characteristic of IPC where each harmful act is constructed to appear insignificant, ambiguous, or interpretable in a benign way to an external observer, thereby isolating the victim and protecting the perpetrator.

Weaponized intimacy

The strategic use of knowledge gained through closeness and trust—such as fears, hopes, and vulnerabilities - not for connection but to inflict psychological harm with precision and to maximize the impact of micro-aggressions.



Biography

Francesco Mappa, Italian psychologist and criminologist.

He received his specialization training in the United States and is an expert in victimology and crime scene analysis. He has been affiliated with the Chair of Legal Psychiatry at the University of Montreal, Canada. He is the author of the essay “Eros e Thanatos, Il labirinto oscuro dei crimini amorosi” (“Eros and Thanatos: The dark labyrinth of crimes of passion”).



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