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Minn. R. Civ. App. P. 136.01, subd. 1(c).*

**STATE OF MINNESOTA
IN COURT OF APPEALS
A25-0832**

State of Minnesota,
Respondent,

vs.

Miguel Saavedra Amigon,
Appellant.

**Filed April 20, 2026
Affirmed
Larson, Judge**

Stearns County District Court
File No. 73-CR-24-7078

Keith Ellison, Attorney General, Christina Brown, Assistant Attorney General, St. Paul, Minnesota; and

Janelle Kendall, Stearns County Attorney, St. Cloud, Minnesota (for respondent)

Cathryn Middlebrook, Chief Appellate Public Defender, Andrea Barts, Assistant Public Defender, St. Paul, Minnesota (for appellant)

Considered and decided by Larson, Presiding Judge; Johnson, Judge; and Schmidt, Judge.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

LARSON, Judge

In this direct appeal, appellant Miguel Saavedra Amigon argues he is entitled to a new trial because the district court abused its discretion when it allowed the state to present

certain relationship evidence under Minn. Stat. § 634.20 (2024). Because we conclude the state acted within its discretion when it admitted the challenged evidence, we affirm.

FACTS

In September 2024, police officers responded to a report of an assault involving Amigon and his then fiancée (victim) at their home. That evening, Amigon and victim had a verbal disagreement, which escalated into a physical altercation. During the incident, Amigon yelled obscenities at victim and damaged victim’s personal belongings. Amigon then physically assaulted victim—grabbing victim, tearing open victim’s blouse, and breaking the necklace victim was wearing. Victim’s children witnessed the incident. The children attempted to pull Amigon off victim, and victim’s daughter (daughter) called 911. Amigon eventually left the house.

Officers arrived shortly thereafter and took statements from victim and daughter. Officers later located and arrested Amigon. Respondent State of Minnesota charged Amigon with felony domestic assault-fear under Minn. Stat. § 609.2242, subd. 4 (2024).¹

Before trial, the state filed notice of its intent to introduce “relationship evidence” under section 634.20.² The state’s notice sought to admit eleven instances of alleged relationship evidence. Amigon’s defense counsel objected in a motion in limine on the grounds that the evidence outlined in the notice did not qualify as relationship evidence

¹ Amigon stipulated to the fact that he had previous domestic-violence convictions which enhanced the current domestic-assault charge to a felony.

² The term “relationship evidence” is generally used to describe evidence admitted under section 634.20. *See, e.g., State v. Bell*, 719 N.W.2d 635, 638 n.4 (Minn. 2006).

and was unduly prejudicial. The district court determined that seven instances were admissible, but the district court limited the number of instances the state could introduce.³

At trial, the state called several witnesses, including victim. As relevant here, prior to victim's testimony, the district court gave a cautionary instruction regarding the relationship evidence, stating that the evidence was "offered for the limited purpose of demonstrating the nature and extent of the relationship between . . . Amigon and [victim] in order for [the jury] to assist in determining whether [Amigon] committed the acts with which he is charged in the complaint." The district court further stated: "Amigon [was] not being tried for and may not be convicted of any behavior other than the charged offense. [The jury was] not to convict . . . Amigon on the basis of the alleged conduct in [the prior incidents]." Victim then testified about three prior incidents involving Amigon.

First, victim testified about an incident that occurred in July 2016 (2016 incident). Amigon pushed victim onto a bed during an argument. Amigon held victim down and yelled obscenities at her. Victim's sister was present during the incident and called the police. Victim minimized the incident to the police due to Amigon's intimidation and coercion.

Second, victim testified about an incident that occurred in January 2019 (2019 incident). One evening, victim and Amigon argued about victim's plans to go out with friends. When victim left the house, Amigon called victim repeatedly and went to

³ The district court indicated the state could introduce "four instances" of relationship evidence—including as an "instance" all victim's prior recantations. Thus, the state complied with this limitation when it admitted evidence of the three incidents described below, plus victim's prior recantation of two of those incidents.

victim's location. The next morning, Amigon physically and verbally assaulted victim. Bleeding, victim ran to the neighbor's house and told them to call the police. Victim suffered a swollen eye for nearly two weeks, which daughter corroborated. Victim reported the incident to the police but later recanted because victim feared Amigon and felt guilty.

Third, victim testified about an incident that occurred in Las Vegas (Las Vegas incident). Amigon and victim argued while on vacation with friends. Eventually, the two were shoving each other, and victim demanded that Amigon leave. Amigon left and returned to their shared hotel room. Victim went to a friend's hotel room for a few hours. When victim returned to the shared hotel room, Amigon had destroyed several of victim's personal belongings. Victim did not report the incident to the police.

Amigon invoked his right not to testify.⁴ The district court repeated its cautionary instruction regarding the relationship evidence during final jury instructions. The jury found Amigon guilty. The jury also returned a special-verdict form, finding that the offense was committed in the presence of a child. The district court sentenced Amigon to a 60-month prison term.

Amigon appeals.

DECISION

Amigon challenges the district court's decision to allow the state to admit relationship evidence under section 634.20. We review a district court's evidentiary rulings for an abuse of discretion. *State v. McCoy*, 682 N.W.2d 153, 161 (Minn. 2004).

⁴ Amigon asserted that he acted in self-defense, and the jury was given a self-defense instruction.

“A district court abuses its discretion when its decision is based on an erroneous view of the law or is against logic and the facts in the record.” *State v. Vangrevenhof*, 941 N.W.2d 730, 736 (Minn. 2020). Section 634.20 provides:

Evidence of domestic conduct by the accused against the victim of domestic conduct, or against other family or household members, is admissible unless the probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice, confusion of the issue, or misleading the jury, or by considerations of undue delay, waste of time, or needless presentation of cumulative evidence. ‘Domestic conduct’ includes, but is not limited to, evidence of domestic abuse . . . [listing other offenses].

Amigon asserts the district court abused its discretion in two respects. First, Amigon argues certain aspects of victim’s testimony do not meet the definition of “domestic conduct” under the section 634.20. Second, Amigon asserts the district court improperly weighed the prejudicial effect of the evidence. We address each argument in turn.

A.

Amigon argues the district court abused its discretion when it allowed victim to testify about certain aspects of the three incidents. Specifically, he asserts that certain aspects of victim’s testimony did not constitute “domestic conduct” under section 634.20.⁵ To resolve this question, we must first interpret section 634.20.

⁵ The state argues Amigon forfeited this argument on appeal. We are not persuaded. Parties are allowed to refine their arguments on appeal. *See State v. Woolridge Carter*, 9 N.W.3d 839, 842 n.3 (Minn. 2024) (explaining that “the forfeiture doctrine does not apply” when a party “has simply refined [their] arguments” on appeal). Upon review of the record, we conclude that Amigon preserved the issue for appeal when he filed a motion in limine arguing the challenged evidence did not qualify as relationship evidence.

Statutory interpretation is a question of law that we review de novo. *State v. Holl*, 966 N.W.2d 803, 808 (Minn. 2021). Our goal when interpreting a statute “is to effectuate the intent of the Legislature.” *State v. Velisek*, 986 N.W.2d 696, 699 (Minn. 2023) (quotation omitted). We must first determine if the statute is ambiguous. *State v. Mikell*, 960 N.W.2d 230, 238 (Minn. 2021). A statute is ambiguous if its language “is subject to more than one reasonable interpretation[.]” *Holl*, 966 N.W.2d at 808 (quotation omitted). If the statute is unambiguous, we must apply the plain language. *Id.*

According to Amigon, a 2013 amendment to section 634.20 narrowed what constitutes admissible relationship evidence. The 2013 amendment modified the statute as follows:

Evidence of ~~similar~~ domestic conduct by the accused against the victim of domestic ~~abuse~~ conduct, or against other family or household members, is admissible unless the probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice, confusion of the issue, or misleading the jury, or by considerations of undue delay, waste of time, or needless presentation of cumulative evidence. “~~Similar~~ Domestic conduct” includes, but is not limited to, evidence of domestic abuse . . . [listing other offenses].

See 2013 Minn. Laws ch. 47, § 7, at 208. In essence, the legislature replaced the word “similar” with “domestic.”

Amigon contends that these modifications overruled previous precedent interpreting the statute. Specifically, Amigon argues that “domestic conduct” must be interpreted to mean conduct that amounts to “domestic abuse” and the phrase “not limited to” must be construed in relation to the specific offenses listed in section 634.20. Thus, Amigon asserts, prior appellate cases holding that “[s]imilar conduct’ under [section] 634.20 is

broader than the enumerated offenses that constitute domestic abuse” are no longer good law. *See State v. Matthews*, 779 N.W.2d 543, 549 (Minn. 2010) (emphasis added); *see also McCoy*, 682 N.W.2d at 161 (holding section 634.20 allows state to admit relationship evidence that “illuminates the history of the relationship between an accused and a victim” and provides context to the charged crime); *State v. McCurry*, 770 N.W.2d 553, 560 (Minn. App. 2009) (concluding phrase “not limited to” in section 634.20 encompasses “general testimony about the relationship”), *rev. denied* (Minn. Oct. 28, 2009). The state disagrees, arguing the change from “similar” to “domestic” did not alter prior interpretations of the scope of admissible relationship evidence under section 634.20.

We agree with the state. Reviewing the statute’s plain language, while the legislature replaced the word “similar” with the word “domestic,” the legislature did not alter the definition of similar/domestic conduct.⁶ Instead, the term is still defined as “includ[ing], but is not limited to, evidence of domestic abuse[.]” *See* Minn. Stat. § 634.20 (2024). Thus, we conclude that the 2013 amendment did not overrule prior precedent. As such, “domestic conduct” under section 634.20 is “broader than the enumerated offenses that constitute domestic abuse,” *see Matthews*, 779 N.W.2d at 549, and the statute permits the state to offer more “general testimony about the relationship,” *see McCurry*, 770 N.W.2d at 560.

⁶ Post-2013, the only substantive change to the definition was the addition of another offense, violation of a domestic abuse no contact order, to the list of non-exclusive offenses that qualify as “domestic conduct.” Minn. Stat. § 634.20 (2024); *cf.* Minn. Stat. § 634.20 (Supp. 2013).

This interpretation is further bolstered by our more recent precedential opinions employing that broader definition. For example, in *State v. Boswell*, the appellant argued that certain testimony was inadmissible because “not all of it was ‘domestic conduct’ under section 634.20.” 20 N.W.3d 640, 652 (Minn. App. 2025). We rejected the appellant’s argument that this testimony was not relationship evidence, stating the phrase “not limited to” encompasses “general testimony about the relationship, including conduct that does not rise to the level of the crimes listed in the definition of” domestic conduct. *Id.* (quoting *McCurry*, 770 N.W.2d at 560).

For these reasons, we conclude the 2013 amendment did not overrule prior precedent regarding what constitutes relationship evidence under section 634.20.

With the standard clarified, we address Amigon’s challenges to victim’s testimony. Amigon argues the following testimony was inadmissible under section 634.20: (1) victim explaining her recantations and minimizations to the police following the 2016 incident and 2019 incident (recanting evidence); (2) victim describing her injuries from the 2019 incident (injury evidence); and (3) victim describing her damaged personal property from the Las Vegas incident (property-damage evidence). We are not persuaded. Under existing precedent, the recanting evidence was admissible because it shed light on the “fear and control dynamic” in Amigon’s and victim’s relationship. *See Boswell*, 20 N.W.3d at 653. The injury evidence is plainly allowable under the definition of “domestic abuse.” *See* Minn. Stat. § 634.20; *see also* Minn. Stat. § 518B.01, subd. 2 (2024) (defining domestic abuse as “physical harm, bodily injury, or assault” and “the infliction of fear of imminent physical harm, bodily injury, or assault” against a family or household member). And the

property-damage evidence was admissible to illustrate an “ongoing tension [or] argument[.]” between Amigon and victim. *See McCurry*, 770 N.W.2d at 560.

Accordingly, we conclude the district court did not abuse its discretion when it determined the challenged testimony was relationship evidence under section 634.20.

B.

Amigon argues that, even if the challenged aspects of victim’s testimony qualified as relationship evidence under section 634.20, the district court abused its discretion in the manner that it weighed the probative value of the evidence against the danger of unfair prejudice. Under section 634.20, relationship evidence is admissible “unless the probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice, confusion of the issue, or misleading the jury, or by considerations of undue delay, waste of time, or needless presentation of cumulative evidence.” Amigon raises three challenges to the district court’s application of this balancing test, which we address in turn.

Amigon first argues the relationship evidence had little probative value because the state had a strong case. We are not persuaded. “[W]hile the need for section 634.20 evidence is naturally considered as part of the assessment of” the balancing test, “a separate analysis of need is not required to admit evidence under section 634.20.” *Boswell*, 20 N.W.3d at 653. Here, the state used the relationship evidence to bolster victim’s credibility. But, importantly, Amigon also used the relationship evidence to attack victim’s credibility. Thus, the proffered relationship evidence had significant probative value because it “illuminate[d] the history of the relationship . . . and . . . assist[ed] the jury in assessing witness credibility.” *See Matthews*, 779 N.W.2d at 549 (quotation omitted); *see*

also *State v. Lindsey*, 755 N.W.2d 752, 757 (Minn. App. 2008) (determining the relationship evidence “had significant probative value in assisting the jury to judge witness credibility”), *rev. denied* (Minn. Oct. 29, 2008).

Amigon argues second that the district court did not properly apply the balancing test because the relationship evidence presented a “particularly great” risk that the jury would misuse the evidence for improper character or propensity purposes.⁷ “Unfair prejudice . . . is not merely damaging evidence, even severely damaging evidence; rather, unfair prejudice is evidence that persuades by illegitimate means, giving one party an unfair advantage.” *State v. Schulz*, 691 N.W.2d 474, 478 (Minn. 2005). We are not persuaded that the district court abused its discretion when it determined that the relationship evidence would not persuade by illegitimate means. The proffered testimony was admissible under section 634.20 because it illuminated the “relationship between an accused and a victim.” *See McCoy*, 682 N.W.2d at 161. And the record shows that the district court carefully, and explicitly, considered the prejudicial effect of the relationship evidence and limited the number of instances the state could introduce to mitigate any prejudicial effect.

⁷ To support his argument, Amigon cites *State v. Hormann*. 805 N.W.2d 883 (Minn. App. 2011), *rev. denied* (Minn. Jan. 17, 2012). In *Hormann*, the victim testified to “four discrete incidents,” which we concluded were “admissible as relationship evidence.” *Id.* at 890. However, the victim also offered “more general statements about the marriage” that lacked specificity. *Id.* at 891. We determined the general statements lacked probative value, which was outweighed by the risk of unfair prejudice. We are not persuaded that *Hormann* supports a different outcome in this case because victim’s testimony was akin to that offered regarding the “four discrete incidents” and did not amount to general statements about the parties’ relationship.

Third, Amigon argues the district court’s cautionary instructions did not effectively mitigate the danger of unfair prejudice. We disagree. “[C]autionary instructions ‘lessen[] the probability of undue weight being given by the jury to the evidence.’” *Lindsey*, 755 N.W.2d at 757 (quoting *State v. Kennedy*, 585 N.W.2d 385, 392 (Minn. 1998)); *see also State v. Benton*, 858 N.W.2d 535, 542 (Minn. 2015) (stating that the potential for unfair prejudice from relationship evidence may be lessened by the district court providing a cautionary instruction to the jury). Here, the district court gave a cautionary instruction both before victim’s testimony and during its final instructions. In the cautionary instructions, the district court clearly articulated that the evidence was “offered for [a] limited purpose” and reminded the jury that they could not “convict [Amigon] on the basis of the alleged conduct in” the three incidents. We presume the jury followed that instruction. *See State v. Courtney*, 696 N.W.2d 73, 84 (Minn. 2005). Thus, we conclude the cautionary instruction mitigated the relationship evidence’s prejudicial effect.

Accordingly, we conclude the district court did not abuse its discretion in its application of the balancing test.

Affirmed.