

Running head: CULPABILITY IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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**The Influence of Gender and Ethnicity on Judgements of
Culpability in a Domestic Violence Scenario**

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Abstract

Using an experimental analog design, in this study we examined 503 European American, African American, and Latino undergraduate students and their responses to a domestic violence scenario in which the gender and ethnicity of the perpetrator were manipulated. Results indicated that participants perceived perpetration of domestic assault significantly more criminal when committed by a man than when committed by a woman. That finding was robust across European Americans, African Americans, and Latinos and was expressed by both genders. Also, European American participants expressed significantly more criticism toward African American perpetrators of assault than they did toward European American and Latino perpetrators of the exact offense, suggestive of racial bias consistent with stereotypes about African Americans being excessively aggressive. Last, Latino participants expressed significantly more sympathy toward women who assault their husbands than toward assaulting husbands. Implications of the findings are discussed.

The Influence of Gender and Ethnicity on Judgements of Culpability in a Domestic Violence Scenario

Government statistics suggest that domestic violence remains a widespread problem throughout the United States, with 1,036,000 victims in 1998, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). Research in the area of domestic violence is important because, as noted by Straus and Yodanis (1996) in their study of 4,401 couples, exposure to violence in the family as children is predictive of aggression toward spouses as adults for both males and females. Further, Sharps and Campbell (1999) note that victims of domestic violence often suffer both significant physical as well as psychological trauma. Because domestic violence commonly evokes strong emotions, the general public—including clinicians, researchers and lawmakers—are likely to harbor biased attitudes toward those involved in domestic abuse. More specifically, despite that laws against domestic assault should apply equally to all people, there is the potential for perpetrators of domestic violence to be judged differentially based upon their gender or ethnicity. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of perpetrator gender and ethnicity on people's attitudes toward a scenario involving domestic violence, as well as the correlation between people's gender and ethnicity and their attitudes toward the same scenario.

The Debate on Domestic Violence as Related to Gender and Ethnicity

Although domestic violence often is conceived as situations in which men attack women (e.g. Dobash, Dobash, Wilson & Daly, 1992; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), a number of studies have noted that attacks by women against their male partners may be just as prevalent (e.g. Scanzoni, 1978; Sorenson & Telles, 1991; McNeely & Mann, 1990). Yet, controversy and debate regarding this research remain high and little consensus exists regarding the relative prevalence and impact of male-to-female and female-to-male domestic violence. In one example of such controversy (Schulman, 1979), data indicating that 38% of violence in intimate

relationships was instigated by women against men was purposefully suppressed (Straus, 1993). That situation only came to light when the original data were obtained and reported by Hornung, McCullough and Sugimoto (1981). Further, although instances of domestic violence perpetrated by women may be characterized as a function of self-defense against male violence (Dobash et al., 1992; Makepeace, 1981) other research indicates that the motives for female perpetrated domestic violence do not differ from those of males (Straus, 1993; McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987). Last, although it is noted that women are injured more often in the context of domestic violence than men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), even this observation has been contested (e.g. Straus, 1993). **Nonetheless, this last issue remains controversial, particularly given a body of literature which indicates that women, relative to men, experience more injuries resulting from domestic violence. For example, Koss & Hoffman (2000) suggest that between 25% to 50% of all women have experienced violence at the hand of a male partner and that women are more likely to sustain injuries. Similarly, studies suggest that emergency room visits for female victims of domestic violence are more common than for men (Krauss & Krauss, 1995) and that law enforcement agencies commonly view women as more at risk from domestic violence (Ferraro, 1989). Information from the government sponsored research studies remains contradictory however. In particular, although results from the National Violence Against Women Survey suggests that women are considerably more likely to experience and be injured by domestic violence (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the National Family Violence Study, using a similar research methodology, found equal rates of male and female victimization (Straus & Gelles, 1987). Taken together, these two studies suggest both men and women are victims of domestic violence, with the possibility remaining that women are victimized more often. Yet, given the greater upper body strength of males relative to females, it would not be surprising to find that women are at greater risk of physical injury during incidents of domestic violence, no matter if the initiating perpetrator is the male or female partner. Thus, even if prevalence rates of**

committing domestic violence are equal for males and females, the overall risk to women is higher than that for men.

Much of the controversy regarding these issues appears to be steeped in emotionality rather than empiricism, which may reflect the sensitivity of the topic. Researchers with differing assumptions regarding the relative prevalence of domestic assault perpetrated by men and women may apply biased research methodologies in line with their initial assumptions. For instance, reliance on self-reported perpetration of violence versus self-reported victimization may yield discrepant information solely due to the choice of behavior that is focused upon (i.e. perpetration vs. victimization). Researchers, for example, holding the view that men commit violence more often than women may focus on perpetration of violence if assessing men, yet focus on victimization if assessing women. This particular methodological problem is further complicated by respondents' gender-based cultural views toward perpetration and victimization of violence. Specifically, men and women may differ on their willingness to disclose their respective roles in domestic violence cases (men possibly are willing to admit perpetration and deny victimization, whereas the opposite may hold true for women).

The differential effects of ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) on prevalence rates of domestic violence remain to be clarified. Despite that a number of researchers assert that domestic violence is essentially equally prevalent among all ethnicities and socioeconomic strata (e.g. Locke & Richman, 1999; Lockhart, 1987), data suggest that individuals with lower SES are more prone to domestic violence than those with higher SES (e.g. Hotaling & Sugarman, 1990; Walby & Myhill, 2000).

Regarding race and ethnicity, little consensus exists regarding the impact of ethnicity on domestic violence. It could be that some cultures entitle men (or less commonly women) to assault their partners, and such behavior is either sanctioned or may even be encouraged (Levinson, 1989). The way that individuals from such cultures perceive domestic violence scenarios may differ from the perceptions of those who are raised in cultures where domestic

violence is discouraged or punished. Although it has been noted that individuals from countries that are less industrial perceive domestic violence as less serious (Reichert, 1991; Walker, 1999) surprisingly little systematic research has examined cultural effects on actual domestic violence perpetration. **What studies do exist suggest that higher levels of domestic violence do exist among minority families particularly among couples who are cohabitating rather than married (Jasinski, 2001) and are younger and of low socio economic status (Kessler, Molnar, Feurer & Appelbaum, 2001).**

Perceptions of people from minority ethnic groups may further influence people's perceptions of culpability in domestic violence scenarios. For example, it has been noted that African American women are often stereotyped as more aggressive and accustomed to violent behavior than European American women (Harrison & Esqueda, 1999), perceptions which may influence legal proceedings involving African American women as both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

It is possible that the controversy over female perpetrated domestic violence reflects to some degree gender-based stereotypes that characterize women as passive and morally incapable of instigating violence (Pearson, 1997). Similarly, attitudes toward specific cultural groups may influence perceptions of culpability in domestic disputes based upon ethnicity rather than the circumstances of the crime. Ultimately, it seems reasonable to suggest that violence by one person against any other person is criminal unless motivated by self-defense. Thus the exact relative prevalence of male-to-female and female-to-male perpetrated domestic assault may be irrelevant if both genders were to be capable equally of committing domestic assault. Yet, it may be that individuals are perceived differently by police, judges and juries, as well as by clinicians and counselors, as a function of their gender and ethnicity, rather than by the motives, specific behaviors, and consequences of their actions.

Attitudes Toward Domestic Violence

Despite a body of evidence suggesting that domestic violence is perpetrated by both men and women (e.g. Straus, 1999; Steinmetz, 1980) and that motives for both genders typically are similar (McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987), little research has examined gender- and ethnicity-based perceptions of domestic violence perpetrators. Although several studies have examined the role that respondents' gender plays in how domestic violence is perceived (e.g. Stalans & Lurigio, 1995; Willis, Hallinan & Melby, 1996) little has been done to examine the role that a perpetrator's gender may play in how they are perceived, independent of the facts of the case or respondents' own gender. One study (Feather, 1996) found that women are perceived as less responsible for their actions when perpetrating incidents of domestic violence than are men. Feather presented men and women with a domestic violence scenario and asked the participants to rate the responsibility of the perpetrator. Both men and women rated the responsibility of male perpetrators higher than that of female perpetrators. Also, it was found that women rated the responsibility of male perpetrators higher and the responsibility of female perpetrators lower than did men participants. Feather's findings indicate that both genders hold male perpetrators more responsible than female perpetrators for domestic violence, even when other variables such as physical injury are held constant. Further, women held male, relative to female perpetrators, more responsible than did men in the study.

Studies examining police officers' attitudes about domestic violence situations also have revealed gender biases. For example, Finn and Stalans (1997) found among a sample of 130 police officers that officers were likely to rate male victims of domestic violence more responsible for precipitating the violence than female victims. Similarly, Stewart and Maddren (1997) found that their sample of 97 police officers were more likely to judge male victims as more responsible for precipitating the violence than female victims. Although these studies focused on victims rather than perpetrators, their results demonstrate a bias against male victims of domestic violence independent of the facts of the specific cases.

Regarding the effects of ethnicity, Locke and Richman (1999) examined the effects of gender and ethnicity in perceptions of domestic violence. Domestic violence scenarios in which a husband abused his wife were presented to nonLatino European American and African American college students. The ethnicity of the perpetrator and victim were varied randomly. It was found that, on average, women respondents rated the domestic violence incident more serious and sympathized more with the victim than did men in the study. Further, African American respondents sympathized with African American victims more than did European American respondents. Further, African American husbands were judged to be less responsible for the incident than European American husbands by all groups of respondents. Finally, women and European American, as groups, disapproved of domestic violence significantly more strongly than did men and African Americans. Although Locke and Richman failed to examine scenarios in which husbands were abused by their wives which might have shed more light on gender dynamics, their results provide clear evidence that ethnicity can play a role in people's perceptions of domestic violence. The Lock and Richman study notwithstanding, most studies on perceptions of domestic violence are done with nonLatino European American respondents, leaving much to be known about how individuals from other racial and ethnic groups perceive domestic violence (Harrison & Willis-Esqueda, 1999).

In the present study, we examined the effects of gender and ethnicity on perceptions of domestic violence. Including the variable of race or ethnicity in the study is important because this variable has been largely neglected thus far in studies of domestic abuse attitudes. More specifically, we examined the effects of perpetrator gender and ethnicity on people's attitudes toward a scenario involving domestic violence, as well as the correlation between participant gender and ethnicity and their attitudes toward the same scenario. This approach to studying how domestic violence is perceived is critical for two reasons. One, domestic abuse is a serious and pervasive problem in the United States and adversely impacts society in multiple ways (Walker, 1999). If a gender bias were to influence the helping profession's and legal system's approach

toward those who perpetrate and those who are victimized by violence, such bias would necessarily need to be addressed in order to appropriately and fairly deal with this problem both psychotherapeutically and criminally. Two, the United States is undergoing major demographic changes and domestic violence among people of “color” increasingly can be expected to come to the attention of authorities. Consequently, it behooves professionals who provide clinical interventions with abusive couples to have a better understanding on how domestic violence is perceived by individuals from diverse ethnic and racial groups.

It was hypothesized that both male and female participants would rate male perpetrators in a domestic violence scenario as more criminal than female perpetrators. The culture of the United States may have evolved such that men are seen as aggressive perpetrators of violence and women are the victims of such violence. Such attitudes might create a mindset whereby violence committed by females is minimized or explained away. It was also hypothesized that participants would be more sympathetic toward offenders of their own genders due to possible overidentification with same-gender individuals despite having committed serious offensive behavior. Because of the dearth of studies on how ethnicity affects perception of domestic situations, this aspect of the study was exploratory and no formal hypotheses were made regarding ethnicity. **In the interest of examining individual differences and how they might impact on perceptions of domestic violence, participants were also measured in regards to their tendency toward socially desirable answering. It was hypothesized that high “social desirability” responders would be more likely to rate the behavior of a male (versus female) perpetrator of domestic violence as culpable.**

Methods

Participants:

Participants included 503 (178 male, 326 female) undergraduate students attending a major metropolitan university. Their mean age was 19.1 (SD=2.87). Regarding ethnicity, 323 (64.2%) of the students self-identified as nonLatino European American, 80 (15.9%) as African

American, and 100 (19.9%) as Latino/Latino. Students were recruited voluntarily from undergraduate classes in psychology and received extra credit in their respective course for participation. Thirty-eight participants self-identified as either Asian American or “other” and because of their small sample size, their data were not included in the analyses.

Materials:

A questionnaire designed to assess attitudes on domestic violence was developed by the present authors that included a domestic violence scenario and 20 Lykert scale types of questions regarding participants’ reactions to the scenario. The questionnaire is presented in its entirety in Appendix 1. The details in the scenario were held constant except for the gender (David or Linda) and ethnicity (European American, African American, or Latino) of the perpetrator. The example in the appendix presents the “Latino female” version of the questionnaire. This questionnaire was examined using principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation and was found to have four factors: (1) Criminality of the Perpetrator (i.e., to what extent did the perpetrator’s behavior warrant criminal charges?); (2) Sympathy Toward the Victim; (3) Sympathy Toward the Perpetrator; and (4) Perpetrator Forgiveness (to what extent does the respondent feel that the perpetrator should have restrained from reacting to a late-arriving spouse with violence and instead should have forgiven the spouse?). Factor analyses also were performed on the data for each ethnic group of participants separately (European American, African American, Latino) and the original factor structure was confirmed across all three ethnic groups, though some items either added to or dropped off the second factor. Cronbach alpha reliability analyses were conducted for each of the factors with data compiled from all three ethnic groups. Because the fourth factor consisted of only one item (“Do you think Linda should forgive David for being late?”), no reliability analysis was conducted on the fourth factor. Reliabilities for remaining factor scores were .77 for Criminality of the Perpetrator, .59 for Sympathy Toward Victim, and .53 for Sympathy toward the Perpetrator. When reliability analyses were conducted on data from European American participants only, the following alpha

coefficients were obtained: .75 for Criminality of the Perpetrator, .75 for Sympathy toward the Victim, and .52 for Sympathy toward the Perpetrator. Alpha coefficients on data from African Americans were .75 for Criminality of the Perpetrator, .36 for Sympathy toward the Victim, and .55 for Sympathy toward the Perpetrator. For Latino participants, alpha coefficients were .82 for Criminality of the Perpetrator, .42 for Sympathy toward the Victim, and .54 for Sympathy toward the Perpetrator. Thus, of the factors obtained, the first factor (Criminality of the Perpetrator) demonstrated the greatest reliability across ethnic groups. The second factor (Sympathy toward the Victim) demonstrated the least reliability across ethnic groups. Consequently, results from this factor were not analyzed for this study. The third factor (Sympathy toward the Perpetrator) demonstrated borderline reliability. All factor scores were converted into standard z scores with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1991): The BIDR is a 40-item Lykert-scale self-report inventory designed to measure endorsement of socially desirable items. This measure was included as a covariate to remove variance due to social desirability from analyses on domestic violence attitudes. The BIDR has two subscales, Impression Management (IM, a tendency to look good to others) and Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE, a tendency to make oneself feel good). Based on the present sample of participants, the following Cronbach alpha coefficients were obtained for IM and SDE: for European Americans, .56 and .56; for African Americans, .63 and .72; and for Latinos, .71 and .68, respectively.

Procedure and Study Design:

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions (i.e., European American male, European American female, African American male, African American female, Latino male, Latino female), representing a true experimental design using an analog format. Although respondents may react to a written analog scenario differently than when presented with a real scenario and thus cause a study to have reduced external validity, Lopez, Smith, Wolkenstein, and Charlin (1993) noted that analog studies provide an excellent opportunity for

maximizing the internal validity of a study. Thus, for the purpose of focusing specifically on the effects of gender and ethnicity on people's judgments about domestic violence, the analog design was deemed most appropriate for this study. Each participant was given a set of questionnaires that consisted of an informed consent sheet, a demographic questionnaire, the domestic violence questionnaire and the BIDR. Approximately fifteen minutes were required to respond to the questionnaires. **The present design is a 3 (participant race) X 2 (participant gender) X 3 (perpetrator race) X 2 (perpetrator gender) between subjects design.**

Regarding the measures of social desirability, namely the self-deceptive enhancement and impression management subscales on the BIDR, means and standard deviations were used to divide respondents into low (at least one SD below the mean), normative (within one standard deviation of the mean) and high (at least one SD above the mean) groups on these measures. The response pattern of low, medium and high respondents was resulted in a 3(Impression Management) X 3 (Self-Deceptive Enhancement) X 2 (perpetrator gender) X 2 (respondent gender) between subjects design.

Results

Manipulation Check

In order to ensure that participants were cognizant of the gender and ethnicity of the perpetrator in the scenario, after participants completed and handed in the questionnaire, they were given a two-item manipulation check that asked them to recall the gender and ethnicity of the perpetrator. Out of a total of 619 original respondents, 84 (16%) failed the manipulation check and therefore their data were not included for further analysis.

Multiple Analysis of Covariance

Due to difficulties in interpreting complex interaction effects inherent to multiple factorial designs (Cozby, 2001), a multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted separately for European American, African American, and Latino participants. The

MANCOVAs were performed on scores from the questionnaire assessing attitudes about the domestic violence scenario. The independent variables were gender of the participants, and the gender and ethnicity of the perpetrator in the domestic violence scenario. Dependent variables were the four factor scores from the questionnaire that had been converted to standard z scores. To control for socially desirable response sets, IM and SDE scores from the BIDR served as covariates.

European American Participants

A significant main effect was found for perpetrator gender among European American participants (using Wilks' Lambda, $F [4, 306] = 45.05, p < .001$; eta squared = .37). Univariate analyses indicated that participants rated the domestic abuse as more criminal when committed by a male ($M = .63, SD = .74$) than when committed by a female ($M = -.57, SD = .83$), $F (1, 309) = 161.20, p < .001$; eta squared = .34. Figure 1a illustrates the mean criminality ratings given by European American participants to male and female perpetrators.

A significant main effect also was found for perpetrator race among European American participants ($F [4, 306] = 2.28, p < .05$; eta squared = .03). Univariate analyses indicated that European American participants gave significantly different ratings on the one item constituting the Perpetrator Forgiveness scale depending on the race of the perpetrator, $F (2, 309) = 8.50, p < .001$; eta squared = .05. Post-hoc analyses revealed that European American participants held African American perpetrators of domestic violence to a higher standard ($M = .15, SD = .96$) than they held European American ($M = -.14, SD = .59; p < .001$) and Latino ($M = -.19, SD = .59; p < .05$) perpetrators with respect to expecting perpetrators to forgive rather than assault their late-arriving spouse. Figure 2 presents group mean Perpetrator Forgiveness ratings given by European American participants to European American, African American, and Latino perpetrators of domestic violence.

The gender of the participants was associated significantly with an effect ($F [4, 306] = 5.52, p < .001$; eta squared = .07). Univariate analyses indicated that women rated the domestic abuse as more criminal ($M = .10, SD = .99$) than men ($M = -.29, SD = .93$), $F (1, 309) = 6.65, p < .01$; eta squared = .02.

African-Americans

A significant main effect was found for perpetrator gender among African American participants ($F [4, 63] = 9.63, p < .001$; eta squared = .38). Univariate analyses indicated that participants rated the domestic abuse as more criminal when committed by a male ($M = .59, SD = .74$) than when committed by a female ($M = -.65, SD = .83$), $F (1, 66) = 36.71, p < .001$; eta squared = .36. Figure 1b illustrates the mean criminality ratings given by African American participants to male and female perpetrators. **This figure includes data on participant gender even though this was not found to be statistically significant for African Americans. This was done both to keep the figures consistent as well as to demonstrate that females consistently report perpetrators as more criminal than males even though this data was not statistically significant for African Americans or Latinos.**

No other significant effects were found for African American participants.

Latinos

A significant main effect was found for perpetrator gender among Latino participants ($F [4, 83] = 13.48, p < .001$; eta squared = .40). Univariate analyses indicated that participants rated the domestic abuse as more criminal when committed by a male ($M = .53, SD = .82$) than when committed by a female ($M = -.87, SD = .75$), $F (1, 86) = 43.44, p < .001$; eta squared = .34. Figures 1c illustrates the mean criminality ratings given by Latino participants to male and female perpetrators. **As with figure 1b, this figure presents data on participant gender, even though**

this was not statistically significant for Latinos. This was done for consistency of presentation.

Univariate analyses also indicated that Latino participants gave higher ratings on Sympathy toward the Perpetrator to female perpetrators of assault ($M = .23$, $SD = 1.19$) than to male perpetrators ($M = -.20$, $SD = .72$), $F(1, 86) = 4.77$, $p < .05$; eta squared = .05. Figure 3 illustrates the Latino participants' ratings on Sympathy toward the Perpetrator for male and female perpetrators.

No other significant effects were found for Latino participants.

BIDR

A significant main effect was found for perpetrator gender ($F[4, 503] = 38.86$, $p < .001$; eta squared = .24) which is consistent with previous findings. Univariate analyses indicated that participants rated the domestic abuse as more criminal when committed by a male ($M = .61$, $SD = .76$) than when committed by a female ($M = -.62$, $SD = .82$), $F(1, 506) = 137.70$, $p < .001$; eta squared = .22.

A significant main effect was also found self-deceptive enhancement ($F[8, 1006] = 2.60$, $p < .01$; eta squared = .02). Univariate analyses indicated that low “self-deceptive” participants reported lower sympathy toward the perpetrator ($M = .62$, $SD = 1.28$) than high ($M = -.32$, $SD = .58$), or normative respondents ($M = .02$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(2, 506) = 4.12$, $p < .02$; eta squared = .02. Tukey's HSD post-hoc analysis confirmed a significant difference between high and low “self deceptive enhancement” respondents, but not between “normative” respondents and either other group.

A significant interaction was found between self-deceptive enhancement and perpetrator gender ($F[8, 1006] = 2.86$, $p < .01$; eta squared = .02). Univariate analyses indicated that high “self-deceptive” participants, to a greater degree than other participants reported abuse perpetrated by males as more criminal ($M = .76$, $SD = .67$), than abused perpetrated by females ($M = -.97$, $SD = .60$), $F(2, 506) = 5.03$, $p < .02$; eta squared = .02. As

noted in figure 4, this outcome was greater for “high” respondents, compared to low or “normative” respondents, although the tendency to report male perpetrated crimes as more criminal was present to some degree for all groups.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that gender and ethnicity influence individuals' perceptions of responsibility and culpability in situations involving domestic violence. The hypothesis that participants would rate male perpetrators of violence significantly more responsible legally for the assault than female perpetrators was supported. In fact, this finding was observed among men and women across all three ethnic groups. Among the results in this study, this finding had the greatest effect size with an eta squared of 37% among European Americans, 38% among African Americans, and 40% among Latinos of the total variance in ratings of criminality. This outcome—similar to the results obtained by Feather (1996)—is striking given that the assault described in the scenario was held constant for both male and female perpetrators. If this finding were to generalize to actual domestic assault cases, the implication is that men who engage in domestic abuse can expect to be judged more harshly for their actions by police, therapists, and family members than women who commit similar assault on their husbands or boyfriends.

The second hypothesis of this study, that individuals would be more sympathetic toward perpetrators of their own gender, was not supported. This prediction was made in light of people's natural tendency to identify with individuals similar to themselves. Perhaps the identification process takes on greater significance and higher likelihood in actual settings with real people and the abstractness of the scenario used in the present study minimized that process from occurring.

An important component of this study was the investigation into whether ethnicity—either of the participants or of the couples in the domestic violence scenario—would influence

participants' perceptions and reactions to the perpetrator and victim in the scenario. Several interesting findings were observed in this regard. One, among European Americans, women were significantly more likely to rate perpetrators of domestic violence as criminal than were men. This result might suggest that among European Americans, women would be more likely to convict or harshly sentence perpetrators of domestic violence than men. This result was not observed among African American or Latino women. Perhaps social campaigns aimed at reducing domestic violence, particularly violence against women, may be more prevalent within European American communities. If that were to explain this finding, it would suggest that stronger efforts should be made to include women of diverse racial backgrounds as targets for receiving information on the seriousness and prevention of domestic violence.

Another finding related to ethnicity was that European American participants were significantly more likely to agree with the item that the perpetrator of domestic violence should forgive the spouse for being late, rather than reacting physically, if the perpetrator was African American. Stated differently, European American participants were less critical of perpetrators of violence who were European American or Latino. The reason(s) for why European American participants held African American perpetrators of abuse to a higher standard than they held European American and Latino perpetrators is puzzling. One possible explanation is that the European American participants might tacitly believe that African Americans are more aggressive than other ethnic groups, thereby causing European Americans to have been more critical of African American perpetrators of domestic abuse. Regardless of the actual reason for this finding, it is likely that African Americans involved in domestic disputes involving physical altercations will be perceived and treated more negatively by those having to work with them either in therapeutic or legal contexts.

The last finding from this study regarding ethnicity was that, among Latino participants, more sympathy was shown toward female perpetrators of domestic violence than male perpetrators. Researchers specializing in the **a variety of Latino cultures, including Mexican,**

Cuban and Puerto-Rican, have described the patriarchal nature of many Latino families in which double-standards exist for men and women (Casas, Wagenheim, Banchero, & Mendoza-Romero, 1995; Diaz-Guerrero, 1986). It is possible that violence perpetrated by females is perceived by some Latinos as a viable means for women to gain some control in an otherwise imbalanced conjugal relationship that favors husbands. Consequently, violence perpetrated by women may come to be seen as understandable and possibly even rationalized as having been the man's fault.

Regarding the impact of social desirability on perceptions of culpability, it was found that individuals who demonstrate "low" social desirability were more likely to sympathize with the perpetrator while those with "high" social desirability were more likely to conform to stereotypes regarding respective criminality of male and female perpetrators of domestic violence. Specifically, high social desirability responders were likely to rate male perpetrators as criminal than female perpetrators to a greater degree than were "low" or "normative" responders. These results suggest that perceptions of culpability in regards to domestic violence may respond to the "social desirability" of the context and that individual response styles may indeed affect perceptions of domestic violence. These results suggest that an entire arena of individual differences, including but not limited to, gender role attitudes, antisocial tendencies, or religiosity may contribute to perceptions of domestic violence.

General Discussion

Some researchers have suggested that, if a gender bias exists, it is created by social and power differentials that exist between males and females (Feather, 1996). Yet in the current study, the motives of the perpetrator, the behaviors engaged in, the context of the behaviors and the outcomes in terms of physical injury were held constant. Thus, the bias demonstrated by

participants in the study reflect an unquestionable gender-based bias rather than a rational analysis of the facts of the case.

It is important to note that the results of this study are by no means intended to detract from the seriousness of the risk of domestic violence toward women. A number of research studies have highlighted the particular risk which women may face to their physical health as a result of domestic violence (e.g. Koss & Hoffman, 2000; Krauss & Krauss, 1995, Ferraro, 1989). This body of research continues to suggest that women are at higher risk of exposure to and injury by domestic violence than are men. Although some researchers (e.g. Straus, 1993) contend that the extent to which men are injured by their female partners is vastly underreported, it remains likely that women are at more physical risk from domestic violence than are men, due primarily to the greater upper-body strength possessed by males. However, given that it may be that females equalize this upper body strength through the use of weaponry, the lack of research attention on male victims of domestic violence, as well as potential bias in both official government and some independent research methodology leaves this issue an open question. Similarly though some researchers contend that men are less psychologically traumatized by domestic violence than are women (e.g. Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), the absolute absence of research into this area renders this issue a matter of opinion rather than based on empiricism. Self-reported victimization and reports of trauma by men may be particularly compromised by gender-based biases as those observed among the present sample of participants. That is, men may be more reluctant to report being assaulted by a woman or to seek medical care due to such an assault knowing the social bias against them with which they will be faced.

Further, irrespective of the effects of domestic violence on male victims, violence perpetrated by females is likely to contribute to a cycle of violence in which they themselves may ultimately be injured (Straus, 1993). For example, it has been noted that in the majority of relationships in which domestic violence occurs, both partners are abusing each other (McNeely

& Robinson-Simpson, 1987). Despite that some researchers suggest that such behavior is due to “self-defense,” (e.g. Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992) it seems reasonable that addressing family violence should entail reducing violent behaviors in all individuals involved. One must also consider that individuals who become embroiled in a cycle of violence may generalize violent behavior toward other members of the family. As such both partners in a violent relationship may begin to use violence as a parenting tool. Though women may be at greater risk than men for physical injury in a violent home, children may be even more at risk. In support of this concern is a body of literature suggesting that young children, and infants in particular, are most at risk of fatal violence as a result of physically abusive mothers (Crittenden & Craig, 1990; Lowenstein, 1997; Overpeck, Brenner, Trumble, Trifeletti, & Berendes, 1998).

One limitation of the present study is the question of external validity. Despite having a manipulation check and taking into consideration responding to the questionnaire in a socially desirable manner, the extent to which attitudes expressed in an analog scenario transfer to real-world settings remains in question. The second limitation about the generalizability of these results is related to having university students as the participants. The beliefs and attitudes held by university students may differ significantly from those who are not college educated or who have been out of college for some time. As such, the findings obtained from this study may not reflect what might be observed among non-university student populations. **Lastly, the borderline reliability of some of the factor scales is an important consideration in interpreting results with those factors.**

Summary and Conclusion

In this study, it was found that participants perceived perpetration of domestic assault significantly more criminal when committed by a man than when the assault is committed by a woman. That finding was robust across European Americans, African Americans, and Latinos and was expressed by both genders. European American women—unlike their African American

and Latino counterparts—indicated significantly more than European American men that physical abuse in domestic situations is criminal. Also, European American participants expressed more criticism toward African American perpetrators of assault than they did toward European American and Latino perpetrators of the exact offense, suggestive of racial bias consistent with social stereotypes about African Americans being excessively aggressive. Finally, Latino participants expressed more sympathy toward women who assault their husbands than toward assaulting husbands.

The findings reported herein underscore how individuals can harbor biases toward those experiencing domestic violence with respect to gender and ethnicity. It is hoped that this study contributes to the literature on domestic violence by highlighting the biased nature of perceptions of violence and by generating more discussion on how society might reduce biases when interfacing with individuals involved in domestic disputes. Obviously, such biases likely exist in legal settings (e.g., among jurors), but also are likely to be found among clinicians, counselors, and social workers whose approach to treatment can be compromised by their gender or racial biases.

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Author Note

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Appendix 1

Domestic Violence Questionnaire (Latino Female Version)

Linda and David are a married, Latino couple who live in a suburb of Orlando. One evening her husband does not come home directly after work as he usually does. Linda becomes increasingly upset as the hours pass. When David comes home around 10pm, she confronts him and demands to know why he did not call to say he would be late. Her husband stated that he was out with friends and lost track of time. Linda becomes very angry and begins to yell and scream. David tells her that she is overreacting and attempts to walk out of the room. Linda grabs him by the arm and strikes him in the face with her fist, leaving a sizable bruise.

- 1) To what extent do you believe Linda is responsible for hitting her husband?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

- 2) To what extent do you believe David is responsible for having been hit by his wife?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

- 3) To what extent should Linda have handled the situation differently?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

- 4) To what extent should David have chosen to handle the situation differently?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

- 5) How serious is the fact that Linda hit her husband?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very Serious

- 6) How serious is the fact that David came home late?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very Serious

- 7) Do you think Linda's behavior is criminal?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

- 8) Do you think David should press charges against her?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

9) How likely would you behave the same way as Linda if you were placed in the same situation?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

10) How likely would you behave the same way as David if you were placed in the same situation?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

11) How sympathetic do you feel toward Linda?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

12) How sympathetic do you feel toward David?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

13) Do you think Linda's behavior in hitting her husband is understandable?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

14) Do you think that David's behavior in coming home late is understandable?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

15) Do you think David should forgive Linda for having hit him?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

16) Do you think that Linda should forgive David for being late?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

17) How likely would you be to convict Linda if she were tried for assault and you were on the jury?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

18) To what extent do you believe David deserved to be hit?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

19) Do you believe that Linda should be arrested for her behavior?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

20) Do you believe that Linda should spend time in jail for her behavior?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very much so

Figure 1a) Mean Criminality Ratings Based Upon Respondent and Perpetrator Gender for White Respondents

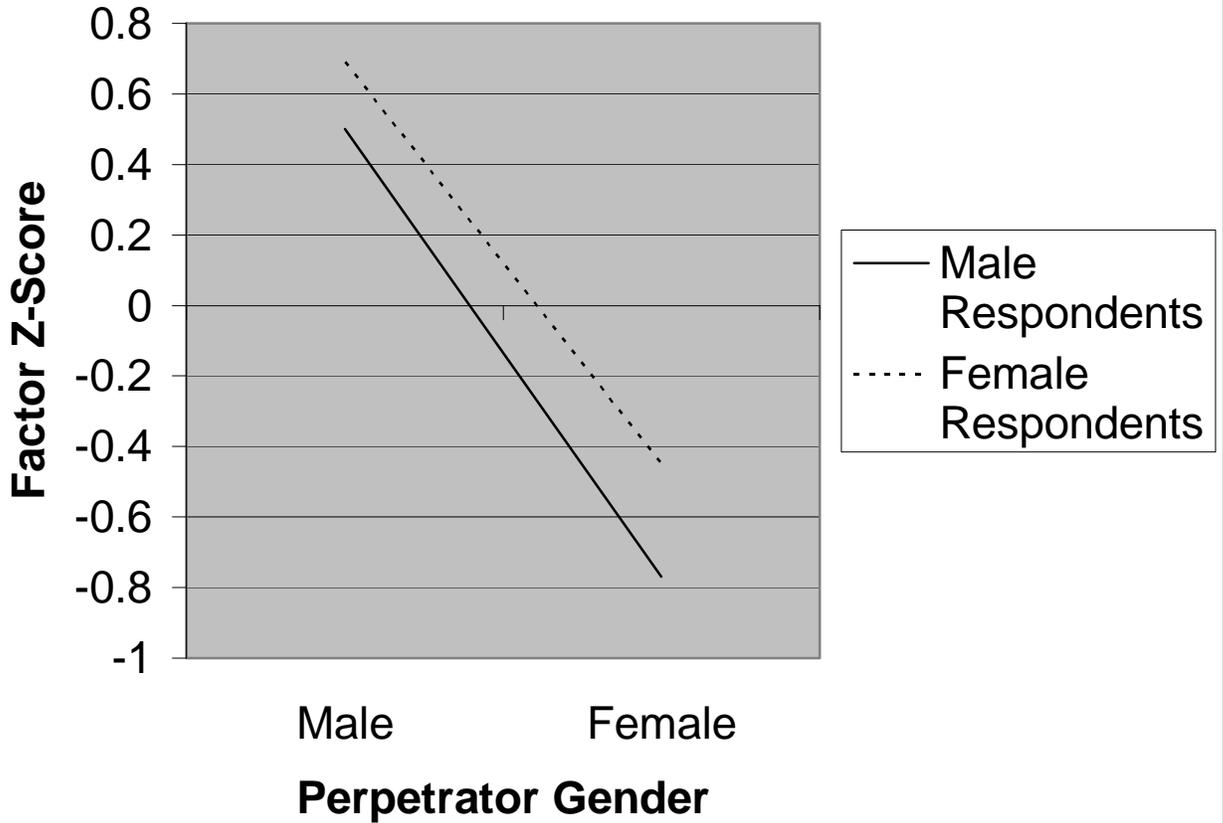


Figure 1b) Mean Criminality Ratings Based Upon Respondent and Perpetrator Gender For African American Respondents

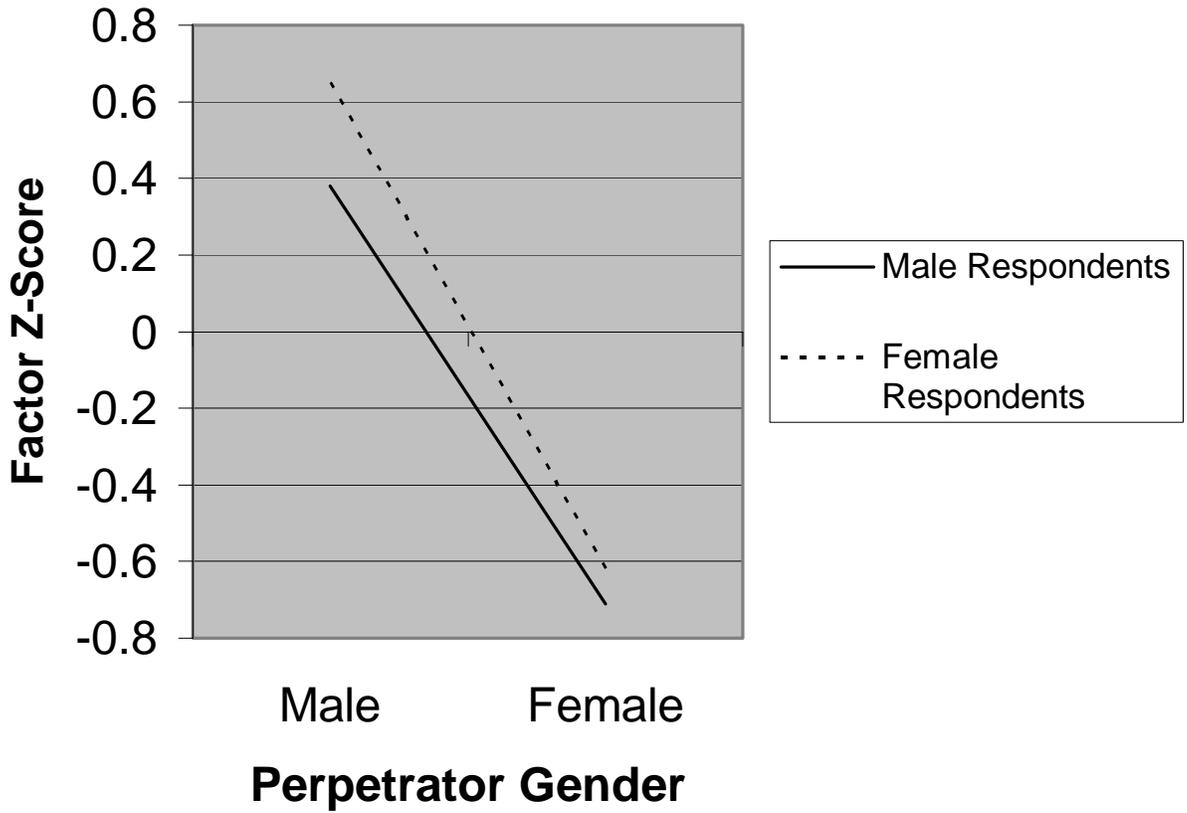


Figure 1c) Mean Criminality Ratings Based Upon Respondent and Perpetrator Gender For Hispanic Respondents

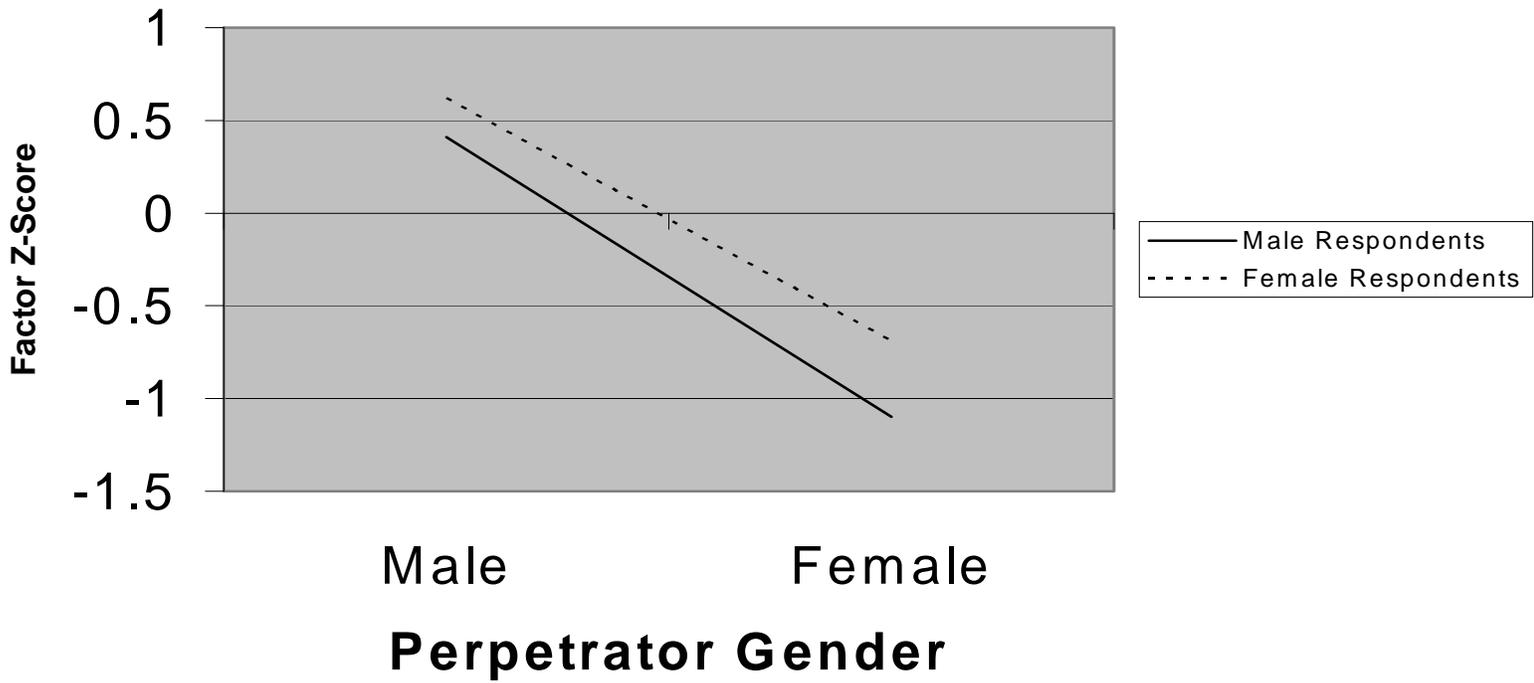


Figure 2) Perceptions of Desired Perpetrator Forgiveness Based Upon Perpetrator Ethnicity For White Respondents

