

Why do People Blame Victims of Abuse? The Role of Stereotypes of Women on Perceptions of Blame

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Abstract Stereotyping research suggests that traditional women (e.g., housewives) are seen as warm and weak, whereas nontraditional women (e.g., career women) are seen as lacking warmth but competent. We expected a nontraditional female abuse victim to be perceived as less warm than a traditional victim, and thus be blamed more in an abuse scenario. In an experiment, 118 Midwestern United States college students read a marital conflict in which the husband perpetrated high levels of psychological abuse. The victim's gender role and reaction to the abuse each were manipulated. As expected, when the victim was nontraditional or she reacted negatively to the abuse (e.g., yelled back), she was rated more negatively and blamed more due to her lack of warmth.

Keywords Victim blame · Stereotypes · Psychological abuse · Warmth · Competence · Traditional and sexist beliefs

Introduction

When people face extreme hardships, a curious phenomenon is that often they are blamed for the hardships. In the context of domestic violence, one can imagine a situation in which a woman is severely beaten, yet her family asks her what she did to cause this. Such reactions are all too common. Why do people blame victims? Theorists suggest that people blame victims in an attempt to establish control

and to make sense of otherwise discomforting events (Lerner 1980; Shaver 1985). One way to make sense of a husband beating his wife is to assume that the wife did something to elicit such treatment. In this paper we focus on the beliefs and expectations people have about the victim—that is, stereotypes about her—and how these play into the process of blaming her for her partner's abuse.

We examined stereotypes because they figure prominently in forming perceptions of others (Higgins et al. 1977). Stereotyped beliefs frequently come to mind easily, inadvertently, and without one's awareness (Devine 1989; Dovidio et al. 1986), and yet they can have direct effects on perceptions of and responses to others (Bargh et al. 1996; Kawakami et al. 2002). Despite the pervasive and automatic effects of stereotypes on perceptions of others, little is known about how stereotypes might influence tendencies to blame a victim. Victims have it hard, but things become even more difficult if they are blamed in quick, systematic ways. We specifically examined stereotypes about a traditional (e.g., housewife) versus a nontraditional woman (e.g., lawyer), and whether such stereotypes lead to blaming the nontraditional woman more for her partner's abusive behavior.

We also sought to examine victim blaming in an understudied type of abuse, namely psychological abuse. Psychological abuse involves non-physically aggressive attempts to control and dominate another person, such as belittling, severely criticizing, derogating, humiliating, and isolating from others (O'Leary 1999). Even though psychological abuse is more prevalent than other forms of partner assault (O'Leary 1999), and results in many psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, low self esteem, and post traumatic stress disorder (Arias and Pape 1999; Sackett and Saunders 1999), it is seen as less severe (Capezza and Arriaga 2008a, b), and is often

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overlooked in research. The current study examined whether a victim is blamed when a perpetrator engages in high levels of psychological abuse.

Factors that Contribute to Blaming the Victim

People often blame victims for their hardships. This has been shown in cases of rape (e.g., Simonson et al. 1999; Whatley 2005), robbery (e.g., Howard 1984), and natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes; Napier et al. 2006). What are the known factors that contribute to blaming a victim?

Event and Actor Characteristics that Influence Perceptions of Blame

Research on perceptions of rape victims suggests conditions that increase tendencies to blame a victim. A victim is blamed more when he or she is perceived as provoking a confrontation with a partner, perceived to elicit jealousy, or yells at a partner (Pavlou and Knowles 2001; Pierce and Harris 1993; Witte et al. 2006). These conditions reduce the perceived seriousness of acts against a victim. Characteristics of the victim's dress also influence perceptions of culpability. Victims of rape are blamed more or seen as more responsible for, and deserving of, the rape when they are seductively-dressed rather than plainly dressed (Whatley 2005; Workman and Freeburg 1999), they resist a rape or fight back rather than remain passive (Branscombe and Weir 1992), are intoxicated rather than sober (Schuller and Wall 1998), or possess a condom (Hynie et al. 2003).

We sought to examine something more subtle than provocation. Rather than examine something that comes before abuse (and thus might be perceived as triggering it), we examined how a wife *responds* to a husband's severe psychological abuse, whether she remains passive or instead yells and criticizes her partner. A person who responds to severe psychological abuse with yelling, criticizing, and even mild aggression (albeit less aggression than the perpetrator's) should not be blamed given that this person did not provoke the initial abuse. Yet, when she takes an active response (i.e., responds with mild aggression), her actions might be used to justify blaming her. We suggest that certain victim characteristics (e.g., engaging in mild aggression) may trigger stereotypes that, in turn, elicit increases in victim blaming.

Stereotyped beliefs are triggered repeatedly in daily perceptions of others (strangers, acquaintances, close others), including in snap judgments that people make about women (Devine 1989; Dovidio et al. 1986; Rudman and Kilianski 2000). It stands to reason that people may also make snap judgments about women who are victims of abuse. If stereotyped thinking causes more victim blaming, then victim blaming may be as quick and automatic of a

process as is stereotyping. Below we first review some general concepts and literature on gendered stereotypes and we then apply this framework to understanding stereotyped perceptions of psychological abuse victims that may increase blame toward them.

Stereotypes About Subtypes of Women

People do not see all women in the same way; they have beliefs (stereotypes) about different types of women, referred to as "subtypes." Numerous subtypes of women exist, from the housewife, to the sexy woman, to the career woman (DeWall et al. 2005). According to the stereotype content model, different stereotypes about certain subtypes of women exist along two dimensions: (1) warmth, and (2) competence (Fiske et al. 1999, 2002). For example, traditional women, such as housewives, are perceived to be high in warmth but low in competence; they are liked, but they are also characterized as someone who should be pitied and needs to be taken care of (see Fiske et al. 2002). On the other hand, a career woman is considered to be high in competence but low in warmth; she is considered to be intelligent but not very nice, and she is viewed as competition (Eckes 2002; Fiske et al. 1999).

We applied a sub-typing framework to determine whether different beliefs about women cause some to be blamed more than others for the abuse perpetrated against them. Utilizing the stereotype content framework allows us to examine the mechanism behind the tendency to blame certain women more than others. Is this due to perceptions of the victim's level of warmth or competence?

We expected that perceptions of the victim's warmth would be more prevalent when assigning blame than perceptions of the victim's competence. Research has shown that warmth has primacy over competence (Fiske et al. 2007). Warmth traits are activated more quickly, and hence are more accessible, than competence traits (e.g., Willis and Todorov 2006; Wojciszke et al. 1998). Furthermore, perceivers are more interested in identifying traits related to a target's warmth (not competence) when asked to form impressions of a target; thus, traits associated with warmth are more diagnostic in evaluations of others (Wojciszke et al. 1998). Given that warmth has been shown to be more prominent and more automatic, we expected that perceptions of the victim's warmth would lead to variations in perceptions of blame.

We examined situations in which a husband is highly psychologically abusive. Despite the fact that he is perpetrating acts against her, we expected that the victim might be blamed, in keeping with documented victim blaming tendencies. We examined, however, whether the tendency to blame her might be mitigated if she is a traditional woman (e.g., housewife), as compared with a

non-traditional woman (e.g., lawyer). Given that housewives embody the traditional communal woman (e.g., warm, kind, likable), people have more positive feelings toward them (Eagly et al. 1991). Thus, because a housewife is likable and high in warmth, we expected that she would be blamed less and perceived less negatively in an abuse context than a nontraditional woman (e.g., housewife→high warmth→less blame).

On the other hand, career women are perceived more negatively because they are perceived as lacking the communal traits associated with women (Rudman 1998). A career woman is viewed as agentic (i.e., independent, assertive and competitive), which makes her competent but not likable (Eckes 2002). Past research has shown that agentic career women are discriminated against in hiring (e.g., Rudman 1998; Rudman and Glick 1999) and others' ratings of their leadership effectiveness (Eagly et al. 1995) because they are not likable—a phenomenon coined “the backlash effect.” Discrimination of agentic women might create conditions favoring victim blaming in an abuse context.

As stated above, we expected that perceptions of the victim's warmth would be the primary factor influencing perceptions of blame. However, we also examined perceptions of the victim's competence as a potential factor. It is plausible that, because a career woman is perceived to be more competent than a housewife, perceivers may see her as having the ability and means to leave the relationship (more than the housewife victim) and consequently blame her more for not leaving. Given the more complex nature of this reasoning (e.g., career woman→high competence→ability to leave →more blame), and the evidence that warmth dimensions are activated before, and faster than, competence ratings (Wojciszke et al. 1998), we expected that warmth would be the mediating link between type of woman and victim blaming, but we also tested competence as a potential mediator.

Individual Difference Variables Associated with Perceptions of Blame

We also sought to replicate past research that examines whether certain personality traits may predispose people to blame victims. We explored traditional gender role beliefs—believing that women should be homemakers, responsible for childrearing and household chores, while men should be the “breadwinner” and in charge of finances—given that individuals with more traditional beliefs have been shown to attribute more culpability to victims of abuse (Hillier and Foddy 1993; Kristiansen and Giulietti 1990; Simonson et al. 1999; Willis et al. 1996). We also explored benevolent sexist beliefs, namely the belief that women need to be protected and cherished, as

well as blatantly negative or hostile sexist beliefs about women (Glick and Fiske 1996). Benevolent beliefs have been shown to predict victim blaming in a rape context (e.g., acquaintance rape) that is viewed as violating norms of female purity (Abrams et al. 2003; Viki and Abrams 2002). Hostile sexist beliefs have been linked to more tolerance for wife-abuse in both Turkey and Brazil (Glick et al. 2002). Do these variables also relate to perceptions of blame in a psychological abuse context?

Hypotheses

Based on the reasoning outlined above, we advanced several hypotheses. The major focus of this research was to bridge victim blaming and stereotyping research in novel ways, specifically by manipulating the victim's gender role to be traditional (a housewife) versus non-traditional (a lawyer). We also included a control condition in which no information was given about the victim's gender role. This allowed us to determine which condition was driving the effect—traditional versus nontraditional—depending on which differed from the control condition. Specifically, the control condition allowed us to determine if the traditional victim was given a boost in warmth, as expected.

In addition to perceptions of victim blame, we also examined perceptions of the victim's actions as negative. Past research has focused on victim blame, but it is also important to examine if perceptions of the victim extends to other types of attributions. To begin addressing this issue, we included perceptions of the victim's behavior as negative. This allowed us to test whether different types of attributions are made about the victim in addition to blame. Based on the above reasoning, we expected the following main effects:

Hypothesis 1: When a perpetrator engages in severe psychological abuse, a traditional woman (e.g., housewife; traditional division of household tasks) will be (a) blamed less, (b) perceived less negatively, (c) seen as warmer, and (d) seen as less competent, than a nontraditional woman (e.g., lawyer; egalitarian division of household tasks).

In addition to the main effect hypothesis, we also expected a mediational path: a traditional woman elicits more sympathy and liking as captured in the stereotype dimension of warmth, and this, in turn, is associated with less blame and negativity when compared with a nontraditional woman. That is, we suggest the following process:

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of the victim's warmth will mediate the association between the victim's gender role and perceptions of blame and negativity.

We also sought to provide a new twist on research examining victim provocation. Rather than manipulate whether the victim provokes the perpetrator, we examined whether the victim responds to the perpetrator's abuse with mild aggression, or simply remains passive. In both cases, his actions are highly abusive whereas hers do not match his level of abuse, and his high abuse comes before her response. We wanted to see whether her actions would trigger negative perceptions, despite the fact that her actions came after and were less severe than his high abuse. We reasoned that the tendency to blame abuse victims is pervasive, and it takes very little to trigger it—either manipulating the victim's gender role or actions should trigger victim blaming. Moreover, we reasoned that mild aggression on the victim's part would influence impressions of her warmth—namely seeing the victim as less warm—and this would account for perceptions of blame and negativity.

Specifically, we expected that:

Hypothesis 3: When a perpetrator engages in severe psychological abuse, a woman that responds with mild aggression will be: (a) blamed more, (b) perceived more negatively, and (c) seen as less warm, than a woman that remains passive.

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of the victim's warmth will mediate the association between the victim's response to abuse and perceptions of blame and negativity.

Finally, we sought to replicate past research showing tendencies to blame victims among those who hold traditional beliefs or sexist beliefs, none of which have been examined in a psychologically abusive conflict. Consistent with previous research, we expected the following:

Hypothesis 5: Participants will be more likely to blame a woman for her abuse and perceive her more negatively to the extent that they endorse (a) highly traditional gender role beliefs, (b) hostile sexist beliefs, and (c) benevolent sexist beliefs.

In addition to using correlations to examine how each personality trait relates to perceptions of the victim, we also used multiple regression to assess which personality trait might be most associated with negative perceptions of an abuse victim.

Method

Design and Participants

The study was a 3 (gender role: traditional, nontraditional, or not specified) \times 2 (victim's response to abuse: passive or mild aggression) between-subjects experiment. A total of

118 college students were recruited from a large university in the Midwestern United States to participate in a study on conflict in relationships in return for credit toward an introductory psychology course requirement. The sample consisted of 62 females and 56 males. The mean age was 19.5 years ($SD=1.76$), and most participants were White (85%; 7% Asian American; 3% Hispanic; 1% African American; 4% other).

Procedure

Data collection sessions were conducted in a classroom; approximately ten participants took part in each session. After signing the written consent form, participants completed a questionnaire packet that contained all study materials. Participants were randomly assigned to read a scenario depicting a marital conflict. After reading the scenario, participants completed a scale tapping specific perceptions of each spouse's behavior followed by trait ratings of each spouse. Then, they completed scales to assess individual difference variables. Finally, participants provided demographic information and answered questions about the content of the scenario that were used as manipulation checks. Sessions lasted approximately 45 minutes. At the end of the session, the experimenter debriefed and thanked participants.

Manipulation

The manipulation was modeled after the one used by Capezza and Arriaga (2008b). We deliberately used extended descriptions (approximately 1.5 single spaced pages) of the couple interaction as a way of engaging participants and facilitating their imagining a specific, meaningful situation. The hypothetical scenario in all conditions was the same, varying only in specific ways described below.

In all conditions, the scenario described a conflict situation involving a married couple, John and Sue. The gender role manipulation involved a brief description that mentioned Sue's occupation (either a homemaker, lawyer, or is not mentioned) and also the division of household tasks between John and Sue. The three manipulations are shown below:

Traditional (homemaker) condition: "Sue is a homemaker and she keeps busy doing things to their new home. Sue and John each have relatively traditional roles: Sue manages the house—cooking and cleaning, doing laundry and such things—while John takes care of financial matters, any repairs, and yard work."

Nontraditional (lawyer) condition: "Sue is a lawyer, and has a higher income than John. Sue and John equally contribute to the household chores; they evenly divide the cooking, cleaning, laundry, paying bills, repairs and yard work tasks."

Control (no occupation) condition: “John and Sue each enjoy what they do during the day. Also, Sue and John keep busy at home, doing various household tasks and chores.”

Sue recently began doing some volunteer work that took more of her time and required John to help out with some additional household chores (e.g., washing dishes), which was a source of marital tension. The volunteer work corresponded to the gender role manipulation (i.e., the traditional victim volunteered for a fashion show, the nontraditional victim volunteered for a legal convention, the control victim volunteered with disabled children). The conflict began when John failed to wash the dishes, and he began verbally abusing Sue, which led to a confrontation.

Given that in the nontraditional condition an egalitarian division of the chores is stated, it is possible that participants may have perceived Sue’s request for help to be less reasonable and fair in this condition than in the traditional condition. In order to rule out this alternative explanation, we collected data on a new sample of participants ($n=23$) to test if Sue’s request for help was seen as equally fair and reasonable in both gender role conditions. We found no significant differences on perceptions of how fair and reasonable Sue’s request for help was based on her gender role, $F(1,21)=.82, p=.375$.

In all conditions, John engaged in high levels of psychological abuse. John yelled, belittled, criticized, and threatened Sue in all conditions. The manipulation included behaviors that are listed on the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory or PMWI (Tolman 1989), which includes two subscales, an isolation/domination component (e.g., “my partner monitored my time and made me account for my whereabouts”) and an emotional/verbal component (e.g., “my partner called me names” and “my partner treated me like an inferior”). The isolation/domination aspect was captured by John asking Sue where she was going as well as having her ask him for money and demanding she bring him the change. The emotional/verbal component was captured by John yelling, cursing, and belittling Sue (e.g., “John slammed down the dishes he was holding and yelled, ‘You just don’t know when to stop, do you?!?! You go ahead and get upset, d— it! Even better, you just try leaving me!! You are such a demanding b— — no one else is ever gonna put up with you! Honestly, I don’t even know why I put up with this bull \$%#! If you can’t handle your side of the marriage bargain then have a \$% #ing happy life alone!’”); and he engaged in threatening behavior (e.g., “John rushed toward Sue, leaning over her in a menacing way, as if he were about to attack her”, “John yelled, ‘You are such a \$%#ing cry baby!!! You keep this up and I’ll really give you something to cry about!!!”).

John’s conflict behaviors remained constant across conditions, whereas Sue’s conflict behaviors varied across conditions. When the victim’s response to abuse was passive,

she calmly spoke to John (e.g., “I’m just asking for some help around here. You’re being somewhat unreasonable”). When the victim’s response to abuse was mildly aggressive, Sue yelled at John (e.g., “Her tone of voice rising, she sternly said, ‘John...John! Come on!! Lately you leave everything around here for me to do, and honestly I’m getting tired of this routine!’”), she threw something at John (“Sue grabbed a dishtowel and hurled it at him”), and she was critical of John (“I just knew you’d be this way. What is your problem? You’re being so incredibly unreasonable. How difficult is it for you to help out a little?!?! Honestly, John, most women would not put up with this!!!”).

Measure

Perceptions of the Victim’s Behavior

Two specific variables captured perceptions of the victim’s behavior: blameworthy and negative. All items assessing these perceptions employed a five-point response scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely), where higher numbers reflected more blameworthy and more negative behavior.

Three items were averaged to capture the extent to which the victim was perceived to be blameworthy and responsible for the conflict ($\alpha=.79$): how much do you blame Sue for the conflict, how responsible was Sue for the conflict, and how much of the conflict do you attribute to Sue’s actions.

Six items were averaged to capture the extent to which the victim’s behavior was perceived to be negative ($\alpha=.82$): how negative, positive (reverse coded), destructive, constructive (reverse coded), undesirable, and desirable (reverse coded) were Sue’s actions.

Perceptions of the Victim as Warm and Competent

Perceptions of Sue as warm and competent were assessed using traits based on Fiske et al. (2002). Five traits were averaged to assess Sue’s warmth ($\alpha=.78$): warm, cold (reverse coded), sensitive, sincere, and caring. Six traits were averaged to assess Sue’s competence ($\alpha=.72$): strong, weak (reverse coded), independent, competent, ambitious, and intelligent. All trait items employed a five-point response scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely), where higher numbers reflected more warmth and competence.

Traditional Gender Role Beliefs

Traditional gender role beliefs were assessed using seven items taken from two different scales. Three items assessing egalitarian gender role attitudes were taken from the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children (e.g., “It is more important for a wife to help her husband’s career than to have one herself”; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). The

remaining four items were from the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; e.g., “Women should worry less about being equal with men”; Spence et al. 1973). All items employed a 5-point response scale (1=do not agree at all, 5=agree completely) and were averaged ($\alpha=.84$), where higher numbers reflected more traditional beliefs.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI)

Both hostile and benevolent sexism were assessed using the 22 items from Glick and Fiske’s ASI scale (1996). Sample items include “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men” (hostile sexism) and “Women should be cherished and protected by men” (benevolent sexism). All items employed a 5-point response scale (1=do not agree at all, 5=agree completely) and were averaged (hostile subscale: $\alpha=.82$; benevolent subscale: $\alpha=.75$), where higher numbers reflected more hostile or benevolent beliefs.

Manipulation Checks

To assess the effectiveness of the gender role manipulation, we asked participants two questions: one was to recall and fill in a blank indicating Sue’s occupation. Responses were coded as housewife, lawyer, or no response. Participants also rated Sue on the trait traditional. The item employed a 5-point response scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely), where higher numbers reflected rating Sue as more traditional.

To assess the effectiveness of the victim’s response to abuse manipulation, we asked participants five questions: to what extent did Sue yell at, belittle, threaten, criticize, and throw something at John. All items employed a five-point response scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely), and were averaged ($\alpha=.83$), where higher numbers reflect more aggressive responses to abuse.

Results

While we did not predict any gender differences, we did include participant gender in all of our analyses to test for possible effects. Also, the two manipulations (gender role and the victim’s response to abuse) did not interact in any of the analyses, and the interaction term was not included in the results presented below.

Manipulation Checks

To test whether the gender role manipulation worked, we ran a chi-square analysis on the open-ended question regarding Sue’s occupation. The majority of participants in the traditional condition (85%) correctly indicated that

Sue was a housewife, $\chi^2=19.60$, $p<.001$; the majority of participants in the nontraditional condition (95%) correctly indicated that Sue was a lawyer, $\chi^2=30.42$, $p<.001$; the majority of participants in the control condition (82.5%) did not indicate an occupation, $\chi^2=16.90$, $p<.001$. To test for ratings of Sue as traditional, we ran a 3 (gender role) \times 2 (participant gender) ANOVA. The interaction was not significant, $F(2,111)=1.03$, $p=.362$. There was a main effect for the gender role manipulation, $F(2,113)=7.52$, $p<.001$, such that participants rated Sue significantly more traditional in the housewife condition ($M=3.13$) than in the lawyer condition ($M=2.29$), and the control condition was in the middle ($M=2.87$). There was also a main effect for participant gender, $F(1,113)=6.70$, $p=.011$, such that men rated Sue as more traditional ($M=3.03$) than women ($M=2.52$). In short, participants differentiated between the three levels of the gender role manipulation in the expected ways.

To test whether the victim’s response to abuse manipulation worked, we ran a 2 (victim’s response) \times 2 (participant gender) ANOVA. The interaction was not significant $F(1,114)=.85$, $p=.360$. There was a main effect for the victim’s response manipulation, $F(1,115)=81.09$, $p<.001$, such that participants rated Sue’s response to John’s severe psychological abuse as more aggressive when she was yelling and being critical ($M=3.31$) than when she responded passively ($M=1.99$). The main effect for participant gender was not significant, $F(1,115)=2.95$, $p=.089$. In short, participants differentiated between the two levels of the victim’s response to abuse in the expected ways.

Perceptions of the Victim’s Behavior

Across all conditions, the victim’s actions were seen as moderately negative ($M=3.26$), blameworthy ($M=2.72$), warm ($M=3.45$), and competent ($M=3.35$), on a scale from 1 to 5 (higher numbers reflect seeing the victim as more negative, blameworthy, warm, and competent).

To test the effects of the gender role and the victim’s response to abuse manipulations, we ran a MANOVA with four dependent variables (blameworthy, negative, warm, competent) and three independent variables (the gender role manipulation, the victim’s response to abuse manipulation, and participant gender). We also tested for all higher order interactions between the three independent variables. No significant interactions occurred between any of the independent variables on any of the dependent variables, all $F_s<2.11$, $p_s>.13$.

The Effect of the Victim’s Gender Role

Hypothesis 1 suggested that a traditional woman would be perceived as less blameworthy, less negative, less competent and warmer than a nontraditional woman. Results from

the MANOVA show that the effect for participant gender was not significant, $F(4,110)=1.65$, $p=.167$. Given that no main effect for participant gender was found at the multivariate level, we collapsed across gender in all further analyses. It should be noted that at the univariate level only one trend for gender emerged, such that women perceived Sue to be more competent than men. All other univariate effects for gender did not approach significance, all $F_s < .67$.

A significant multivariate main effect for the gender role manipulation was found, $F(8,222)=3.79$, $p<.001$. At the univariate level, the main effect for the gender role manipulation was significant for all four variables: blameworthy, $F(2,114)=3.26$, $p=.042$, negative, $F(2,114)=5.90$, $p=.004$, warm, $F(2,114)=4.68$, $p=.011$, and competent, $F(2,114)=3.97$, $p=.022$.

As can be seen in Table 1, and consistent with hypothesis 1, the traditional victim was perceived to be significantly less blameworthy, less negative, warmer and less competent than the nontraditional victim. The traditional victim was also perceived to be warmer and less negative than the control condition suggesting that the traditional victim received an increase in positive perceptions. The nontraditional and control conditions did not differ.

Meditation Analyses

Hypothesis 2 suggested that the relationship between the gender role manipulation and perceptions of blameworthy and negative might be mediated by perceptions of the victim's warmth. To test for this mediation, a series of regressions were conducted on participants in the traditional and nontraditional conditions.

We first examined whether the conditions for assessing mediation were met for warmth (Baron and Kenny

1986). Confirming the univariate results, the gender role manipulation (dummy coded: traditional=0, nontraditional=1) significantly predicted both blameworthy, $\beta=.40$, $t=2.58$, $p=.012$, and negative, $\beta=.48$, $t=2.75$, $p=.007$ —that is, the independent variable had a significant effect on the dependent variable. Also confirming the univariate results, the gender role manipulation had a significant effect on warmth, $\beta=-.40$, $t=-2.69$, $p=.008$ —that is, the independent variable had a significant effect on the mediating variable. As can be seen in Fig. 1, when the gender role manipulation (independent variable) and the victim's warmth (mediator) were simultaneously entered into the regression, warmth was significant for both blameworthy, $\beta=-.33$, $t=-2.86$, $p=.005$, and negative, $\beta=-.66$, $t=-5.74$, $p<.001$, but the effect of the gender role manipulation became nonsignificant (blameworthy: $\beta=.27$, $t=1.73$, $p=.087$; negative: $\beta=.22$, $t=1.44$, $p=.154$).

We next tested the significance of the indirect effect of the mediator by using the Sobel test (Baron and Kenny 1986; Sobel 1982). The Sobel test provides a direct test of the decrease in the regression coefficients for the independent variable on the dependent variable with the addition of the mediator in the model. The decrease in the coefficient for the gender role manipulation was significant according to the Sobel test for both blameworthy, $z=1.96$, $p=.049$ and negative, $z=2.46$, $p=.014$. This provides evidence consistent with a model in which perceptions of the victim's warmth mediates the link between her gender role and tendencies to find her behavior more negative and blameworthy when her partner is highly abusive.

Table 1 Mean perceptions of the victim's behavior for each level of the gender role manipulation.

	Gender roles		
	Traditional (<i>n</i> =40)	Nontraditional (<i>n</i> =38)	None (<i>n</i> =40)
Perceptions of the victim			
Blameworthy	2.51 (.71) _a	2.91 (.67) _b	2.76 (.79) _{ab}
Negative	2.95 (.81) _a	3.44 (.74) _b	3.40 (.73) _b
Warm	3.72 (.57) _a	3.32 (.72) _b	3.31 (.79) _b
Competent	3.23 (.73) _a	3.59 (.53) _b	3.26 (.57) _{ab}

Table values are mean perceptions for each level of the gender role manipulation. The means reported are combined across participant gender given that there were no significant multivariate gender effects. Standard deviations are reported in italics. A five-point response scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely) was used. Within rows, mean values with different subscripts are significantly different ($p<.05$), as indicated by results of Tukey multiple-range tests.

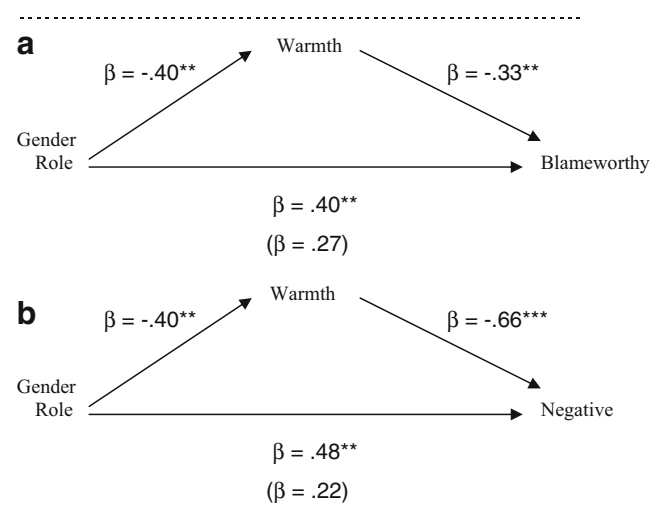


Fig. 1 Warmth mediation analysis of the association between gender role and blameworthy and negative. Parentheses represent beta coefficients when gender role and warmth are entered simultaneously in the regression. Gender role coded as traditional=0 and nontraditional=1. $**p<.01$, $***p<.001$.

In an exploratory vein, we examined support for competence as a mediator between the gender role manipulation and perceptions of blameworthy and negative. As stated above, the gender role manipulation had a significant effect on the dependent variables. Confirming the univariate results, the gender role manipulation had a significant effect on competence, $\beta=.35$, $t=2.44$, $p=.017$ —that is, the independent variable had a significant effect on the mediating variable. When the gender role manipulation (independent variable) and victim's competence (mediator) were simultaneously entered into the regression, competence was significant for both blameworthy, $\beta=.24$, $t=1.98$, $p=.051$, and negative, $\beta=.32$, $t=2.37$, $p=.021$, however, the effect of the gender role manipulation remained significant for both blameworthy, $\beta=.49$, $t=3.06$, $p=.003$ and negative $\beta=.60$, $t=3.37$, $p=.001$. The Sobel test confirms that the addition of competence did not significantly decrease the effect of the gender role manipulation (blameworthy, $z=1.54$, $p=.123$; negative, $z=1.69$, $p=.091$). Thus, competence did not mediate the link between the victim's gender role and tendencies to blame her.

The Effect of the Victim's Response to Abuse

Hypothesis 3 suggested that when the victim responds to abuse with mild aggression she would be rated less warm, more negative, and more blameworthy, compared with when she responds passively. A significant multivariate main effect for the victim's response was found, $F(4,111)=5.28$, $p<.001$. At the univariate level, the main effect was significant for blameworthy, $F(1,114)=4.48$, $p=.036$, negative, $F(1,114)=18.07$, $p<.001$, warm, $F(1,114)=6.85$, $p=.010$, but not competent, $F(1,114)=.08$, $p=.784$.

As can be seen in Table 2, consistent with hypothesis 3, the victim's behavior was perceived to be significantly less warm, more negative and more blameworthy when she responded to her partner's abuse with mild aggression than when she remained passive.

Meditation Analysis

Hypothesis 4 suggested warmth might mediate the relationship between the victim's response to abuse and perceptions of blameworthy and negative. To test for this mediation, a series of regressions were conducted.

The conditions for assessing mediation were met for warmth. Confirming the univariate results, the victim's response to abuse manipulation (dummy coded: passive=0, mild aggression=1) significantly predicted both blameworthy ($\beta=.27$, $t=2.03$, $p=.045$) and negative ($\beta=.55$, $t=4.52$, $p<.001$). Also confirming the univariate results, the victim's response to abuse manipulation had a signifi-

Table 2 Mean perceptions of the victim's behavior for each level of the victim's response to abuse manipulation.

	Victim's response to abuse	
	Passive ($n=60$)	Mild aggression ($n=58$)
Perceptions of the victim		
Blameworthy	2.59 (.75) _a	2.86 (.71) _b
Negative	2.99 (.77) _a	3.54 (.70) _b
Warm	3.61 (.71) _a	3.29 (.69) _b
Competent	3.34 (.65) _a	3.37 (.61) _a

Table values are mean perceptions for each level of the victim's response to abuse manipulation. The means reported are combined across participant gender given that there were no significant multivariate gender effects. Standard deviations are reported in italics. A 5-point response scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely) was used. Within rows, mean values with different subscripts are significantly different ($p<.05$), as indicated by results of Tukey multiple-range tests.

cant effect on warmth, $\beta=-.32$, $t=-2.50$, $p=.013$. As can be seen in Fig. 2, when the victim's response to abuse manipulation and the victim's warmth were simultaneously entered into the regression, warmth was significant for blameworthy, $\beta=-.40$, $t=-4.52$, $p<.001$, and the effect of the victim's response to abuse manipulation became nonsignificant, $\beta=.14$, $t=1.11$, $p=.269$. This decrease in the direct effect of the victim's response to abuse was significant according to the Sobel test, $z=2.15$, $p=.032$. For the other dependent variable, negative, when both warmth and the victim's response to abuse were in the regression equation, warmth was a significant predictor, $\beta=-.56$, $t=-6.78$, $p<.001$, as was the victim's response to abuse, $\beta=.37$, $t=3.10$, $p=.002$. Importantly, the decrease in the direct effect of the victim's response to abuse on negative was statistically significant based on the Sobel test, $z=2.32$, $p=.020$. This provides evidence consistent with a model in which perceptions of the victim's warmth mediates the link between the victim's response to abuse and tendencies to find her behavior blameworthy when her partner is highly abusive, and partially mediates perceptions of her actions as negative.

We did not examine Sue's competence as a mediator between the victim's response to abuse and perceptions of blameworthy and negative because one of the conditions for mediation was not met; as stated above and as shown in Table 2, the manipulation of the victim's response to abuse did not affect perceptions of competence.

Individual Difference Variables

Hypothesis 5 suggested that participants with more traditional gender role, hostile sexist, and benevolent sexist

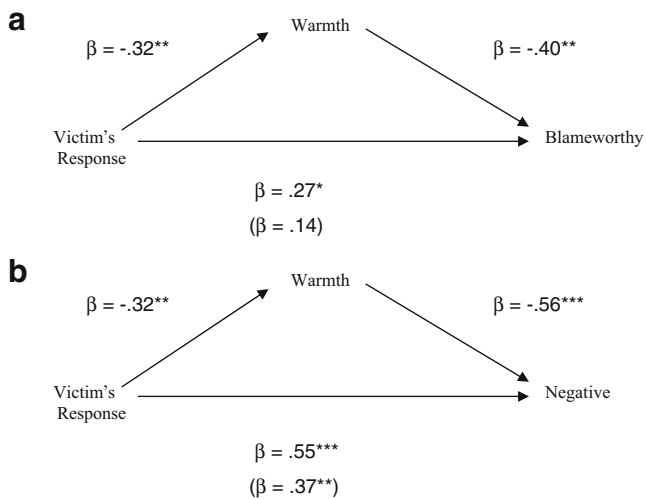


Fig. 2 Warmth mediation analysis of the association between the victim's response to abuse and blameworthy and negative. *Parentheses* represent beta coefficients when victim's response to abuse and warmth are entered simultaneously in the regression. Victim's response coded as passive=0 and mild aggression=1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

beliefs would assign more blame to the victim and perceive her more negatively. No significant interactions were found between the manipulations or participant gender and any of the individual difference variables. The three individual difference variables were significantly correlated with each other: traditional gender role beliefs and hostile sexism, $r = .61$, $p < .001$; hostile sexism and benevolent sexism, $r = .33$, $p < .001$; and traditional gender role beliefs and benevolent sexism, $r = .31$, $p < .001$.

Given the significant correlations, we next checked if these three correlated variables were too correlated to be included together in a model as predictors (i.e., whether the level of multicollinearity exceeds acceptable levels). We used variance inflation factors to measure how much the variances of the estimated regression coefficients are inflated compared to when the independent variables are not related. In each analysis that included all three individual difference variables as predictors, the variance inflation factors (VIF) were all below 1.6, far smaller than the conventional threshold of 10 at which multicollinearity may be suspected (Netter et al. 1996).

To test the association of the individual difference variables with perceptions of the victim, we first conducted simple correlations between each individual difference variable and blameworthy and negative. As shown in Table 3, the simple correlations revealed little support for hypothesis 5. Only hostile sexism was significantly correlated with negative, such that greater endorsement of hostile beliefs was associated with perceiving the victim's actions to be more negative.

Next we conducted separate multiple regression analyses for blameworthy and negative with all three

individual difference variables as predictors to assess if hostile sexism still predicted the victim's actions when traditional gender role beliefs and benevolent sexism were included in the model. Neither model was significant, blameworthy, $F(3,114) = 1.32$, $p = .270$ and negative, $F(3,114) = 2.41$, $p = .071$, suggesting that hostile sexism does not predict perceptions above and beyond the other variables. Thus, hypothesis 5 received only minimal support—namely the link between hostile beliefs and negative perceptions of the victim. Individual difference variables did not have a consistent pattern of association with perceptions of the victim, relative to the two manipulations examined.

Discussion

The three aims of this study were (1) to examine whether stereotypes about certain types of women would influence the process of blaming a victim for her husband's psychological abuse, (2) to examine whether the victim's response to her husband's abuse would trigger stereotypes that would influence the process of blaming her, and (3) to replicate the effects of perceiver characteristics on victim blaming in a psychologically abusive conflict.

Do Stereotypes About Women Influence Victim Blaming?

Given that housewives are perceived to be warmer than career women (Fiske et al. 2002), we expected that a traditional woman would be perceived as warmer, less competent, less negative, and less blameworthy than a nontraditional woman. This is precisely what we found. Additionally, we found that the lawyer victim was perceived more negatively and blamed more because she lacked warmth. Thus, she was blamed more because she was not as likable as the housewife victim. These findings extend past research that shows nontraditional women are discriminated against in the workplace (Rudman 1998;

Table 3 Correlations of traditional gender role beliefs, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism with perceptions of the victim's behavior.

	Traditional beliefs	Hostile sexism	Benevolent sexism
Perceptions of the victim			
Blameworthy	.14	.17	.11
Negative	.17	.23*	.02

Table values are correlations.

* $p < .05$.

Rudman and Glick 1999) into a new realm of discrimination, victim blaming.

This study provides new insight into the question: Why do people blame the victim? Stereotypes seem to be part of the answer. Theories suggest that victim blaming is a way people can come to grips with or make sense of an unjust event; a victim must have done something to provoke or cause this negative event to happen (e.g., Lerner 1980). For example, a person may believe that a husband abused his wife because she is cold and not a likable person and is therefore deserving of the abuse. In this way, stereotypes about a victim's lack of warmth can be used to justify why a perpetrator was abusive. Undoubtedly, such justifications have serious consequences for abuse victims. If people blame victims, rather than perpetrators, this helps to maintain a societal climate where abuse is tolerated and where women will likely fail to get much needed help and support. If victim blaming is triggered by stereotypes, as our study suggests, this provides another important reason to study techniques to reduce automatic stereotype activation (e.g., extensive practice in denouncing stereotypes; Kawakami et al. 2000) and also stereotype application or use in perceiving others (e.g., motivation to control prejudice; Devine et al. 2002).

We also extended past research examining the role that the victim's actions have on perceptions of victim blame. Past research has focused on the victim provoking the abuse, such as yelling at her partner prior to the abuse. We extended this literature by examining if the way in which the victim responds to her partner's abuse would influence perceptions of blame. We found that manipulating the victim's response to being abused does influence perceptions, such that when she engages in mild aggression, but aggression that is not nearly as severe as the perpetrator's, she is blamed more and perceived more negatively than if she remains passive. Importantly, we examined warmth as a potential mediator to explain the effect of the victim's response on victim blaming, and found strong support that warmth is an important mechanism underlying this effect. Victims that respond actively to being abused are perceived to be less warm and it is this lack of warmth that leads to increases in blame and negativity. This suggests that stereotypes about a victim's warmth may be an important factor to understanding why certain victims are blamed more than others.

We did not, however, find evidence for competence as a mediator. Even though the lawyer victim was indeed perceived to be more competent than the housewife victim, this was not the mechanism leading to variations in blame or negativity. Given that warmth is activated before competence and that warmth is more diagnostic in impression formation (Wojciszke et al. 1998), it is not surprising that warmth, not competence, was the mediating factor.

Do Individual Differences Predict Perceptions of Victim Blame?

Past research has found that certain personality traits, such as traditional and sexist beliefs, are reliable predictors for victim blaming in physical abuse and rape scenarios. We sought to replicate these findings in a psychological abuse situation. However, we found little support for this relationship. Participants with more hostile sexist beliefs perceived the victim more negatively. This finding provides some evidence that hostile sexism is associated with perceptions of the victim. Benevolent sexism was not associated with perceptions in this study. This is not surprising given that past research has only explored benevolent sexism in the context of an acquaintance rape scenario, in which aspects of purity and virtue were manipulated (e.g., Viki and Abrams 2002).

Contrary to expectations, we did not find an association between traditional gender role beliefs and perceptions of the victim. Past research shows a strong and consistent relationship between traditional gender role beliefs and perceptions of blame in rape and physical abuse scenarios. There may be something unique about a psychologically abusive conflict. Past research has shown that perceivers do not rate a psychologically abusive conflict to be as serious and unacceptable, nor are perpetrators rated as negatively, as in a physically abusive conflict (Capezza and Arriaga 2008a, b). This may be because in a physical assault or rape scenario the injuries to the victim are often salient with bruises to the body, leading perceivers to identify the injured person as the victim and typically blame the perpetrator for inflicting the injuries (e.g., Harris and Cook 1994). However, injuries are not as obvious in a psychologically abusive situation, which may lead perceivers to be less clear about which party in the conflict is more to blame. Thus, people in general may blame victims more in a psychologically abusive conflict, and individual differences may predispose certain people (e.g., individuals with more traditional beliefs) to be more likely to blame victims in a physical abuse or rape situation. More research is certainly needed to test this possibility. Another explanation is that our lack of findings is more a function of our measure. We used an explicit measure of traditional gender role beliefs which may not be as accurate today as it was in the past. As people become less willing to admit holding certain beliefs more implicit measures may yield stronger relationships (Rudman 2005). Future research should examine whether an implicit measure of traditional gender role beliefs leads to more victim blaming in a psychological abuse situation.

Finally, women and men did not differ in their perceptions of the victim in our study. The lack of gender effects in our study suggests that stereotypes about different

subgroups of women is strong and that both women and men are aware of and may rely on such stereotypes to form impressions of others.

These findings suggest that perceiver characteristics may play a more minor role in perceptions of blame compared to stereotypes about the victim. Victim blaming is not a phenomenon only prevalent in a select group of individuals, but rather given the right circumstances, anyone may blame a victim. In our study, regardless of the perceiver's beliefs, the nontraditional female victim was rated more negatively because of stereotypes about her. Stereotypes about women and how they are expected to behave are pervasive and may lead to detrimental outcomes for women that do not conform to these stereotypic expectations.

Limitations

Although this study provides important contributions to the study of stereotypes on victim blaming, it has limitations. One limitation is that in our efforts to create a “nontraditional woman”, we examined only one example of a professional woman—a lawyer—who may be less likable at the outset than other professional women (e.g., doctor). In addition, the nontraditional woman in our manipulation had a higher income than her husband. To increase the possible generalizability of these results, future research might examine other professions and hold constant across conditions income disparity. It is worth noting, however, that despite these issues, the nontraditional woman was not driving the effects for most of the dependent variables, as can be seen in the comparison of the two experimental conditions with the control condition (Table 1). Instead, the traditional victim was driving the effect on negative and warm, and both conditions were driving the effect on blameworthy and competent.

A related limitation is that we examined only two subgroups of women. Future research should explore other female subgroups, such as the athletic woman, the sexy woman, and a feminist woman to see whether variations in blame would also be based on perceptions of each group's perceived warmth. Another limitation is that only two aspects of stereotypes about women were assessed as mediators. Another potential mediator is virtue. Research has shown that virtue is an important component to the female stereotype (Dewall et al. 2005) and it has been shown to be an important factor in blame in a rape situation (Viki and Abrams 2002).

Finally, the sample of participants we obtained was a convenience sample of college students, most of whom were white. As such, these results should not be used to draw more general inferences about all young adults in the US or to the population in general. However, rates of psychological abuse are exceedingly high even in college samples, suggesting that the issues raised in this study pertain to college students as well as others (Straight et al. 2003).

Conclusions

This study has important implications for understanding the process behind victim blaming. Past research has focused on perceiver characteristics and characteristics of the victim in assessing why some people are more likely to blame victims and why some victims are more likely to be blamed. This study suggests that stereotypes play an important role in understanding why some victims are blamed more than others. We found that a victim's lack of warmth explains why nontraditional women are perceived more negatively and blamed more. Women who fail to conform to traditional expectations, either based on her occupation or on her actions, are perceived as less warm and this lack of warmth leads to more blame and negativity in a psychological abuse context. Understanding the role of stereotypes in the process of victim blaming is vital to identifying ways to counteract this harmful tendency.

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