

PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TREATMENT

The Blameworthy Victim: Domestic Violence Myths and the Criminalization of Victimhood

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Prior research shows that individual perceptions of victims play an integral role in the societal response to domestic violence, as well as victims' responses to their own victimization. However, little research has specifically examined individual perceptions of domestic violence victims who remain in abusive relationships. This study begins to fill the void in the literature by examining college students' attitudes toward battered women. Specifically, the study considers whether students adhere to common myths associated with battering and if myths lead college students to view domestic violence victims as "blameworthy." The study relies on a sample of 370 university students attending a large Southern metropolitan university. Findings indicate that students moderately support domestic violence myths and that myth promotion is associated with support for increased criminal justice penalties such as prosecution of mothers and approval of delayed police response in cases of repeat victimization. Implications for policy, theory, and practice are provided.

KEYWORDS domestic violence, domestic violence myths, intimate partner violence, public perceptions, victims

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In 2008, more than half a million females age 12 or older in the United States reported they had experienced intimate partner violence (Catalano, Smith, Snyder, & Rand, 2009). In that same year in the United States, intimate partners were responsible for committing 14% of all homicides, with 70% of intimate partner homicide victims being women (Catalano et al., 2009). Based on interviews with more than 16,000 adults living in the United States, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) established that over 35% of women and more than 28% of men surveyed reported they had been raped, physically assaulted, or stalked by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). Despite the seemingly large number of victimizations, these figures are most likely only a small fraction of the actual number of men and women suffering from violence committed by their intimate partners. Research suggests that intimate partner violence is under-reported, which ultimately influences prevalence estimates, especially those based on official reports. For instance, Catalano and colleagues (2009) report that approximately half of all intimate partner violence victimizations committed against women in 2008 were reported to the police. Further, battered women face numerous obstacles when making the decision to report abuse, and even more if they decide to leave their abuser (Catalano et al., 2009). Many of the barriers battered women encounter are associated with misperceptions of intimate partner violence that inform individual beliefs about the abuse, victim, and abuser. Societal attitudes and perceptions regarding intimate partner violence play a pivotal role in the public response to domestic violence and the victim's response to his or her own victimization (Flood & Pease, 2009; Worden & Carlson, 2005).

Many decisions made by victims of domestic violence, as well as those made by professionals working with the victim, are influenced by what Westbrook (2009) identified as information myths about intimate partner violence. Comparable to the concept of rape myth acceptance, which was advanced by Burt (1980), domestic violence information myths are misconceptions and false beliefs about intimate partner violence, victims, and abusers. Domestic violence information myths or stereotypes include the ideas that domestic violence only involves physical abuse, battered women could easily leave if they wanted to, and victims are to blame for the violence (Westbrook, 2009). Rape myth acceptance research has demonstrated that individuals who accept rape myths are more accepting of rape and these individuals are also more likely to blame victims for being victimized (Flood & Pease, 2009; Hockett, Saucier, Hoffman, Smith, & Craig, 2009; Mitchell, Angelone, Kohlberger, & Hirschman, 2009; Yamawaki, 2007). Similarly, domestic violence myths not only potentially serve to justify abuse and minimize the accounts of countless victims, but might also prevent victims from escaping their abusive situations. These myths may result in victims not seeking help because they feel they are to blame for the

violence. Further, the public may not provide assistance if they see victims as the source of the problem.

Although research has examined the source of rape myths and the consequences of these myths, fewer studies have examined factors contributing to domestic violence myths and the consequences of these myths for victims. The purpose of this study is to identify the extent to which college students adhere to myths about intimate partner violence and determine whether myth acceptance perpetuates a criminal view of victims of intimate partner violence. Identifying those factors that contribute to myth acceptance and the criminological consequences of the myths will help to determine whether myths create barriers for domestic violence victims seeking to leave abusive situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of literature examining individual attitudes toward intimate partner violence indicates that the public is increasingly supportive of legislation condemning the behavior (Carlson & Worden, 2005; Johnson & Sigler, 2000). However, one study found that at least one third of the respondents considered certain myths about domestic violence to be true and many individuals perceive victims of intimate partner violence to be responsible for their own victimization (Carlson & Worden, 2005). In particular, Carlson and Worden's study of 1,200 New York City residents revealed that one third of participants considered domestic violence to be a "normal" course of conduct. Furthermore, one in four reported that they believed some female victims want to be abused and two thirds of participants indicated that they considered female victims capable of leaving violent relationships if they truly wanted to.

One of the emerging themes in the current literature is the presence of victim-blaming attitudes with the image of a provoking victim and reactive abuser surfacing (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Haj-Yahia & Schiff, 2007; Harris & Cook, 1994). Even more troubling about the emergence of victim-blaming attitudes among members of the public is the presence of these attitudes among professionals and preprofessionals (e.g., students aspiring to occupy positions in the social services and law enforcement sectors). Research has demonstrated that law enforcement officers and social workers bring their personal attitudes and conceptions based on prior experiences into their current interactions with victims and offenders (McMullan, Carlan, & Nored, 2010). Haj-Yahia and Schiff (2007) found that undergraduate social work students overwhelmingly disapproved of acts of violence against wives and were not likely to justify wife abuse. Yet, students indicated less disapproval of a husband's violence against his wife if the wife had had sex with another

man or if the wife had abused their children. Harris and Cook (1994) also found that participants were more likely to assign responsibility for violence to the wife if she was perceived as having provoked her husband than if the wife was perceived as unprovoking. These findings suggest that participants perceived victims who “provoked” or pushed their husbands to violence to be blameworthy victims who ultimately deserved to be punished by their husbands for their offensive behavior.

Additionally, it has been well documented that gender and victim blaming are significantly related, with males being more likely to blame victims than females (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Flood & Pease, 2009; Harris & Cook, 1994; Pierce & Harris, 1993). A cross-national study found that male university students from the United States had the most favorable attitudes of intimate partner violence victims when compared to male university students from India, Japan, and Kuwait (Nayak, Byrne, Martin, & Abraham, 2003). Studies in the United States have found that the acceptance of traditional gender roles significantly influences perceptions of intimate partner violence among U.S. college students. Research indicates that individuals who adhere to traditional gender roles are more likely to physically assault their partners, as well as hold less favorable views of victims compared to individuals who do not adhere to strict gender roles (Haj-Yahia & Schiff, 2007; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009). For instance, a study of 1,580 college women and 851 college men in the United States established that the acceptance of male heterosexual violence and traditional gender roles were significantly related to the perpetration of physical violence against an intimate partner (Nabors & Jasinski, 2009). Another study found that individuals who held traditional attitudes toward women and subscribed to traditional sex-role stereotypes were more likely to believe that wives benefited from abuse (Haj-Yahia & Schiff, 2007).

Researchers have also examined how the public defines intimate partner violence and ultimately what types of behaviors they perceive to be criminal domestic violence. Overall, general population studies have indicated that the public recognizes a broad definition of domestic violence that encompasses a wide range of behaviors from verbal abuse to physical assault (Carlson & Worden, 2005; Johnson & Sigler, 1995, 2000). This would seem to indicate that the public does not support the myth that domestic violence only involves physical abuse.

Of significant concern are the definitions held by future law enforcement and social work professionals and what behaviors these individuals perceive as worthy of prosecution and intervention. In an attempt to assess the perceptions of future professionals, McMullan et al. (2010) asked 491 students aspiring to a career in law enforcement, non-law-enforcement criminal justice occupations, and social work to read scenarios depicting a violent relationship and identify what they believed was intimate partner violence, as well as which behaviors deserved to be reported to police. Similar to prior findings, female and White students were more likely to identify scenarios as

domestic violence and indicate that the behaviors should be reported to the police. However, social work students were more perceptive of intimate partner violence than both law enforcement and non-law-enforcement criminal justice students (McMullan et al., 2010).

In comparison to the previous study, Johnson, Sigler, and Crowley (1994) asked service professionals to provide their own definition of different types of family violence. Their findings indicated that social service professionals were more inclined to define spousal abuse in terms of psychological abuse as opposed to criminal justice professionals, who conceptualized spousal abuse as primarily physical violence. Another study that compared students to professionals established that professionals are less likely to see domestic violence as justified than are students (Drout, 1997). Yet, Drout (1997) also found that when professionals were compared to the students in the study, the professionals were more likely to attribute responsibility for abuse to the victim than to the abuser. These findings indicate that even though professionals carry over the definitions for intimate partner violence they might have learned while in college, their professional experience could possibly jade their perceptions of victims. It is also possible that these professionals did not participate in university courses that challenged their perceptions of victims of intimate partner violence that the college students in the comparison group might have encountered.

Whereas studies have considered how individuals hold misconceptions about domestic violence, demographic characteristics contributing to perceptions about domestic violence, and the possible ties between attitudes and aggressive behavior among potential offenders, virtually no studies have examined how misconceptions might influence victims of domestic violence. Labeling theory offers a framework from which the possible consequences of misconceptions about domestic violence victims can be best understood. Instead of focusing on the behavior itself, labeling theorists shift the focus to society and the process through which the labels of deviant and criminal are assigned to a particular behavior (Kubrin, Stucky, & Krohn, 2009). According to Lemert (1951), there are two forms of deviance: primary and secondary deviance. *Primary deviance* occurs when individuals violate a social norm without perceiving themselves as being deviant. Public labeling of the individual's behavior as deviant can result in a significant alteration of the individual's self-concept, a reduction in the availability of legitimate opportunities, and an individual's identification with deviant subcultures (Kubrin et al., 2009). *Secondary deviance* includes deviant behavior that occurs because of the labeling process and its effect on the individual's perception of self. Consider how members of the public blame victims for repeated abuse when victims do not leave abusive situations. In effect, the blaming potentially makes it even more difficult for victims to leave, as victims' lives become organized around the label of a "blameworthy victim" (see Payne & Gainey, 2009).

Traditionally, labeling theory has been applied only to criminals, but recent studies have extended the theory to understanding the application of the “victim” label (Dunn, 2010; Kenney, 2002). Prior research on intimate partner violence has primarily highlighted the extent to which individuals misunderstand the dynamics of this form of victimization and engage in victim blaming. The notion of a blameworthy victim implies that individuals view the behavior of certain victims as deviant. Prior literature suggests that victims are judged as deviant depending on their behavior prior to, during, and after their victimization (Dunn, 2010; Kenney, 2002). It is evident that a substantial portion of individuals are assessing the victim’s own behavior before attaching significant meaning to his or her experience and much of their assessment is based on common myths about abusive relationships. Carlson and Worden’s (2005) research suggests that individuals assign blame to victims because they perceive that victims invite and accept the violence they experience. According to Carlson and Worden (2005), victim blaming is linked with the belief that women can leave these relationships and victims who fail to leave their abuser are often deemed as responsible because they are perceived as consenting to the abuse. Indeed, it is plausible that if the victim was seen as provoking or did not respond to his or her abuse by leaving, then he or she is potentially deemed as a social deviant, thus responsible for his or her own victimization. An important component missing in the literature is whether individuals’ levels of myth acceptance leads them to reassign the primary identity of victims to that of deviant or criminal.

Researchers have begun to pay more attention to what is now coined victim–offender overlap. This body of research examines those victims who have criminal histories. A common explanation for histories of crime and victimization focuses on individuals’ lifestyles. It is often argued that individuals who engage in certain types of lifestyles increase their risk for both victimization and offending (Daigle, 2012). Researchers now even use the label *pure victim* to distinguish those victims who have never offended (Unnever, 2005). Lifestyles might explain some victim–offender overlap, but it is also possible that the process of labeling individuals as victims, and the assignment of blame to victims, might actually create criminal labels for victims. From our perspective, blame often arises from myths that individuals have about partner violence. Hence, myth acceptance potentially leads to blame, which results in offender labels as opposed to pure victim labels.

The extant literature has contributed substantially to understanding the public’s position on intimate partner violence and how the general public comprehends the dynamics of violent intimate relationships. The prior literature has primarily focused on individual perceptions of the victim and the abuser as these beliefs relate to culpability and responsibility for the abuse. Specifically, researchers have investigated how individuals define intimate partner violence, perceive victims and offenders, and assign blame to one party involved in a domestic dispute. However, little attention has been

devoted to examining the potential consequences for domestic violence victims that are associated with the public's acceptance of common domestic violence myths. In particular, no research has examined whether myth acceptance is related to perceptions of domestic violence victims as offenders (as opposed to victims).

This study fills this void in the literature by examining the sources of domestic violence myth acceptance and whether myth acceptance is tied to perceptions that victims should be treated as criminals rather than victims. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors influence support for intimate partner violence myths?
2. Is adherence to domestic violence myths tied to support for punishing victims?
3. Does myth acceptance perpetuate a criminal view of victims? More specifically, do students believe victims should be held liable for their victimization if they do not act appropriately according to myths?

METHOD

To address these questions, a survey instrument was administered to 370 students enrolled in general studies courses at a large Southern university. The survey instrument was divided into two sections. The first portion of the survey instrument asked respondents about basic demographic information (age, sex, year in school, etc.). Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample. The majority of the sample was female (65.4%) and single (95.4%) and participants ranged in age from 17 to 48 years old, with a mean age of 20.58 ($SD = 3.77$). Approximately 55% of the sample were non-White students, and more than 50% were employed part-time. The majority of the sample was classified as sophomores in college (34.5%).

The second portion of the instrument included a series of 10 statements. Each participant was asked to rate his or her agreement with each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*). Five of the statements were created to measure each participant's level of myth acceptance as well as general misunderstandings about victims of domestic violence. These items included statements such as "I don't believe it's that difficult for women to leave abusive relationships," and "I find it difficult to understand why battered women stay in abusive relationships." The remaining five items gauged participants' level of acceptance for different penalties for victims of domestic violence. These items go beyond assessing victim culpability by evaluating participants' inclination to criminalize victimization. These statements included punishments such as prosecuting victims for exposing their children to abuse, limiting resources for repeat victims, and taxing repeat victims to compensate for what they cost society.

TABLE 1 Sample Demographics

	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender		
Female	242	65.4%
Male	128	34.6%
Race ^a		
White	167	45.3%
Non-White	202	54.6%
Major ^a		
Criminal justice	12	3.3%
Social sciences	81	22.0%
Health sciences	34	9.2%
Hard sciences	33	9.1%
Arts and humanities	79	21.5%
Computer sciences	15	4.1%
Business	76	20.7%
Education	13	3.4%
Undeclared/undecided	25	6.8%
Year in school ^a		
Freshman	107	29.1%
Sophomore	127	34.5%
Junior	74	20.1%
Senior	60	16.3%
Employment status		
Full-time	29	7.8%
Part-time	189	51.1%
Unemployed	152	41.1%
Marital status		
Married	13	3.5%
Single	353	95.4%
Divorced/widowed	4	1.1%
	\bar{X}	<i>SD</i>
Age	20.58	3.77

^aTotals for *n* do not add to total sample size of 370 due to missing data.

A factor analysis revealed that three of the myth promotion items were loading together. Therefore, the three items “I find it difficult to understand why battered women stay,” “Women decide on their own to stay in abusive relationships,” and “I don’t believe it’s that difficult for women to leave abusive relationships” were summed to create a scale to measure the independent variable of *myth promotion* (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .640$). Four items were used to measure the dependent variables. These four items were selected because they measured distinct forms of punishment that could be imposed on victims: the reduction in social resources for repeat victims, approval of delayed police response to repeat domestic violence calls, the termination of parental rights, and the prosecution of mothers who expose their children to domestic violence.

The item “Women who stay in abusive relationships should receive fewer resources than they currently receive” was used to measure participants’ agreement with the reduction in social resources for repeat victims (reduction in social resources). The statement “It is okay for police officers to take longer to respond to a domestic violence situation in a home where they have previously counseled the victim to leave the batterer” was selected to gauge respondents’ belief that it was acceptable for police to designate repeat domestic violence calls as a low priority (delayed police response). The final punishment variables measured whether participants believed that mothers should be prosecuted for exposing their children to domestic violence (prosecution of mothers) and whether participants felt that mothers who are in abusive relationships should have their children taken away from them (termination of parental rights).

RESULTS

Participant responses to all of the 10 items concerning domestic violence myth promotion and victim punishment are presented in Table 2. The majority of the sample indicated they disagreed with myth promotion items, as well as the punishment of victims. Approximately 78% agreed that professionals shared the responsibility of helping victims leave their abuser and nearly 71% reported they did not believe that victims stayed in a violent relationship because they liked the abuser’s attention. More than 95% of respondents indicated they did not believe that women who remain in abusive relationships should be subject to higher taxes because of their increased dependence on social resources.

With regard to the variables of interest used in the analysis, the sample was inclined to disagree with the punishment of domestic violence victims. Approximately 93% of participants indicated they did not think police service priorities should be based on whether the police had previously been to the home for a prior domestic violence call and over 93% disagreed with the statement that women who stay in abusive relationships should receive fewer resources. The punishment item with the highest level of agreement was the item concerning the termination of parental rights, with almost 42% of the sample agreeing that battered women who remain with their abuser should have their children taken away. Yet, almost 80% of the sample disagreed with the criminal prosecution of mothers who expose their children to domestic violence. As for the measures used for the myth promotion scale, almost 83% of the sample indicated that believed it was difficult to dissolve a violent intimate relationship. However, the remaining items revealed that a notable proportion of the sample misunderstand domestic violence victims to a certain degree. Approximately 51% reported they believed that “women

TABLE 2 Frequencies for Punishment and Myth Measures

Measure	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I don't believe it's that difficult for women to leave abusive relationships.	2.4% (9)	14.6% (54)	43.2% (160)	39.7% (147)
Women who stay in abusive relationships should receive fewer resources than they currently receive. ^a	0.5% (2)	5.7% (21)	44.6% (165)	48.6% (180)
Women who stay in abusive relationships should be taxed higher for the costs they contribute to society. ^a	0.5% (2)	3.2% (12)	32.2% (119)	63.8% (236)
Battered women who expose their children to domestic violence should be prosecuted criminally. ^a	3.5% (13)	16.8% (62)	53.4% (197)	26.3% (97)
Women decide on their own to stay in abusive relationships.	10.8% (40)	39.7% (147)	43.0% (159)	6.5% (24)
I find it difficult to understand why battered women stay in abusive relationships.	16.8% (62)	33.8% (125)	39.5% (146)	10.0% (37)
Battered women should have their children taken away from them if they stay in an abusive relationship. ^a	9.2% (34)	32.7% (121)	47.0% (174)	10.8% (40)
On some levels, I think that battered women stay in abusive relationships because they like the attention they receive from the abuser.	1.6% (6)	27.8% (103)	38.9% (144)	31.6% (117)
It is okay for police officers to take longer to respond to a domestic violence situation in a home where they have previously counseled the victim to leave the batterer.	1.6% (6)	5.9% (22)	24.9% (92)	67.6% (250)
Professionals are partly responsible for helping women leave abusive relationships. ^a	12.2% (45)	65.7% (243)	17.6% (65)	3.0% (11)

^aTotal does not add to total sample size of 370 due to missing data.

decide on their own to stay in abusive relationships” and the same percentage indicated they found it difficult to understand why victims stay in violent relationships.

In addition to the punishment and myth promotion measures, sex, race, year in school, age, and marital status were included as control variables. A bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationships among all of the variables (see Table 3). All three of the myth measures were significantly and positively correlated with one another. Further, all three myth items demonstrated a positive and significant relationship with the

TABLE 3 Correlation Matrix

	Sex	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Race	-.121*										
2. Year in school	.038	.024									
3. Age	-.053	.104*	.483*								
4. Marital status	-.036	.050	.161**	.517**							
5. I find it difficult to understand why battered women stay	.152**	-.043	-.119*	-.046	-.056						
6. Women decide on their own to stay in abusive relationships	-.094	-.133*	-.032	.004	.096	.281**					
7. I don't believe it's that difficult for women to leave abusive relationships	-.271**	-.085	-.116*	.002	-.060	.431**	.418**				
8. Prosecution of mothers	-.106*	-.057	.004	.048	.020	.203**	.255**	.278**			
9. Reduction in resources	-.043	.007	.056	-.015	-.018	.098	.022	.051	.082		
10. Delayed police response	-.241**	.067	-.008	.048	.018	.211**	.127**	.320**	.279**	-.003	
11. Termination of parental rights	.040	.053	.041	.020	.006	.042	-.106	.033	.073	.003	.071

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

prosecution of mothers and delayed police response items. This indicates that individuals who agree with myth promotion items are more likely to agree that mothers who expose their children to domestic violence should be prosecuted compared to individuals who do not agree with myth promotion items. Furthermore, individuals who subscribe to myths and do not understand why women stay in abusive relationships are more likely to agree that it is acceptable for police to take longer to respond to repeat domestic violence calls than individuals who do not subscribe to myths and better understand why battered women stay in abusive relationships. The items measuring participants' approval of reduction in social resources and support for termination of parental rights failed to be significantly correlated with any of the variables of interest, as well as any of the control variables.

Several of the control measures exhibited significant relationships with the variables of interest. Sex was significantly and negatively correlated with the item "I find it difficult to understand why battered women stay in abusive relationships." Males were more likely to report that they found it difficult to understand why battered women remained in abusive relationships compared to females. Additionally, sex demonstrated a negative and significant relationship with the variables "I don't believe it's that difficult for women to leave abusive relationships," "Battered women who expose their children to domestic violence should be prosecuted criminally," and "It is okay for police officers to take longer to respond to a domestic violence situation in a home where they have previously counseled the victim to leave the batterer." Men were more likely to agree with all of the aforementioned items than women. Race demonstrated a significant, negative relationship with the variable "Women decide on their own to stay in abusive relationships." Non-Whites were more likely to indicate they believed that women decided on their own to maintain a relationship with their batterer than Whites. Finally, year in school was negatively and significantly associated with the items "I find it difficult to understand why battered women stay in abusive relationships" and "I don't believe it is that difficult for women to leave abusive relationships." Students at earlier stages of their college careers were more likely to agree with these items than students at an advanced stage of their college education.

Four regression models were constructed to investigate the influence of myth promotion on endorsement of punishment for domestic violence victims (see Table 4). The model analyzing the impact of myth promotion on the support for reductions in social resources was not significant ($p = .504$) and the model investigating the effects of myth promotion on support for the termination of parental rights also proved to not be significant ($p = .783$). The delayed police response model was found to be significant ($p = .000$). The myth promotion scale was significant ($p = .000$). This finding indicates that as one's level of myth promotion increases, so does one's approval of delayed police response to calls involving repeat victimization. Additionally,

TABLE 4 Regression Models

	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	Beta
Model 1: Reduction in social resources	.016	.969	
Myth promotion scale			.052
Gender			-.094
Race			-.050
Year in school			.012
Age			-.016
Marital status			-.005
Model 2: Delayed police response	.123	8.346*	
Myth promotion scale			.255*
Gender			-.177*
Race			.073
Year in school			.019
Age			.039
Marital status			.005
Model 3: Prosecution of mothers	.106	7.064*	
Myth promotion scale			.302*
Gender			-.033
Race			-.048
Year in school			-.005
Age			.086
Marital status			-.051
Model 4: Termination of parental rights	.009	.533	
Myth promotion scale			.053
Gender			.057
Race			.065
Year in school			.047
Age			-.011
Marital status			.007

*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

gender was significant within this model. Men were more likely to agree with delayed police response than women. The final model evaluated the effects of myth acceptance on the prosecution of mothers who expose their children to domestic violence. This model was significant ($p = .000$), with myth acceptance ($p = .000$) being the only significant variable within the model. Individuals who scored higher on the myth promotion scale were more likely to believe that mothers who expose their children to domestic violence should be criminally prosecuted.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the degree to which students supported domestic violence information myths and whether support for the myths was tied to support for treating domestic violence victims like criminals rather than victims by punishing them. In general, moderate support for myths existed,

with half of the sample believing that women decide on their own to stay in abusive relationships and half indicating they found it difficult to understand why women stayed in abusive relationships. Nearly a third of the sample indicated they believed women stayed in these relationships because they liked the attention they received from their abuser. Fewer of the respondents supported punitive responses to domestic violence, although approximately 40% believed children should be taken away from their mothers in these situations and one fifth of the respondents supported criminal prosecutions for women abused in front of their children. Interestingly, those who scored higher on the myth promotion scale were more likely to support criminal justice responses, such as criminal prosecution of victims for exposing children to domestic violence and a delayed police response for victims. Myth promotion levels were not tied to support for social service responses such as removing children from the home and reducing social services resources for victims. Collectively, these findings have implications for theory, policy, and future research.

With regard to theory, our findings provide at least partial support for an application of labeling theory to the way that misunderstanding promotes different responses and interventions for victims. Consider that myth promotion was tied to support for two “criminal justice” responses, but was not tied to support for social services responses. This suggests that myths do, in fact, promote the application of a criminal label to domestic violence victims. Note that through the use of criminal prosecutions for exposing children to domestic violence and delayed police responses to domestic violence, victims are in fact relabeled offenders and treated as offenders through criminal justice interventions (Button & Payne, 2009).

A central premise of labeling theory is that the assignment of the criminal label promotes subsequent offending by offenders. In terms of domestic violence situations, although a criminal label for victims might result in wrongdoing by the victim, it is more probable that the label promotes continued victimization. Given that a primary source of the criminalization of victimhood is myths about domestic violence, it seems plausible to suggest that myths contribute to violence at least indirectly. This suggestion has been supported in other research that identifies a link between myths and perceptions about sexual violence (Carmody & Washington, 2001). Researchers have used the phrase *cycle of violence* to describe how domestic violence occurs in stages including the honeymoon stage, tension building, and battering episode (Walker, 1979). From our perspective, Walker’s cycle of violence fails to take into account the role that responses from outsiders contribute to continued violence.

Because the criminalization of domestic violence victims is tied to myths, one might call this the mythical cycle of violence. In short, domestic violence myths promote criminal labels. Criminal labels limit effective services and responses. Ineffective services and responses, in turn, promote continued

victimization. When victims decide to contact the police at some time during the cycle, they are often blamed for not leaving the cycle earlier (Payne & Gainey, 2009). A mythical cycle of violence fits within the framework of labeling theory. At this point, we can only conjecture that such a cycle actually exists. We propose it simply as a way to understand the long-term effects of myths about domestic violence.

Four policy implications arise from our findings. First, it is important to recognize that labeling the victim as an offender sets into motion a set of responses and policies that will not help victims. Domestic violence policies should be reviewed to ensure that the policies are based on accurate information with an eye toward limiting the possibility that the policies turn victims into offenders. In doing so, efforts to promote a “victim justice system” rather than a “criminal justice system” can be achieved (Doerner & Lab, 2012). As well, the likelihood that victims will be revictimized will be reduced.

Second, the most obvious way to reduce misconceptions that professionals have about domestic violence is through continued training of human services professionals about the issue. It is particularly interesting that, although police departments across the United States have implemented mandatory arrest policies over the past two decades, few have actually implemented mandatory training policies. Training, of course, is not a panacea. However, accurate understanding about domestic violence is needed for criminal justice professionals to effectively serve domestic violence victims.

A third policy implication has to do with advocacy efforts to dispel myths about domestic violence. These efforts must be evidence-based rather than driven by emotion (Payne & Gainey, 2009). As a sensitive topic, when domestic violence is addressed a tendency exists to focus on sensational issues or exaggerated claims. Such an approach makes it more difficult to effectively educate the public about domestic violence and dispel myths that continue to exist. Using an evidence-based approach to advocate for domestic violence victims and dispel myths about domestic violence will serve to reduce misconceptions about domestic violence.

Fourth, more courses on violence against women should be offered in colleges and universities across the United States. Research by Danis (2003) and Danis and Lockhart (2003) shows that human services professionals take very few college courses on family violence. University courses have the capacity to expose students to the experiences of victims and the reality of domestic violence. Research in middle and high school settings shows that programs on dating violence can change attitudes about violence (MacGowan, 1997; Weisz & Black, 2010). According to Craig (1999), exposing students to the experiences of victims through class readings forces students to acknowledge that violence exists and is highly biased toward certain individuals. Many students have never confronted this reality and it often leads them to acknowledge and sometimes challenge their own biases.

Currier and Carlson (2009) found that courses specifically addressing violence against women had a significant impact on students' attitudes toward rape victims.

It is not just college course work that can address intimate partner violence. Several studies have established that early college experiences have a substantial impact on individual perceptions of violence against women and students at a later stage in their college career are more likely to hold favorable views of victims (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Haj-Yahia & Schiff, 2007; McMullan et al., 2010; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009). These experiences can transform attitudes in either a positive or a negative direction. Nabors and Jasinski (2009) discovered that males' acceptance of violence against women increased between their first and second years of college and suggested that early college experiences shape male students' attitudes toward violence against women.

Our research is not without limitations. First, we focused on only a handful of myths and responses to victims. It is plausible that other types of myths might promote different levels of support for treating victims as offenders. Second, our analysis focused on support for specific types of responses rather than the actual use of these responses. Respondents might indicate they support a certain response, but it does not necessarily mean that those respondents would actually utilize those responses if they were actually in a situation involving a domestic violence victim. Finally, using a student sample raises questions about the generalizability of the findings. Note, however, that student samples are routinely used in criminological studies assessing the ties between attitudes and violence (Payne & Chappell, 2008). Also, studies of college students are no less valuable because it is important to understand the perceptions and attitudes of college student populations, not only because student opinions often reflect the general public's beliefs, but also because this population is at a high risk for intimate partner violence.

Estimates of intimate partner violence among college populations vary, but prior research indicates that college students commit and experience intimate partner violence at alarmingly high rates. Straus (2004) examined the prevalence of intimate partner violence at 31 universities in 16 different countries and discovered rates of physical intimate partner perpetration ranging from 17% to 45%. A later study conducted by Gover, Kaukinen, and Fox (2008) utilizing data from 2,541 college students found that 29% of subjects had committed violence against their intimate partner and 22% had been the victims of intimate partner violence in the year prior to the study. In general, research indicates that approximately 30% of college students engage in some sort of physical violence against their intimate partners (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Gover et al., 2008; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Straus, 2004). This means that college students "know something" about intimate partner violence.

A number of questions arise for future research. For example, researchers should examine whether criminal justice practices are specifically tied to myths that professionals hold about domestic violence. For example, research shows that more women have been arrested for domestic violence as a result of mandatory arrest policies (Payne & Gainey, 2009). Miller (2001) cited estimates that suggest that the percentage of women arrested in California for domestic violence more than tripled (from 5% to 17%) after the implementation of mandatory arrest policies. Other states showed dramatic increases as well. It is important to question, however, whether these increases were actually the result of the policies or the result of law enforcement professionals deciding to respond a certain way based on myths they held about domestic violence.

Future research should also explore whether a mythical cycle of violence exists. From our perspective, it appears possible that misunderstanding about domestic violence serves to promote continued violence. Does misunderstanding among criminal justice professionals promote future domestic violence? Do certain types of criminal justice professionals have different levels of misunderstanding about domestic violence? What strategies are effective in reducing domestic violence information myths among criminal justice professionals? Addressing these sorts of questions will help to place criminal justice professionals in a better position to break the cycle of violence. In a similar way, researchers should also explore whether adherence to domestic violence myths by offenders and victims is tied to intimate partner violence. Just as researchers have examined how rape myths contribute to sexual assault, researchers should explore how domestic violence myths influence individuals' decisions to be violent toward their partners. Determining how domestic violence myths influence individual behavior will provide insight into effective ways to prevent and intervene in domestic violence cases.

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