



# MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES OF ACTORS INVOLVED IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CULPABILITY ATTRIBUTIONS

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**ABSTRACT.** *Stereotypes exist about actors involved in domestic violence, particularly women of color. It has been suggested that Black women are more aggressive and accustomed to violence than White women. Moreover, victim resistance, marital status, and perceiver's sex have all been found to influence perceptions of domestic violence culpability. Since the 1970s, when domestic violence was acknowledged as a social problem, researchers have examined how the lay person's perceptions of battered women and their batterers are influenced by extralegal factors. Although research on perceptions of domestic violence when White women and men are involved has increased dramatically in recent years, there is a dearth of research on perceptions of such violence when women and men of color are participants. The available findings on the influence of stereotypical notions concerning victims and batterers upon perceptions of domestic violence are examined. This review will provide the available evidence and suggest research areas where information is needed to more fully address the needs of people of color in understanding their own victimization and how actors in the legal system can guard against biased responding. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd*

HISTORICALLY, MEN WERE permitted to use moderate physical punishment to control their wives without fear of legal sanctions (Browne, 1987; Hutchings, 1988), and the Judeo-Christian ethic instructed men to physically chastise their wives as it remanded women to the authority of their husbands (Hutchings, 1988). However, since the early 1970s, substantial public attention has been given to domestic violence that has resulted in many changes concerning domestic violence policies, as is exemplified by the 47 states and the District of Columbia, which now allow or mandate warrantless, probable cause arrests for domestic assaults (Bachman & Coker, 1995). Nonetheless, domestic violence is still very prevalent in the United States, and it is estimated that 3–4 million females

are battered each year in the United States by an intimate male (Russo, Koss, & Goodman, 1995). In addition, one in four wives is physically battered sometime during her marriage (Hampton & Coner-Edwards, 1993; Russo et al., 1995), and 20 to 30% of all annual emergency department visits are made by battered women (Hampton & Coner-Edwards, 1993; Hatty, 1987; Krauss & Krauss, 1995). Moreover, women are six times more likely than men to be assaulted by an intimate partner (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995).

As a response to these disturbing statistics, many diverse agencies and organizations are struggling to develop methods to understand and eliminate domestic violence, as well as programs that address the current needs of domestic violence victims. However, if domestic violence is to be curtailed in the United States the myths and stereotypes concerning the actors of such violence need to be identified and dispelled. Therefore, the purpose of this review is to provide a brief overview of the literature concerning such myths and stereotypes, and their effects upon domestic violence actors, particularly for people of color.

Although domestic violence is no longer legally sanctioned in the United States, endorsement of negative myths and stereotypes concerning battered women continues to prevail in our culture (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1993; Dodge & Greene, 1991; Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Jenkins & Davidson, 1990; Walker, 1979). Recent research investigating the content of the battered woman stereotype indicates that battered women are perceived by many to be helpless, vulnerable, ashamed, weak, passive, dependent, unassertive, depressed, defenseless, and predominately White (Harrison & Willis Esqueda, 1997). Likewise, myths surrounding battered women include the notions that battered women are masochistic and crazy (Walker, 1979) or at least emotionally disturbed (Ewing & Aubrey, 1987). In addition, battered women are often perceived as willfully choosing abusive partners and as willfully remaining in abusive situations (Ferraro, 1989). Correspondingly, battered women are also often believed to be partially responsible for their victimization or to have provoked the battering incident in some manner (Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Hart, 1993; Walker, 1979). Finally, battered women are considered to be less attractive and less likable than non-battered women (Yarmey & Kruschenske, 1995) as if their victimization places a shroud of repugnance upon them.

One possible explanation of the prevalence of negative attributions toward battered women is that these attributions are differentially influenced by the traits and behaviors of battered women, inasmuch as battered women are expected to look and behave in a certain manner if they are to be accorded victim status. However, victims who do not fulfill stereotypical assumptions of what constitutes a "proper" battered woman may be categorized not as victims, but as accomplices to domestic violence. This notion is supported by research that indicates that stereotype-based expectations influence perceptual processing of social information (Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987; Devine, 1989; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hamilton & Trolie, 1986). Therefore, biased attributions of battered women may be generated if individual battered women differ from the perceiver's expectancies of how battered women should look like and behave (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1993; Dodge & Greene, 1991; Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Jenkins & Davidson, 1990; Walker, 1979). Furthermore, stereotypical notions of battered women may combine with various destructive myths concerning battered women, such as they are responsible for their victimization. This may result in the denial of equitable treatment for some victims of domestic assaults.

A discussion of the myths concerning battered women must address the notion that these victims are partially responsible for the abuse they suffer (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1993; Dodge & Greene, 1991; Ewing & Aubrey, 1987; Jenkins & Davidson, 1990; Walker, 1979). Evidence of the belief in this myth is found in an examination of the domestic violence

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