The legitimation of wife abuse among women: The impact of belief in a just world and gender identification

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ABSTRACT

Past research has found that when victims are ingroup members, observers' social identification interacts with general belief in a just world (GBJW) to predict judgments about those victims. In this correlational study ($N = 284$ women, ages from 18 to 80) we aimed to test whether and how women's explicit endorsement of BJW, both personal belief in a just world (PBJW) and GBJW, interacts with their identification as women to predict wife abuse legitimization.

We predicted and found that the interaction between PBJW and social identification predicted legitimization of wife abuse. Specifically, for highly identified women, PBJW was positively associated with wife abuse legitimization, for less identified women, PBJW was not associated with wife abuse legitimization. This interaction was significant above and beyond other variables associated with this phenomenon: hostile and benevolent sexism, empathy (cognitive and emotional), and social desirability. On the contrary, the interaction between GBJW and social identification was a nonsignificant predictor of legitimization of wife abuse. These results contribute to reconceptualize the role of PBJW and GBJW on judgments about victims and to highlight the importance of considering the victimization situations in the social context and the social groups in which they actually occur.

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1. Introduction

Wife abuse, defined as physical and/or sexual violence against women by their male partners, is a very common problem around the globe involving severe consequences for victims, their families and society as a whole. For example, studies conducted in ten countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand and the United Republic of Tanzania) estimated that lifetime prevalence rates of physical or/and sexual partner violence varied from 15% to 71% (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006). Other studies estimated such rates as varying between 17.4% and 25.5% in the USA (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004), and between 10% and 50% in Europe (Machado & Dias, 2008). However shockingly high these figures are, most authors sustain they may be underestimations of the actual rates (Machado, Dias, & Coelho, 2010).

In most Western countries wife abuse is a crime, thus being officially illegitimate. Nevertheless very often wife abuse is given some degree of unofficial legitimation in various social interactions (for a review, see Baker, Cook, & Norris, 2003). For instance, individuals recurrently justify wife abuse by attributing it to the victims' presumed negative actions or/and their bad character. In fact, the media very often consider abused wives as ultimately responsible for both being in that situation and for putting an end to it (Berns, 1999). Furthermore, these victims may also expect these unsupportive reactions from the formal or informal systems that are supposed to help them, for instance their families, the clergy, the police, the welfare, the shelters, the justice system, the courts, the helping professionals, medical doctors and nurses, and even other women (for a review see Machado, Dias, & Coelho, 2010). Instead, these victims often meet a decrease in (or even to the absence of) social support. Given that social support is crucial for individuals' physical and psychological well-being in general, this state of affairs is especially deleterious for victims (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

In this paper our goal is to deepen our understanding of how just world and gender identification processes can contribute to explain women's judgements of wife abuse legitimation.

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2. Belief in a just world, social identification and legitimation of victimization

Many types of innocent victims face negative reactions from other people as if their suffering is fair and therefore legitimate (e.g., Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Just world theory (e.g., Lerner, 1980) has offered an explanation for this surprising and apparently perverse phenomenon. According to this theory, individuals legitimize the suffering of innocent victims in order to preserve their illusory but fundamental perception that the world is a just place where everyone gets what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). This may be accomplished through various ways, such as derogating and/or blaming the victim. By so doing, individuals are able to have confidence in their "fundamental delusion" that unjust events will be unlikely in their lives (Lerner, 1980). This pattern tends to be more visible among individuals endorsing a higher degree of BJW, and it occurs even when the participants themselves are the victims (e.g., Choma, Hafer, Crosby, & Foster, 2012; Hafer & Olson, 1989; for a review, see Hafer & Bègue, 2005). According to just world theory, this assimilation of injustices happening to either the self (Dalbert, 2001) or to other people (Lerner, 1980) derives from the threat that innocent victimization poses to individuals' BJW. This threat should be especially felt by high believers in a just world, who thus need to defend such worldview to a higher extent than low believers.

Just world research has also found evidence that social identity and social identification are important factors explaining the threat that innocent victims pose to individuals' BJW. Sharing a common identity with the victim is a potential cause of threat to one's BJW because ingroup members are more relevant than outgroup members in indicating what may happen to the self (Aguiar, Vala, Correia, & Pereira, 2008; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Novak & Lerner, 1968). This finding is in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to this theory when people categorize themselves as members of social groups, they define themselves in terms of their social identities rather than in terms of their unique personal characteristics. Furthermore, self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) conceptualizes social identification as readiness to categorize the self as a member of a particular group in a certain context. This categorization accentuates intragroup similarities and intergroup differences. In turn, highly (versus low) identified individuals perceive other ingroup members in a more depersonalized way and as more interchangeable entities.

Applying the aforementioned reasoning to victimization cases, if individuals know that someone from their ingroup (versus an outgroup) suffers innocently, highly (versus low) identified members are more likely to believe that the same might occur to them. In fact, Correia et al. (2012) found that the interaction of participants' explicit endorsement of BJW and their identification with the identities shared with the victims predicted derogation and psychological distancing. Specifically, the positive relationship between BJW and those judgements was significant for strongly identified participants but nonsignificant for weakly identified participants.

3. The present study

In the current study female participants judged wife abuse legitimation. Based on Correia et al.'s (2012) findings, we may expect a joint effect of BJW and social identification on wife abuse legitimization. In this research we extend on previous work by making a distinction between the general belief in a just world (GBJW; Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987) and the belief in a personal just world (PBJW; Dalbert, 1999) when examining the inter-

action of just world beliefs with social identification. According to this distinction, GBJW indicates the degree to which individuals believe that people in general get what they deserve; whilst PBJW indicates the degree to which individuals believe that they themselves get what they deserve. The literature has shown that GBJW better predicts how individuals assimilate injustices happening to other people than PBJW (e.g., Bègue & Bastounis, 2003), and that PBJW better predicts how individuals react to injustices happening to themselves than GBJW (Correia & Dalbert, 2007; Dalbert, 2001).

It is also important to notice that there is a crucial difference between the situations in Correia et al. (2012) and the one in this study. In fact, in Correia et al. (2012) the identity of the victim and the victimization cases are not necessarily related (e.g., a university student that was run over by a car). On the contrary, in the case of wife abuse there is an intrinsic relation between being a women and being victim of wife abuse: the victimization situation is more likely to affect members of the perceivers' ingroup than members of an outgroup. Therefore, in the present study we measured the predictive value of GBJW and that of PBJW on the legitimation of wife abuse. In this study we aimed to test whether and how women's explicit endorsement of BJW (both PBJW and GBJW) interacts with their identification (with being a woman) to predict legitimization of wife abuse. More specifically, we predicted that for highly identified women, BJW would be positively associated with wife abuse legitimization. For those who were less identified, we expected that BJW would not be associated with wife abuse legitimization.

Furthermore, in order to isolate these predicted effects from the effects of other significant variables in the processes of legitimization of wife abuse, we controlled for a number of relevant variables. First, we controlled for sexism as previous research has shown that this variable is a significant predictor of attitudes legitimizing wife abuse (Glick, Sakalli-Ugurlu, Ferreira, & Souza, 2002). Second, previous research suggests that empathy reduces victim blaming (Aderman, Brehm, & Katz, 1974; Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000) and we thus controlled for this variable. And finally, we also assessed and controlled for social desirability given that in such sensitive topics it is advisable to control for social desirability response bias (Saunders, Lynch, Grayson, & Linz, 1987).

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Two hundred and eighty-four female participants voluntarily participated in this study (ages between 18 and 80, $M = 35.93$, $SD = 15.47$). They held a variety of occupations/professions (students, teachers, managers, nurses, lawyers, accountants, social service professionals, commercial workers). Their highest level of education varied between 3 years of total education to holding a PhD degree ($M_{years\ of\ schooling} = 12.92$, $SD = 3.06$). About 16% had at least partially completed the 9th grade, about 32% had at least partially completed the 12th grade, and about 52% had at least received a certain amount of higher education, including BAs and MAs.

4.2. Procedure and measures

When recruiting this sample we aimed at reaching a wide range of occupations and age groups in order to reflect the nuances in perspectives in society. Therefore, partly based on Glick and Fiske (1996, Study 6), in exchange for credit for a course, university students who volunteered for this study were invited to recruit around 6 adult females from their close circles. It was explicitly mentioned that they could include family members and friends.