

## **Perceptions of Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships: Stereotypes and Gender Role Expectations**

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*In light of evidence suggesting that violence between lesbian couples is oftentimes dismissed as “mutually combative,” expectations that support this perception were examined. Participants (N = 287) evaluated a domestic violence situation within the context of a lesbian partnership. As physical appearance may be used to support gender- and heterosexist-based stereotypes relating to lesbians, participants evaluated a domestic violence incident wherein the physical appearance of both the victim and perpetrator were systematically varied. Overall, women perceived the situation as more dangerous than did men. However, among women, the plausibility of the victim’s claim, and blame assigned to the perpetrator and victim, varied as a function of the physical appearance of the couple. Implications of this research as well as future directions are discussed.*

**KEYWORDS** *lesbian, domestic violence, victim perceptions, physical appearance*

During the past two decades, the issue of domestic violence has come to be recognized as a serious social issue (Burke, Jordan, & Owen, 2002; Pitt, 2000; Seelau & Seelau, 2005). Although researchers have investigated perceptions of battered women in general, little research has examined perceptions of lesbians in violent relationships (Burke et al., 2002; Letellier, 1994;

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Seelau & Seelau, 2005). Challenging assumptions that domestic violence is primarily a heterosexual issue, studies suggest that domestic violence within lesbian relationships occurs nearly as often as it does in heterosexual relationships (Koss, 1990; Letellier, 1994; Pitt, 2000; Turell, 2000). Despite this, when compared to violence against women in heterosexual relationships, violence within lesbian relationships is less likely to be reported by victims to authorities, less likely to be prosecuted within the legal system, and generally disregarded by helping agencies as well as the general public (Connolly, Huzurbazar, & Routh-McGee, 2000; Renzetti, 1989; Turell, 2000).

The dismissal of lesbian violence may in part stem from gender-based stereotypes that situate the roles of men and women in oppositional terms and support heterosexual-based assumptions concerning intimate relationships (Balsam, 2001). How gender and heterosexist-based stereotypes impact claims of victimization advanced by lesbian victims is unclear. However, to date, little research has examined how victims of domestic violence within lesbian partnerships are perceived. In light of preexisting norms dictating appropriate female behaviors and stereotypical beliefs concerning lesbians, this study examined attributions of blame and responsibility for violence within a lesbian relationship.

## PREVALENCE

Establishing rates of lesbian domestic violence is difficult due to negative attitudes that lead to the dismissal of claims as well as differing data collection methods and operational definitions of domestic violence (Pitt & Dolan-Soto, 2001). Because domestic violence can include physical, emotional, and economic control as well as the threat of being "outed," rates reported from surveys of lesbians in the context of domestic violence vary from 9% to 60% (Bologna, Waterman, & Dawson, 1987; Brand & Kidd, 1986; Lie & Gentlewarrior, 1991; Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne & Reyes, 1991; Lockhart, White, Causby, & Isaac, 1994; Loulon, 1987; Waldner-Haugrud, Gratch, & Magruder, 1997; Wood, 1987). Further, because there is lack of acknowledgment that lesbian domestic violence does occur within relationships, in part due to a lack of reporting within the lesbian community (Turell, 2000), official reports may underrepresent the prevalence of violence within lesbian relationships.

According to the most recent statistics (Bureau of Justice, 2003) gathered from local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies as well as social service agencies, 7% of women (3.9 million) are physically abused by their partners and 37% (20.7 million) are verbally or emotionally abused (Burke et al., 2002). Considering even the lowest reported prevalence rate within lesbian relationships, lesbian battering appears to present as much of a pervasive problem as it is within heterosexual couples (e.g., Burke & Follingstad,

1999; Letellier, 1994; Pitt, 2000, Renzetti, 1989, 1999; Turell, 2000). Despite the prevalence of violence within lesbian relationships, the issue of lesbian battering is often dismissed, which may in part reflect expectations that construct “legitimate” victim status. Such expectations may stem from gender-based stereotypes concerning men and women’s roles within society.

## GENDER-BASED STEREOTYPES

Gender-based stereotypes support expectations regarding “appropriate” behavior for men and women (Hilton & von Hippel, 1990, 1996). Society constructs gender in oppositional terms: what men are, women are not, and vice versa (Renzetti, 1999). It is women’s “nature” to be passive and dependent, while men are most often described as assertive (Hegstrom & McCarl-Nielsen, 2002). Indeed, while men are socialized to be competitive, assertive, autonomous, self-confident, and to have the tendency to not express intimate feelings (Maccoby, 1990), women on the other hand, are socialized to be nurturing, warm, and emotionally expressive (Noller, 1993). Such stereotypes in turn may support expectations regarding victims of domestic violence; that is, stereotypes delineating the roles of men and women are reflected within characteristics typically ascribed to domestic violence victims and offenders. Thus, within the context of heterosexual domestic violence, women are perceived as the “legitimate” recipients of abuse and men are seen as the perpetrators (Terrance & Parisien, 2006). Gender-based stereotypes extend beyond individuals and further serve to define intimate relationships within heterosexual terms (Corley & Pollack, 1996). Specifically, intimate relationships become equated with male-female relationships (Corley & Pollack, 1996; Kite & Deaux, 1987; Storms, Stivers, Lambers, & Hill, 1981; Viss & Burn, 1992).

Interestingly, these stereotypes are inversely associated with one’s sexual orientation. While heterosexual women are described as feminine, lesbians are perceived as masculine. Because of this, beliefs about gay men and lesbians represent a special case of gender stereotypes (Storms et al., 1981, Viss & Burn, 1992). The association between one’s gender and sexual orientation can be so robust that, when it has been demonstrated to be untrue, alternate explanations for the inconsistency is generated by the observer (Merrill, 1996; Perilla, Frndak, Lillard, & East, 2003; Storms et al., 1981). Further, the perceived association between gender and sexual orientation supports the contention that gender-based stereotypes support expectations that prescribe partner preference. As Ponce (1978) notes, gender and sexual partner choice are presumed to be related in a highly consistent manner such that, given one of the elements, the rest are expected to follow.

Considered within the context of lesbian partnerships, a lesbian couple would be perceived as having one masculine and one feminine partner that

adopt the dominant and submissive gender-based stereotypes, respectively, in the relationship (Peplau, 1983; Tripp, 1975). This assignment of masculine and feminine roles in a lesbian relationship is not necessarily accurate (Cardell, Finn, & Marecek, 1981; Kurdek, 1988). Indeed, lesbian couples are self-reportedly less gender-typed when compared to heterosexual couples (Cardell et al., 1981). However, observers may not have firsthand knowledge of what constitutes a lesbian couple and, therefore, rely on heterosexual-based assumptions concerning intimate relationships. The reliance on assumptions regarding homosexual relationships has implications for perceptions of domestic violence allegations within lesbian partnerships. Indeed, perceptions of what it means to be a “legitimate” victim can directly contradict the stereotype of what it means to be a lesbian.

## METHOD

### Participants

Two hundred eighty-seven undergraduate psychology students (men = 101; women = 186; self-described heterosexuals = 281, self-described homosexuals = 4, self described other = 1, no sexual orientation given = 1) were drawn from among undergraduate psychology students at a Midwestern university and ranged in age from 18 to 28 years old ( $M = 19.66$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ). Participants' ethnic and racial background was not assessed; however, they were drawn from a student body population where the majority (87%) identifies as White/non-Hispanic American. After gathering consent forms prior to the commencement of the study, no other identifying information was gathered. Participants volunteered to participate in exchange for extra course credit that was claimed by credit slip handed to the student to be redeemed in the appropriate courses. The study was conducted in accord with American Psychological Association standards on ethical treatment of participants, and institutional review board (IRB) of the University of North Dakota requirements.

### Materials

#### VIGNETTES

The scenario was adapted from the vignette used in Harris and Cooke's (1994) study. Briefly, this vignette described a situation in which the police were called to investigate a domestic disturbance between two women. Upon arriving at the location of the reported dispute, which appeared to have ended, the officers found the victim on the living room couch bleeding and with a black eye.

The alleged victim reported returning home from work later than usual. As she was late, she decided to prepare leftovers from the previous night

for dinner and then sat down to watch the news. When the alleged offender returned from home 10 minutes later to find the victim watching television, a verbal argument ensued. The victim then went into the kitchen to prepare dinner. The offender followed the victim into the kitchen, grabbed her by the arm and slapped her, knocking her to the floor, and kicked her several times. The offender subsequently left the house. Upon her return, she was informed by one of the officers that her partner was charging her with assault.

For each level of the condition, the names of the victim and offender in the vignette remain unchanged; however, the occupation of each reflected the gender characteristics as designated by the condition.

#### PHOTOGRAPHS

Participants viewed two photographs in Microsoft PowerPoint format, one of the alleged victim and one of the accused batterer. The photos, consisting of close-cropped, head shots of White/non-Hispanic women apparently taken in someone's home, were presented together, side by side, for the duration of the study. Target pictures were selected on the basis of a pilot study that combined extreme scores on an attribute measure derived from Deaux and Lewis (1983) that assessed traits (e.g., independent, emotional), roles (e.g., financial provider, takes care of home) and occupation (e.g., engineer, nurse worker, telephone operator). Attractiveness and likeability were assessed during the selection of the photographs and failed to differ. The two most extreme pictures, defined as masculine or feminine in appearance, were selected on the basis.

#### PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

Participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale with endpoints defined by the wording of the item (i.e., not serious-very serious; not violent-very violent). The 20 items on this questionnaire tapped into seven measures reflecting perceptions of the incident.

**Victim blameworthiness.** Evaluation of victim blameworthiness consisted of participants' responses on a single item, assessing the degree to which the victim should be blamed for the incident of abuse. Higher scores reflect more blame assigned to the victim.

**Accused blameworthiness.** Evaluation of the accused blameworthiness consisted of participants' responses to a single item, assessing the degree to which the accused should be blamed for the incident of abuse. Higher scores reflect more blame assigned to the accused.

**Plausibility of the claim.** Ratings of the extent to which participants perceived the incident as plausible consisted of participants' mean response on two items ( $r = .55$ ) evaluating the extent to which they perceive the

incident as probable and realistic. Higher scores reflect higher perception of the incident seen as plausible.

Dangerousness of the situation. Ratings of the extent to which participants perceived the incident as dangerous, consisted of participants' mean response on four items ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ), assessing how serious, severe, and violent the incident was and the likelihood that the respondent would have contacted the police if they themselves witnessed the incident. Higher scores reflected higher perception of dangerousness.

## Procedure

In accordance with IRB requirements, participants' informed consent was sought both verbally and in writing. Participants who consented to participate were randomly assigned to one of four domestic violence batterer-victim conditions that varied the appearance (masculine vs. feminine) of both the batterer-victim: masculine victim-feminine batterer, masculine victim-masculine batterer, feminine victim-feminine batterer, and feminine victim-masculine batterer. After reading the police report regarding a domestic violence incident, participants were provided with photos of the victim and asked to fill out the Perceptions of Violence questionnaire. When participants had completed the questionnaire, they were debriefed orally as well as in written format, thanked for their time and dismissed.

## RESULTS

### Perceptions of Violence Questionnaire

#### DANGEROUSNESS OF THE SITUATION

A 2 (Victim Appearance: Masculine vs. Feminine)  $\times$  2 (Offender Appearance: Masculine vs. Feminine)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant main effect for gender  $F(1,229) = 18.93, p < .05$ , such that women ( $M = 3.67, SD = .72$ ) rated the incident as more dangerous than men ( $M = 3.29, SD = .79$ ).

#### PLAUSIBILITY OF THE CLAIM

A 2 (Victim)  $\times$  2 (Offender)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender) ANOVA revealed a three-way interaction between victim appearance, offender appearance, and gender  $F(1, 269) = 13.12, p < .05$ . This interaction was broken down into two-way interactions between victim appearance and offender appearance as a function of gender. Only the two-way interaction for women attained significance,  $F(1, 150) = 10.29, p < .05$ .

Simple main effects of offender appearance at each level of victim appearance revealed significance for both the masculine-appearing victim,  $F(1, 150) = 6.83, p < .05$ , and the feminine-appearing victim,  $F(1, 150) = 5.68, p < .05$ . Female participants viewed the masculine-appearing victim as having a more plausible claim when the offender was depicted as feminine ( $M = 3.80, SD = .73$ ) than when the offender was depicted as masculine ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.10$ ). Conversely, female participants rated the feminine-appearing victim as having a more plausible claim when the offender was depicted as masculine ( $M = 3.93, SD = 1.03$ ) than when the offender was depicted as feminine ( $M = 3.36, SD = 1.13$ ).

#### VICTIM BLAME

A 2 (Victim Appearance)  $\times$  2 (Offender Appearance)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for victim  $F(1, 266) = 5.41, p < .05$ . The victim who appeared more feminine ( $M = .77, SD = 1.26$ ) was blamed less than the victim who was portrayed as more masculine in appearance ( $M = 1.16, SD = 1.28$ ).

#### ACCUSED BLAMEWORTHINESS

A 2 (Victim Appearance)  $\times$  2 (Offender Appearance)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender) ANOVA revealed an interaction of offender appearance by gender  $F(1, 276) = 6.23, p < .05$ . Simple main effect of offender appearance at each level of gender revealed significance only for female participants  $F(1, 181) = 4.55, p < .05$ . The feminine-appearing offender ( $M = 4.18, SD = .99$ ) was rated by female participants as more to blame than the masculine-appearing offender ( $M = 4.04, SD = 1.14$ ),  $t(154) = 1.34, p < .05$ .

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the impact of gender and heterosexist-based stereotypes within the context of domestic violence occurring within a lesbian relationship. More specifically, this study examined the extent to which the victim would be blamed for her own abuse when she was portrayed as either masculine or feminine in appearance and the degree to which these perceptions would be influenced by the masculine or feminine appearance of the offender.

Overall, results suggest that perceptions of victims of domestic violence are influenced by pervasive expectations about behaviors and characteristics (i.e., feminine) of lesbians in relationships. However, these beliefs appear to be mitigated not only by the gendered appearance of the victim and offender, but the gender of the observer as well.

In regards to level of blame, both men and women rated the feminine-appearing victim as less blameworthy than the masculine-depicted victim. This result is not surprising in light of gender-based stereotypes that support that men, and in turn, masculine individuals, are supposed to be stronger and more aggressive than women or feminine individuals (Corley & Pollack, 1996). Consequently, masculine individuals are perceived as being able to protect themselves in an attack. It could be that the masculine-appearing victim was violating this stereotype and, therefore, was perceived as more blameworthy.

One of the most consistent findings in the present study concerned the heterosexual-based assumptions that female participants seem to hold. The characterization of the victim in combination with the physical appearance of her abuser had an impact on how she was perceived. This was demonstrated most significantly when considering the plausibility of the claim. Surprisingly, the masculine victim was viewed as having a more plausible claim by women when the offender was depicted as feminine. It may be the case that female participants perceived the feminine-appearing offender as violating gender-based norms prescribing appropriate (i.e., nonaggressive) behavior for women to a greater degree than the masculine appearing offender and were thus more sympathetic to the claims advanced by the masculine victim.

At the same time, however, female participants viewed the feminine-appearing victim as having a more legitimate claim when the offender was depicted as masculine. Again, as gender-based stereotypes characterize intimate relationships in heterosexist terms, such that the passive role is assigned to the women and the aggressive role is assigned to men, it may be the case that this scenario was viewed by female participants as most consistent with gender-based norms. Overall, women viewed the victim as having a more legitimate claim when the offender was depicted as masculine.

Beliefs such as these serve only to reduce the legitimacy of any victim's claim of abuse in a relationship that does not fit this ideal. Additionally, it was only women endorsing this heterosexist ideology in regard to lesbian relationships. Indeed, men failed to differ on claims of victimization despite the gender depiction of the victim or the offender. In comparison to women, men rated all claims as less plausible and less dangerous. This suggests a dismissal of claims and a perception of the abuse as mutual combat. Future research examining the impact of adherence to gender-role ideology would be helpful in terms of delineating the impact of attitudes toward women and perceptions of violence within lesbian relationships.

Finally, victim and offender appearance were not the only contributing factors and perceptions of lesbian domestic violence. Gender also played an important role in the degree to which the offender was blamed for the incident. Specifically, female participants blamed the feminine depicted



offender more for the incident than the masculine depicted offender. Blaming the feminine appearing offender more may be again, due to the fact that she was perceived as violating the traditional gender-based expectations for women in general (i.e., by being aggressive). Indeed, previous research has found that women who are seen as aggressive are liked less and, therefore, blamed more for the abuse (Terrance & Parisien, 2006). Women may be especially sensitive to this belief and may resort to other justifications for the abuse when perpetrated by a characteristically feminine offender as opposed to a masculine offender. Among women, it may be that the justification for a masculine offender is that she is already perceived as aggressive and dominant. For a feminine-appearing offender, that justification does not work and, therefore, there must be something about the offender that makes her more blameworthy.

The perceived level of danger in this domestic violence scenario also varied as a function of participant gender. Female participants tended to rate the incident as more dangerous than male participants. This may in part be due to the more prevalent threat that women face in regards to becoming a victim of domestic violence (Pitt, 2000). It may be the case that, for women, the plight of the battered woman is more salient, whereas, the perceived threat of being a battered man is more remote. It may be then that women rate domestic violence as more serious irrespective of the appearance of the victim or offender.

Further exploration of factors that influence victim blame and perceptions of lesbian domestic violence would be helpful. A future study could evaluate participants' preexisting stereotypes of lesbians and beliefs about appropriate gender roles within a relationship. An additional direction for future research would be exploration of the perceptions of lesbian domestic violence within a community of gay and lesbian people. Although this study's participant pool consisted of mostly self-identified heterosexuals, it would be beneficial to study the community in which this violence occurs, the implication being that often times lesbians will seek out other lesbians and gay-friendly organizations for help. One cannot assume that these resources would be stereotype free.

As with any research, methodological limitations should be noted. The use of photos may be a confounding variable. Although measures were employed to help reduce effects (i.e., no significant differences in rating of attractiveness), there is no doubt that individual perceptions of attractiveness can play a role in perceptions of guilt (Efran, 1974; Stewart, 1980, 1985; Darby & Jeffers, 1988). Despite that the photographs were rated independently and not within the context of a lesbian domestic violence scenario, these photographs were not identical in features common to physical attractiveness, such as symmetry. These were photographs of real women, not computer generated, and, therefore, all confounds could not be eliminated, but none were found. Additional limitations stem from the demographic

makeup of the sample. College-aged students from a predominantly White, Christian, Midwestern region limits the generalizability of these results.

These limitations notwithstanding, this study found support for the contention that gender and heterosexual-based expectations can influence the standing of a victim of lesbian domestic violence. These stereotypes may have implications for the legitimacy with which claims of domestic violence advanced by lesbians are perceived. These expectations may undermine or distort claims of domestic violence advanced by lesbians, therefore limiting the resources that may be offered to lesbian victims of domestic violence.

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