

Perceptions of Psychological Abuse: The Role of Perpetrator Gender, Victim's Response, and Sexism

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Abstract

It is commonly assumed that male abuse is more damaging than female abuse, just as it previously has been assumed that physical abuse is more harmful than psychological abuse. We sought to examine gender assumptions given that they may cause people to overlook the harm that men experience with a psychologically abusive partner. The current experiment compared perceptions of male and female perpetrators of psychological abuse, and examined whether gendered perceptions were affected by sexist beliefs or participants' own sex. The experiment also explored the effect of the victim's response to a perpetrator's abuse. College participants ($N = 195$) read a scenario depicting a hypothetical marital conflict that manipulated the sex of the perpetrator, the level of abuse (abuse or no abuse), and whether the victim did or did not respond with some aggression. In scenarios that featured abuse (relative to no-abuse conditions), a male perpetrator was consistently perceived more harshly than a female perpetrator. Participant sex and sexism did not moderate this gender-based perception. Varying the victim's response in the scenario affected perceptions more in the no-abuse condition than in the abuse condition. The findings are discussed in

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terms of robust gender assumptions and the difficulties in challenging such assumptions.

Keywords

psychological abuse, gender, perceptions, victim's response, traditional sexism, ambivalent sexism

Their covert abuse is administered in small, cunning ways over time. So, the impact is gradual, not fist-to-the-eye immediate.

—Augusten Burroughs (2013)

Demean, humiliate, control, chastise, threaten, and belittle are words that may be foreign even to someone who could be experiencing the effects of these hardships every day. People do not always recognize psychological abuse by a partner, which may include common verbal aggression (e.g., yelling, swearing), or more severe forms of emotional manipulation and intimidation (e.g., degrading, pervasive criticism and humiliation, denying needed economic resources, threatening behavior, isolation from others; Johnson, 1995). Perhaps, because psychological abuse is common (e.g., Hines & Saudino, 2003; Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009), it may not be perceived as serious (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008a). This is surprising because it can be difficult to overcome the negative effects of psychological abuse, which include depression, anxiety, and other forms of psychological distress and trauma (e.g., Arias & Pape, 1999; Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015). Individuals in relationships that involve high levels of psychological and physical abuse report greater difficulty recovering from being humiliated and denigrated than from anything else (Estefan, Coulter, & VandeWeerd, 2016; Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polck, 1990). Moreover, people who feel highly committed to their relationships tend to downplay psychological abuse by their partner (Arriaga & Capezza, 2011; Arriaga, Capezza, & Daly, 2016). We posit, however, that even people who have no connection to an aggressive partner may exhibit bias in their perceptions of psychological abuse. The current research specifically examined the gendered nature of perceptions of psychological partner abuse.

Gender issues have been prominent in understanding the nature of partner abuse, and there has been significant discussion over whether perpetration of partner abuse follows a gendered pattern (cf. Johnson, 2006; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Straus, 1999). Gender issues are also likely to figure prominently in *perceptions* of partner abuse. For example, considering the common

assumption that men are perpetrators of violence, then behavior perpetrated by a man may be perceived to be more serious than the same behavior perpetrated by a woman. Men are more likely than women to perpetrate severe forms of physical abuse, which in turn causes more severe consequences for their female partners (Black et al., 2010). When examining psychological abuse, the rates and consequences are more equivalent among men and women.

The current research examined gendered perceptions of individuals who were asked to read and rate an interaction that experimentally varied the gender of a psychologically abusive partner, and also examined whether individuals' own sexist beliefs or gender might affect their perceptions. In heterosexual relationships, it is often assumed that men are perpetrators and women are victims. If male perpetrated psychological abuse evokes more negative perceptions than the same behavior by a female perpetrator, this may cause people to be more accepting of female abuse. Given that both men and women are capable of abuse, studying the perceptions of both genders as perpetrators is vital.

Psychological Abuse Is Pervasive and Harmful

Psychological abuse is pervasive and profoundly hurtful (Follingstad et al., 1990); yet, globally, it remains less of a priority than does physical abuse (cf. Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005). In the United States and other Western countries, approximately 80% of partners report moderate levels of psychologically abusive behaviors (Hines & Saudino, 2003; Lawrence et al., 2009; Taft et al., 2006). Psychological abuse affects both males and females in intimate relationships. As reported in the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, approximately one in seven women and one in five men in the United States indicated that in the previous year a relationship partner had engaged in at least one form of verbal abuse (i.e., name calling, insulting, and humiliation; Black et al., 2010).

Furthermore, research shows that men and women experience comparable amounts of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress at low levels of psychological victimization, and women experience even more severe outcomes as the frequency of violence increases (Harned, 2001). Derrick, Testa, and Leonard (2014) found that both perpetrators and victims reported worse moods and lower relationship functioning after a psychologically abusive interaction, suggesting that this kind of abuse has negative effects for both couple members and the relationship itself. Thus, it is significant to establish a clear understanding of the perceptions of psychological abuse, as its impact is prevalent and can result in severe consequences.

Perceptions of Psychological Abuse

Much of the research on perceptions of partner abuse has examined how people judge physical forms of abuse. Past research has revealed that perceptions of physical abuse are more negative than perceptions of psychological abuse (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008a; Capezza & Arriaga, 2008c; Hammock, Richardson, Williams, & Janit, 2015). Physical abuse is more blatant and visible; thus, individuals observing a relationship conflict may more easily understand that slapping or kicking is physical abuse, whereas individuals may have more trouble identifying that a perpetrator belittling or threatening their partner is also a form of abuse. Capezza and Arriaga (2008a) surfaced this issue by discovering that when psychological abuse was accompanied by any level of physical abuse, participants did not differentiate between high and low levels of psychological abuse. The physical abuse in the scenario overwhelmed the observer and prevented the participant from distinguishing between the levels of psychological abuse. Even low levels of physical abuse were perceived to be more serious than any level of psychological abuse, including extremely severe and controlling acts of psychological abuse (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008a; Capezza & Arriaga, 2008c).

A recent study by Hammock and colleagues (2015) compared a physically abusive scenario with a psychologically abusive scenario, while also varying the sex of the perpetrator and victim. This study revealed that people not only neglect to label psychological abuse as negative or destructive but also fail to punish the psychologically abusive perpetrator. Participants perceived both male and female physical aggressors more severely than psychological aggressors, and perceived male aggressors overall more negatively than female aggressors. This suggests that society recognizes a slap to the face or a kick in the side as abuse, yet does not perceive belittling, humiliation, or inferior treatment as abusive.

The current research draws attention to perceptions of psychological abuse in its own right, without the need to compare it with physical abuse as was previously done (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008a; Capezza & Arriaga, 2008c; Hammock et al., 2015). We sought to examine only psychological abuse to see how a conflict involving psychological abuse is perceived compared with a conflict without psychological abuse. Focusing our attention on conflicts that only involve psychological abuse is crucial in light of research revealing the damaging effects of psychological abuse in its own right (Arriaga & Schkeryantz, 2015; Follingstad et al., 1990; Lawrence et al., 2009). The following prediction was tested:

Hypothesis 1: A conflict situation in which psychological abuse occurs will be perceived more harshly (i.e., negatively and severe) than the same conflict situation without abuse (main effect for level of abuse).

Gendered Nature of Perceptions

Gender of the Perpetrator and Victim

Existing research on gendered perceptions has primarily examined physical abuse (e.g., Bastow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2007; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). For example, in a study by Sorenson and Taylor (2005), participants read vignettes that varied the gender of a perpetrator, along with other characteristics; most of the violence depicted was severe (e.g., punched with a fist, beat up). This study revealed harsher judgments of male perpetrators than female perpetrators. A few other studies have examined whether male and female perpetrators of physical abuse are perceived differently, and they similarly reveal harsher judgments of male perpetrators (Bastow et al., 2007; Hammock et al., 2015). Men are on average physically stronger than women, who, typically, have less total muscle mass, both in absolute terms and relative to total body mass (Burton, 2012). Therefore, when male perpetrators of physical abuse are compared to female perpetrators of physical abuse, there are already uneven perceptions given the biological differences that may cause more negative consequences from a male perpetrator.

The current research moved beyond perceptions of physical abuse to focus solely on psychological abuse. By removing the component of physical abuse, we sought to equalize the harm that male or female perpetrators might cause, despite assumed differences in size and strength. We expected that gendered perceptions of physical abuse are so entrenched that they would spill over to perceptions of psychological abuse and cause harsher judgments when perpetrators are male than when they are female. Perceivers may be quick to conclude that abusive behavior by a male is more harmful than abusive behavior by a female, even when the abusive behavior is psychological.

Much of the research on perceptions of psychological abuse has not varied the gender of perpetrator to assess gender-based perceptions (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008a; Capezza & Arriaga, 2008c; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Shlien-Dellinger, Huss, & Kramer, 2004). Only a couple of studies have directly compared perceptions of male and female perpetrators of psychological abuse (e.g., DeHart, Follingstad, & Fields, 2010; Hammock et al., 2015). For example, in an experimental study in which people specifically rated psychologically abusive behaviors (such as threatening, physical harm, or insisting

that the partner not speak to romantic rivals), male perpetrators were considered more abusive than female perpetrators (DeHart et al., 2010).

The current research expands the small body of research on gendered perceptions of psychological abuse in several ways. First, we sought to examine several perceptions, including not only perceptions of the perpetrator, and perceived severity of the conflict, but also perceptions that the couple would experience negative consequences in the future. This provided multidimensional perceptions with different points of focus (the perpetrator, the conflict interaction, consequences). The primary prediction regarding gendered beliefs of psychological abuse was as follows:

Hypothesis 2: A conflict situation in which psychological abuse occurs (relative to the same conflict situation without abuse) should elicit gendered perceptions: Conditions of psychological abuse will be perceived more harshly, the conflict more severe, and the future consequences for the couple more negative, when the perpetrator is male relative to a female perpetrator, whereas gendered perceptions will be attenuated under nonabusive conditions (Level of Abuse \times Perpetrator Gender interactions).

A second major goal of this research was to examine other gender factors that might diminish or amplify gendered perceptions of psychological abuse, as described in the next section.

Gendered Characteristics of the Perceiver

One factor that may affect gendered perceptions of psychological abuse is the perceiver's own gender. Past studies examining whether a person's gender affects her or his perceptions have yielded mixed results (e.g., sex differences only emerge in one or two dependent variables, but not others, Capezza & Arriaga, 2008a, or have no impact at all, Hammock et al., 2015).

Beyond self-identified gender, another perceiver factor concerns specific beliefs that may influence perceptions of psychological abuse. We examined traditional and ambivalent sexism, given the gendered nature of such beliefs. For example, a person with traditional sexist beliefs (e.g., men should be the breadwinners and women stay at home) may perceive a female perpetrator more negatively because she is acting against the traditional female role. Ambivalent sexism consists of two subcategories: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. People who are benevolently sexist support traditional female gender roles, whereas people with hostile sexist beliefs oppose women who challenge or threaten the status quo (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Research conducted by Yamawaki, Ostenson, and Brown

(2009) revealed that participants who were more ambivalently sexist had more accepting attitudes toward domestic violence in Japan and the United States. Additional research found that hostile beliefs led to more acceptance of wife abuse (Glick, Sakalli-Ugurlu, Ferreira, & de Souza, 2002). These studies did not directly assess the relationship between ambivalent sexism and perceptions of perpetrators of psychological abuse, which we addressed in the current study.

Given the mixed results regarding the perceiver's sex, and the absence of research on sexism and perceptions of psychological abuse, we advanced the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Will male and female perpetrators be perceived differently among individuals who (themselves) are female versus male?

Research Question 2: Will male and female perpetrators be perceived differently among individuals who endorse ambivalent or traditional sexist beliefs?

Boundary Condition: Perceiving a “Deserving” Victim

Partner abuse can be difficult to understand given that a loved one is being hurtful (Arriaga & Capezza, 2011). One way that people try to make sense of why a partner would be hurtful is to perceive the victim as someone who has done something to instigate or deserve the partner's abusive behavior. We tested whether an aggressive victim would be viewed as “deserving” of psychological abuse, which may absolve the perpetrator of responsibility and diminish harsh perceptions of the interaction.

Prior research has revealed that a victim is blamed more when he or she is perceived as provoking a confrontation with a partner, eliciting jealousy, or yelling at a partner (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008b; Pavlou & Knowles, 2001; Pierce & Harris, 1993; Witte, Schroeder, & Lohr, 2006). These “provoking” behaviors carry over into cases of rape, in which victims are often blamed more or seen as more responsible when they are seductively dressed (Whatley, 2005) and even when they resist a rape rather than remain passive (Branscombe & Weir, 1992). Perceiving a rape victim as more blameworthy when resisting rape is parallel to the idea of perceiving a victim more harshly when he or she actively speaks out against a psychological abuser. These conditions potentially reduce the perceived seriousness of acts toward a victim, such that some of the negative perceptions of the perpetrator may be pushed upon the actions of the victim.

We varied the victim's actions such that the victim either actively engaged in some aggression or was passive in the conflict (i.e., not aggressive). In varying the victim's response, we deliberately kept the victim's level of aggression lower than the perpetrator's aggression when the perpetrator was psychologically abusive. This allowed perceivers to differentiate a "victim" and "perpetrator." Therefore, we advance the following prediction:

Hypothesis 3: The effect of a male perpetrating psychological abuse (relative to a female perpetrator, or to nonabuse situations) will be attenuated when the victim becomes actively engaged in conflict behavior (i.e., the Level of Abuse \times Perpetrator Gender interaction hypothesized above is expected to occur only when a victim is passive, and not occur when a victim is active).

Current Research

Previous research has revealed gendered perceptions of physical abuse, whereby male perpetration is judged more harshly than female perpetration. The gender assumption driving perceptions of physical abuse may not apply to psychological abuse given that a person's size does not affect the ability to cause harm via psychological abuse. We expected, however, that even psychological abuse would cause gendered perceptions, and examined whether perceiving a victim as contributing to an abusive situation might "undo" entrenched gender beliefs about perpetrators.

Method

Design and Participants

The study was a 2 (level of abuse: no abuse, abuse) \times 2 (perpetrator gender: male, female) \times 2 (victim's response: passive, active) randomized between-subjects experiment. Participant gender and sexist beliefs were also included as measured independent variables. A total of 195 college students ($n = 113$ males, $n = 82$ females) were recruited from a large Midwestern university in the United States in 2008 and were given course credit for compensation. The mean age was 19.4 years, and most participants were White (75%, 11% Asian American, 5% Hispanic, 5% African American, 4% Other). The data have not been previously published.

Procedure

Data collection sessions were conducted in classrooms with up to 10 participants, and each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. After signing an

informed consent form, participants were given a questionnaire packet to complete. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of eight scenarios depicting a marital conflict. After reading the scenario, participants completed various scales (described in detail below) to examine specific perceptions and measure sexism. Participants completed additional measures that were beyond the scope of this article. When the session was completed, the experimenter debriefed and thanked the participants.

Manipulation

The manipulation was modeled after the one used by Capezza and Arriaga (2008a). Participants read a written hypothetical scenario (one and one-third single-space pages in length) that described a conflict between a married couple, John and Sue. The conflict was about the victim helping out his or her aging parents with their household tasks, which was resulting in less time to complete chores at his or her own home. The scenario was exactly the same in all conditions with only the names for the perpetrator and victim changing. In all conditions, both John and Sue engaged in behaviors (e.g., arguing) that often occur during marital conflicts, which provided a “baseline” conflict level across all conditions. The gender of the perpetrator was manipulated by varying John and Sue’s roles as perpetrator or victim.

The perpetrator’s level of abuse (nonabusive vs. abusive) was manipulated. In the no-abuse condition, the conflict did not escalate and remained a typical marital disagreement. One example from the scenario is,

You just don’t know when to stop, do you? Try to understand that I have a lot of my own things to take care of and I’m tired too. We had a good system for getting everything done before this, so it will just take us some time to adjust to this too.

In contrast, the perpetrator’s behavior in the psychologically abusive condition included the following:

Don’t get pissy with me—you brought this on yourself! Things were fine until you decided to spend so much time at your parent’s house. If you can’t handle it, maybe you should just stop and let your brother and sister help out more, instead of making us so f\$%#ing miserable!

In another part of the scenario the perpetrator slammed down the dishes 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 f\$%#ing happy life alone!! I oughta just put you in your place!!

The perpetrator then rushed toward the victim, leaning over him or her in a menacing way and yelled, "You are such a f\$%#ing baby!! I can't believe I married such a f\$%#ing baby, always whining about everything!!!"

The victim's response (passive vs. active) was also manipulated. In the passive condition, the victim's response remained at a baseline level. One example from the scenario is, "*Come on!! Lately you leave everything around here for me to do and honestly I'm getting tired of this routine!*"

In contrast, the victim's response in the active condition involved the victim becoming aggressive but not as aggressive as the perpetrator: He or she grabs a dishtowel, hurls it at the perpetrator and yells, "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, . . . most women/men would not put up with this!!!"

Measures

Perceptions of perpetrator's behavior as negative. Eighteen items modeled after those used by Capezza and Arriaga (2008a) assessed negative perceptions of the perpetrator's behavior in the incident (e.g., How negative were John's/Sue's actions? How much do you blame John/Sue for this incident? How unacceptable were John/Sue's actions? How abusive was John/Sue?). Participants indicated their perceptions using a five-point response scale: 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*. Items were averaged such that higher numbers reflected harsher ratings of the perpetrator's behavior ($\alpha = .92$).

Perceptions of conflict severity. Two items were averaged to indicate the perceived severity of the conflict (How severe was the conflict? How serious was the conflict? $\alpha = .69$). Participants indicated their perceptions of conflict severity using a five-point response scale: 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*.

Perceptions of negative future consequences. Future consequences were assessed by asking,

Following the incident, how likely is it that (a) the police will intervene, (b) a similar conflict will occur again, (c) John and Sue will make up (reverse

coded), (d) John and Sue will break up, and (e) John and Sue will be less satisfied with their relationship.

The five items employed a five-point response scale: 1 = *not at all likely*, 5 = *extremely likely*. The items were averaged such that higher ratings indicated perceiving more negative future consequences for the couple ($\alpha = .72$).

Sexism. Two measures of sexism were included, all using a five-point response scale: 1 = *do not agree at all*, 5 = *agree completely*. First, traditional gender role beliefs were assessed using seven items (e.g., “It is more important for a wife to help her husband’s career than to have one herself”; $\alpha = .82$), which were obtained from two separate scales (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). The items were averaged such that higher numbers reflected more sexist beliefs. On average, the mean of the participants’ traditional gender role beliefs was low ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.76$).

Second, Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) was assessed using the 22 items ($\alpha = .79$) developed by Glick and Fiske (1996). Past researchers have combined the benevolent and hostile subscales of the ASI into one measure of sexism as the subscales are positively and significantly correlated (e.g., McCarty & Kelly, 2015; Yamawaki et al., 2009). Sample items include, “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men” (Hostile Sexism Subscale) and “Women should be cherished and protected by men” (Benevolent Sexism Subscale). All 22 items were averaged such that higher numbers indicated more sexist beliefs. On average, the mean of the participants’ ambivalent sexist beliefs was moderate ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.49$).

Manipulation checks. A series of items assessed whether the various conditions had the intended effect (e.g., To what extent did John belittle Sue? To what extent did Sue criticize John?). All items used a five-point response scale: 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*. Participants in the abuse condition reported that the perpetrator (a) belittled the partner, (b) threatened the partner, (c) criticized the partner, and (d) called the partner names significantly more than in the no-abuse condition (all significant at $p < .001$).

The victim’s response manipulation also had the intended effect. Participants who were in the active victim condition reported that the victim (a) criticized the perpetrator and (b) threw something at the perpetrator more than in the passive victim condition (both significant at $p < .001$).

Results

Data Analysis Overview

The hypotheses were tested using a series of general linear models (GLMs). All models included main effects for level of abuse, perpetrator gender, victim's response, and participant sex. Within each section below, we describe the higher order interactions that were included in the model to test our hypotheses and answer our research questions. We conducted analyses on three different dependent variables: negative perceptions of the perpetrator, conflict severity, and negative future consequences.

Gendered Nature of Perceptions (Hypotheses 1 and 2)

Hypothesis 1 predicted that a situation involving psychological abuse would be perceived more harshly than a situation involving no abuse. Hypothesis 2 predicted a gender effect in the psychological abuse condition: A male perpetrator may be perceived more harshly than a female perpetrator. To test these hypotheses, we included the level of abuse, perpetrator gender, and their two-way interaction in the GLM.

Negative perceptions of perpetrator. There was a significant main effect for level of abuse. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants rated an abusive perpetrator more negatively ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.55$) than a nonabusive perpetrator ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.48$), $F(1, 187) = 209.51$, $p < .001$. There was also a main effect of perpetrator gender: John was perceived more negatively ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.75$) than was Sue ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.69$), $F(1, 187) = 10.32$, $p = .002$. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between level of abuse and perpetrator gender: $F(1, 187) = 8.86$, $p = .003$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, John as a perpetrator was perceived more negatively than Sue under conditions of abuse, whereas they were both perceived less negatively and similarly in the no-abuse condition (see Table 1).

Conflict severity. There was a significant main effect for level of abuse. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants rated the conflict as more severe when the perpetrator's actions were abusive ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.78$) versus nonabusive ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.65$), $F(1, 189) = 128.82$, $p < .001$. This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction with perpetrator gender: $F(1, 189) = 5.15$, $p = .024$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the conflict was perceived as more severe when John was the perpetrator than Sue under conditions of abuse, whereas the conflict was perceived less severe and similarly in the no-abuse condition (see Table 1). The main effect of perpetrator

Table 1. Mean Perceptions of the Perpetrator and the Conflict for Abuse Level in Relationship With Perpetrator Gender.

	Abuse Level			
	No Abuse		Abuse	
	Perpetrator Gender			
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Perceptions of perpetrator				
Negative	2.91 (0.41) _a	2.89 (0.54) _a	4.13 (0.43) _c	3.70 (0.57) _b
Perceptions of the conflict				
Severity	1.96 (0.72) _a	2.16 (0.57) _a	3.39 (0.72) _c	3.11 (0.82) _b
Negative consequences	2.34 (0.50) _a	2.54 (0.49) _{ab}	2.94 (0.63) _c	2.73 (0.60) _b *

Note. Means with different subscripts were significantly different from each other ($p < .05$).

*The difference between the male (2.94) and female (2.73) for the abuse condition was marginally significant, $p = .054$.

gender was not significant (John: $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.01$; Sue: $M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.86$), $F(1, 189) = 0.13$, $p = .718$.

Future consequences. There was a significant main effect for level of abuse. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants rated the conflict as having more negative future consequences when the perpetrator's actions were abusive ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.63$) versus nonabusive ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.50$), $F(1, 189) = 23.95$, $p < .001$. This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction with perpetrator gender: $F(1, 189) = 6.68$, $p = .010$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the conflict was perceived as having marginally more negative future consequences when John was the perpetrator than Sue under conditions of abuse, whereas the conflict was perceived as having fewer negative future consequences in the no-abuse condition (see Table 1). Additionally, when Sue was the perpetrator, perceptions of negative future consequences did not differ between the no-abuse and abuse conditions. The main effect of perpetrator gender was not significant (John: $M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.65$; Sue: $M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.56$), $F(1, 189) = 0.001$, $p = .976$.

Participant Sex and Sexism as Potential Moderators (Research Questions)

Participant sex. One research question was concerned with whether gendered perceptions of the perpetrator or conflict would vary between female and

male participants. We included all two-way interactions with participant sex in the model (e.g., level of abuse by participant sex, perpetrator gender by participant sex) as well as the three-way interaction between level of abuse, perpetrator gender, and participant sex. Across all three dependent variables (negative perceptions of the perpetrator, conflict severity, and negative future consequences), none of the two-way or three-way interactions with participant sex were significant. Examining main effects related to participant sex yielded only one significant effect for negative future consequences, such that female participants ($M = 2.74, SD = 0.58$) were more likely than male participants ($M = 2.54, SD = 0.61$) to perceive that John and Sue would experience negative future consequences, $F(1, 186) = 5.67, p = .018$.

An analysis of the first research question suggested that participant sex has very little impact on gendered perceptions in a psychological abuse scenario. Participant sex did not moderate the level of abuse by perpetrator gender interactions.

Sexist beliefs. A second research question concerned whether gendered perceptions of the perpetrator or conflict would vary among participants who endorse traditional or ambivalent sexist beliefs. We examined traditional and ambivalent sexism in separate models. Each model included all two-way interactions (e.g., level of abuse by sexism, perpetrator gender by sexism) as well as the three-way interaction between level of abuse, perpetrator gender, and sexism. Across all three dependent variables, none of the effects involving traditional sexism were significant, and none of the three-way interactions or main effects involving ambivalent sexism were significant. There was one significant two-way interaction between perpetrator gender and ambivalent sexism for negative perceptions of the perpetrator, $F(1, 182) = 4.15, p = .043$. As shown in Figure 1, participants low in ambivalent sexism perceived the male perpetrator as more negative than the female perpetrator. Participants high in ambivalent sexism rated the male and female perpetrators equally negative.

An analysis of the second research question suggested that sexism appears to have very little impact on gendered perceptions in a psychological abuse scenario. Neither traditional sexism nor ambivalent sexism moderated the level of abuse by perpetrator gender interactions.

Summary. There was strong support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. A conflict with psychological abuse was perceived as more negative, severe, and likely to result in worse consequences compared with a conflict without abuse. There was no perpetrator gender effect on perceptions under nonabusive conditions. In the abuse conditions, the male perpetrator (John) was perceived more

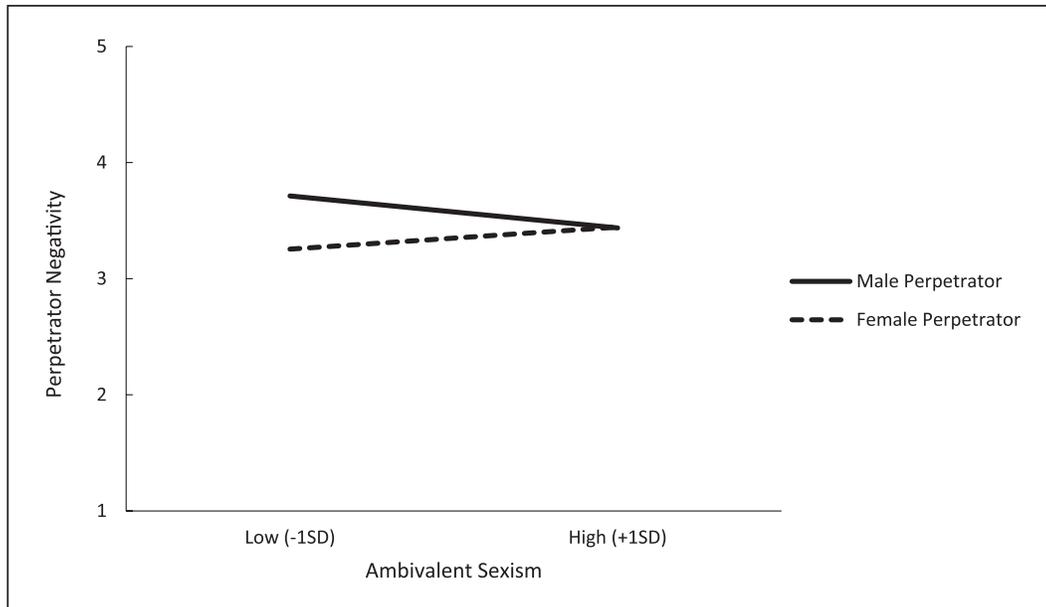


Figure 1. Participants low in ambivalent sexism perceived the male perpetrator more negatively than the female perpetrator. Whereas, participants high in ambivalent sexism rated the perpetrator equally negative regardless of perpetrator gender.

harshly than the female perpetrator (Sue). Participant sex and sexism did not moderate this effect.

The Impact of the Victim's Response (Hypothesis 3)

Hypothesis 3 predicted a boundary condition: When a victim is actively engaged in the conflict and somewhat aggressive in response rather than passive, this may eliminate harsh perceptions of a male- (vs. female-) perpetrating psychological abuse. This was tested for each dependent variable in models that included all two-way interactions between victim's response, level of abuse, and perpetrator gender as well as a three-way interaction with these variables. Across all three dependent variables, only one of the three-way interactions was significant (negative future consequences), the other three-way interactions are not included in the results below.

Negative perceptions of perpetrator. There was a significant main effect for victim's response: Overall, participants perceived the perpetrator to be more negative when the victim was passive ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.67$) versus active ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.76$), $F(1, 184) = 14.77$, $p < .001$. This main effect was qualified by two interactions.

Table 2. Mean Perceptions of the Perpetrator and the Conflict for Abuse Level in Relationship With Victim's Response.

	Abuse Level			
	No Abuse		Abuse	
	Victim's Response			
	Passive	Active	Passive	Active
Perceptions of perpetrator				
Negative	3.10 (0.45) _a	2.70 (0.43) _b	3.98 (0.55) _c	3.85 (0.55) _c
Perceptions of the conflict				
Severity	1.88 (0.58) _a	2.24 (0.68) _b	3.31 (0.72) _c	3.19 (0.85) _c
Negative consequences	2.45 (0.45) _a	2.44 (0.54) _a	2.96 (0.62) _c	2.71 (0.55) _b

Note. Means with different subscripts were significantly different from each other ($p < .05$).

There was a significant interaction between victim's response and perpetrator gender, $F(1, 184) = 6.86, p = .010$. When Sue was the perpetrator, she was rated less harshly if John was active ($M = 3.07, SD = 0.69$) than if John was passive ($M = 3.51, SD = 0.63$). In contrast, perceptions of John were not attenuated when Sue was active; instead, he was rated equally harshly as a perpetrator, regardless of the victim's response (active: $M = 3.48, SD = 0.78$; and passive: $M = 3.56, SD = 0.71$).

There was also a significant two-way interaction between victim's response and level of abuse, $F(1, 184) = 3.97, p = .048$. Under nonabusive conditions, the perpetrator was rated more negatively if the victim was passive than if the victim was actively engaged in the conflict. Under conditions of abuse, however, the perpetrator was perceived similarly, regardless of the victim's behavior (see Table 2).

Conflict severity and future consequences. There were no significant main effects of victim's response on conflict severity, $F(1, 186) = 1.27, p = .262$, or negative future consequences, $F(1, 186) = 2.68, p = .103$. There was a significant two-way interaction between victim's response and level of abuse on perceptions of conflict severity, $F(1, 186) = 5.27, p = .023$. Under nonabusive conditions, participants rated the conflict more severely if the victim was actively engaged than if the victim was passive. Under conditions of abuse, however, the conflict was perceived equally serious, regardless of the victim's behavior (see Table 2).

There was a significant three-way interaction between victim's response, perpetrator gender, and level of abuse on perceptions of negative future consequences, $F(1, 186) = 3.53, p = .031$. When John was the perpetrator the victim's response did not impact perceptions of negative future consequences. Rather, when John was abusive the consequences were more severe (passive victim: $M = 3.06, SD = 0.64$; active victim: $M = 2.83, SD = 0.65$) than when he was nonabusive (passive victim: $M = 2.38, SD = 0.39$; active victim: $M = 2.30, SD = 0.60$).

When Sue was the perpetrator the victim's response did impact perceptions of negative future consequences. When John was a passive victim and Sue was abusive the consequences were more severe ($M = 2.87, SD = 0.61$) than when she was nonabusive ($M = 2.52, SD = 0.51$). However, when John was an active victim, the negative future consequences were perceived as the same regardless of if Sue was abusive ($M = 2.59, SD = 0.56$) or nonabusive ($M = 2.57, SD = 0.47$). That is, victim's response only had an impact on perceptions of negative future consequences when John was an active victim.

Summary. We did not find support for Hypothesis 3: Harsher perceptions of a male-perpetrating psychological abuse, relative to a female, were not attenuated when the victim was active and even somewhat aggressive. In fact, across levels of abuse, the analysis of a victim's response revealed additional gender effects on the way perpetrators are perceived. The female perpetrator was perceived less harshly when the male victim became active and somewhat aggressive, regardless of how abusive the female perpetrator became. Further, when the male victim became active, the negative future consequences for the couple were no longer impacted by the female perpetrator's actions. This was not the case for the male perpetrator; his behavior was equally negative and the future consequences equally negative regardless of the victim's response. More generally, the victim's response affected perceptions in the no-abuse condition more often than in the abuse condition, as shown in Table 2.

Discussion

Gendered Perceptions of the Perpetrator and Conflict

We found strong support for our first two hypotheses, which we believe contribute to closing a significant gap in the field. In nonabusive scenarios, male and female perpetrators were viewed similarly, and the conflict was perceived to be low in severity. However, the perceptions greatly differed in abusive scenarios. Participants overwhelmingly perceived the abusive actions of a

male perpetrator, compared with a female perpetrator, to be more negative, more severe, and resulting in more negative consequences for the couple. Despite the fact that, regardless of their gender, the perpetrators engaged in exactly the same psychologically abusive actions against their spouse, the perpetrator's gender affected how his or her behavior was perceived.

Past research has revealed that when perpetrators are physically abusive, male perpetrators are perceived more negatively than female perpetrators (Bastow et al., 2007; Hammock et al., 2015). Gendered perceptions of physical abuse may be justified by actual gender differences in the consequences of physical abuse (see Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010). We focused specifically on psychological abuse, for which there may be less of a justification to expect gendered consequences. The current study isolated psychological abuse by removing all physical acts of aggression from the conflict; and yet, gendered perceptions were robust. It may be that beliefs about males as perpetrators and females as victims is so ingrained in our belief system that any type of abuse is likely to be perceived in stereotypical ways. The current study suggests that abusive conflicts with a female perpetrator and a male victim are condoned more than the reverse.

It is also plausible that men may be perceived as "stronger" and more capable of dealing with abuse even when the abuse is purely psychological, which would explain participants perceiving less severe consequences for male victims. Existing research, however, does not reveal a clear gender pattern in the actual consequences of psychological abuse. It is also possible that the female perpetrator condition seemed strange to participants because the scenario violated gender role stereotypes (e.g., the male taking care of his parents). This would likely cause participants either to dismiss the scenario or to attend to it more carefully given its counterexpectancy content. Although this cannot be ruled out, the manipulation check did not reveal different levels of recall when a female (vs. male) was the perpetrator. Future research should examine these and other possible explanations.

Our research is the first known study to measure sexist beliefs as related to perceptions of a conflict involving only psychological abuse. We found very little impact of perceiver characteristics, specifically participant sex and sexist beliefs, on perceptions in this study. Our lack of findings suggests a robust and ingrained gender bias with regard to male perpetrators of abuse. Overall, males and females have similar perceptions of psychological abuse perpetrators, only yielding one difference in perceptions; negative consequences (females perceiving more negative consequences for the couple than males). Although we did find one significant effect for sexism (an interaction between gender of the perpetrator and ambivalent sexism on perpetrator negativity), all other tests for sexist beliefs were not significant. Future research should

further explore the impact of various types of sexism in different scenarios involving psychological abuse to pinpoint when and how sexist beliefs may have a role in perceptions of psychological abuse. One of our results suggests that the bias in rating male perpetrators more harshly than the female perpetrators was true only for participants low in ambivalent sexism.

Gendered Perceptions of the Victim's Response

We did not find support for Hypothesis 3, which predicted that when a female victim was actively involved in the conflict, some of the negative perceptions of the male perpetrator would be attenuated. Rather, we found that when the male victim was active, perceptions of the female perpetrator were attenuated suggesting that participants may have attributed some of the blame to the male victim. The male perpetrator, however, was viewed the same whether or not the female victim was passive or active. This finding further supports the conclusion that, overall, participants viewed a male perpetrator more harshly than a female perpetrator.

In addition, the victim's response had a greater impact on perceptions in the nonabuse conditions than in the abuse conditions. Specifically, the perpetrator was rated more negatively when the victim was passive (compared with active), suggesting that a one-sided conflict would result in more negative perceptions of the instigator. Also, the conflict was rated as more severe when the victim was active (compared with passive), suggesting that when a victim is mildly aggressive, people recognize the conflict as more serious.

Limitations

Although this study provides much insight into the topic of gendered perceptions of psychological abuse, there were some limitations. First, this study consisted of only college participants, most of whom were White, which is not representative of the entire population. Thus, we are not able to make declarative statements about the population as a whole. Second, our scenario only included some aspects of psychological abuse, not all types (e.g., extreme isolation was not in our scenario). Third, the conflict involved a heterosexual couple and did not assess perceptions of psychological abuse among nonheterosexual couples. Fourth, our scenario involved a division of labor conflict that contained some gender role elements that may have affected perceptions due to a potential lack of realism. To attempt to address some of these limitations, future studies could consider including more types of psychological abuse in the scenario, a different type of conflict without stereotypical content, and expanding to nonheterosexual couples. In addition,

the study could strive to obtain a more representative sample. Future research should also continue to investigate the role that sexism plays in people's perceptions of psychological abuse.

By studying both male and female perpetrators of psychological abuse, we can conclude from our study that male perpetrators are perceived significantly worse than female perpetrators. Knowing this, we can begin to inform and educate people on the severe consequences that *both* male and female victims experience from psychological abuse. By doing so, we may begin to remedy the misconceptions that people hold.

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