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Victim Blaming and Exoneration of the Perpetrator in Domestic Violence: The Role of Beliefs in a Just World and Ambivalent Sexism

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The existence of domestic violence is closely linked to several ideological factors that include sexism and other beliefs about society in general, namely the belief in a just world. In this study, which involved 485 people of both sexes aged between 18 and 70 years, we analyzed the influence of these ideological variables of the perceivers and characteristics of the situation on judgments of a gender aggression – blaming the victim and exonerating the perpetrator. Results showed differences in the reactions of observers depending on the cause that triggered the aggression. Participants blamed the victim and exonerated the aggressor more when no cause of the aggression was mentioned than when a cause was mentioned (the woman wanted to separate, to see an old male friend, or simply to take a trip with her female friends). We also found clear effects of hostile sexism and just world beliefs on the dependent variables. Results showed that the influence of just world beliefs depended on the fact of mention or not a cause for the aggression.
Keywords: domestic violence, ambivalent sexism, just world beliefs.

La existencia de violencia doméstica está estrechamente relacionada con una serie de factores ideológicos entre los que se encuentran el sexismo y otras creencias sobre la sociedad en general como son las creencias en el mundo justo. En este estudio, en el que participaron 485 personas de ambos sexos con edades comprendidas entre los 18 y 70 años, se analizó la influencia que en los juicios sobre una agresión de género (culpar a la víctima y minimizar la importancia de la agresión) tenían tanto algunas variables ideológicas de los perceptores como ciertas características de la situación. Los resultados mostraron diferencias en las reacciones de los observadores en función de la causa desencadenante de la agresión descrita. Los participantes culparon más a la víctima y exoneraban más al agresor cuando no se presentaba causa de la agresión que cuando la causa era mencionada (la mujer quería separarse, iba a ver a un viejo amigo o simplemente hacer un viaje con amigas). También se obtuvieron claros efectos del sexismo hostil y de las creencias en el mundo justo en las variables dependientes. Los resultados mostraron que la influencia de las creencias en el mundo justo dependía del hecho de mencionar o no la posible causa de la agresión.
Palabras clave: violencia doméstica, sexismo ambivalente, creencias en el mundo justo.

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Every day, thousands of women and girls in the world are victims of some kind of violence mainly because they are women. According to international studies carried out by the World Health Organization in 35 countries, between 24 and 53 per cent of women have been physically abused in their lifetime; a great part of this violence is perpetrated by men who are or were their intimate partners (WHO, 2005).

This kind of violence has deep historic roots and is present in almost every society (Alberdi & Matas, 2002; Straus, 2006; Vieraitis, Brito, & Kovandzic, 2007; Yoshioka, Dinoia, & Ullah, 2001). The socio-cultural structure has an influence on violence against women, essentially by maintaining a set of widely shared beliefs, values and myths related not only to gender violence in particular but also to the social system in general and to relationships between men and women (Bhanot & Senn, 2007).

Attitudes towards domestic violence are important to understand how people react or behave towards victims and perpetrators of these aggresions (Gracia, García, & Lila, 2009). These attitudes are often characterized by blaming the victim, minimizing the importance of the aggresion and justifying or exonerating the perpetrator and may be shown by perpetrators as well as victims (Yamawaki, Darby, & Queiroz, 2007). Attitudes towards domestic violence are linked to other ideologies, as gender ideology. Thus, traditional gender beliefs are associated with increased sympathy for perpetrators of physical aggression (Pavlou & Knowles, 2001; Willis, Hallinan, & Melby, 1996), less blame for perpetrators (Hillier & Foddy, 1993; Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990; Pavlou & Knowles, 2001), more victim blame (Valor-Segura, Expósito,& Moya, 2008) and lower perceptions that the behaviors are abusive (Willis et al., 1996). Moreover, attitudes towards domestic violence seem to be linked to other broader ideologies, as Just World Beliefs (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008). Our research will focus on these ideologies: Belief in a Just World (BJW) and Sexist Beliefs. These two ideologies are used as tools to legitimize the status quo. However, Belief in a Just World influences judgments and behaviors related to various types of victims (of poverty, illness – HIV/AIDS –, spousal abuse,…), whereas sexism especially legitimize gender inequality.

Just World Beliefs

Belief in a Just World is an ideology according to which individuals or groups of people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). The theory postulates that people need to believe that they live in a just world where people usually obtain what they are entitled to. This ideology can be applied to very different situations such as poverty and economic well-being, accidents, fortune when gambling, and so on, and seems to be especially applicable to domestic violence. Perceivers' just-world beliefs are typically threatened when something terrible happens to another person. To protect their sense of justice and to reaffirm their beliefs, people can use one or more of several possible strategies (Lerner, 1980). One of the most studied strategies is that perceivers can decide that the victims deserved to suffer; for instance, their misfortune can be attributed to reckless behavior, or they can be judged to be bad, unworthy persons whose suffering is not unjust, even if they did not cause the outcome directly. Making these rationalizations allows people to maintain their belief that a similar misfortune will not occur to them, as long as they are careful and are of ''good'' character (Lerner & Miller, 1978).

There is empirical evidence that relates Belief in a Just World to negative reactions towards people considered to be victims or in a disadvantaged situation: victims of domestic violence, poor people in the third world, the handicapped, AIDs patients, accident cases, rape victims, cancer patients, etc. (Castillo, Asún, & Aceituno, 2002; De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Furnham, 2003; Montada, 1998).

Numerous studies have examined whether stronger beliefs in a just world are associated with more acceptance of physical and sexual aggression against women, but the support for this relationship is mixed (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008). According to the just world hypothesis, if the world is a just place, then there must be a justifiable reason that a person perpetrates an aggressive act, absolving the person of any personal responsibility (e.g., he hit her because she deserved it or she did something to provoke it). Supporting this idea, Schuller, Smith and Olson (1994) found that people who have a strong Belief in a Just World tend to blame victims of domestic violence more than those who have a weaker belief that the world is a just place, and Sakalli-Ugurlu, Yalcin, and Glick (2007) found that Belief in a Just World predicted less positive attitudes towards rape victims. Other studies have found that individuals who adopt more just world beliefs perceive a perpetrator as less culpable (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). However, other studies have not found this association between beliefs in a just world and acceptation of physical and sexual aggression against women (Hammock & Richardson, 1993; Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990; Lambert & Raichle, 2000). For example, some research (e.g., Kleinke & Meyer, 1990) has shown that women scoring high in just world beliefs have more favorable reactions to rape victims, which seems opposite to what just world theory would predict.

Although victimg blame is one of the most studied strategy that people use to maintain their beliefs in a just world, the perpetrator of injustice may also be the focus of just-world-restoring strategies. Correlational literature shows a relatively consistent association between explicit individual-difference measures of belief in a just world and punitive, or antidefendant, attitudes in matters of criminal justice (Hafer & Bégue, 2005), attitudes that can be summarize under the label "exonerating the aggressor".

Hafer and Bégue (2005) consider that there are two main conceptualizations of the Belief in a Just World. In the first one, the assumption is that people differ in the extent

to which they believe that the world is a just place and these variations can be measured with standard self-report instruments. Scores on individual difference scales are correlated with a number of criteria, including attitudinal and personality variables and measures of well-being (Furnham, 2003). According to Hafer and Bégue (2005) this conceptualization represents a major shift in focus from the essence of the theory, that proposes that people develop a general justice motive for a variety of reasons, the most well specified and unique of which is that people need to believe in a just world in order to maintain their personal contract (Lerner, 1977; Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976). In this conceptualization, virtually all people develop a commitment to deserving their outcomes and to organizing their lives around principles of deservingness. For this commitment to be maintained, people need to believe in a just world, and, therefore, they are threatened by instances of injustice and motivated to reduce this threat to maintain the appearance that the world metes out resources and ill fate as deserved.

Experimental research rather than correlational investigations is the appropiate methodology toward testing the motivational implications of an underlying need to believe in a just world (Lerner, 1980, p. 30, 1998, 2003). In experimental studies measures can be more easily gathered during and/or shortly after exposure to emotionally arousing stimuli, ensuring that the motivations proposed by just-world theory are still engaged and uncontaminated by other, more thoughtful processes (see Lerner, 2003).

Some research has combined these two conceptualizations of just world beliefs and experimental manipulations are assessed in combination with an individual-difference measure of belief in a just world. The general notion is that, if a need to believe in a just world leads to certain types of responses in a given experimental condition, then this response should occur primarily for people expressing a strong endorsement of such a belief (Hafer & Begué, 2005).

As previously mentioned, to threat people beliefs about deservingness the stimulus should contain elements of injustice in order to challenge the notion of a just world. Thus, victims would have to appear, at some level, as undeserving of their fate. For instance, Gilmartin-Zena (1983) presented participants with a respectable versus nonrespectable victim of sexual assault and, on the basis of past research by Jones and Aronson (1973), predicted that the respectable victim would be deemed more responsible for her victimization than the less respectable victim, thus restoring some element of deservingness and fairness to the good person's bad outcomes.

Sexism

Regarding sexism, there are new conceptions that make it possible to reconcile the existence of contempt for women with praise at the same time, which does not imply the absence of discrimination. One of these theories is that of Ambivalent Sexism, developed by Glick & Fiske (1996), which postulates that sexism is ambivalent because it is formed by two clearly differentiated, yet related, components: Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism. Sexism has traditionally been understood as contempt for women and the belief that women should be dominated and forced to submission, and also limited to certain roles. Hostile Sexism (HS) basically matches this conception. Benevolent Sexism (BS) is defined as a set of interrelated attitudes towards women which are sexist in the sense that women are considered in a stereotypical way. Yet, these attitudes elicit a positive affective tone in the perceiver and tend to lead to behavior that is typically categorized as prosocial (e.g., helping) or intimacy seeking (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491). Hostile sexism legitimates violence against women who challenge the power of men, women who "take advantage" of men sexually, and women who "soil" the honor of men. Benevolent sexism, however, legitimates negative reactions towards women who do not fulfill traditional gender role expectations, when they do not follow the "right" path, by withdrawing male "protection." Various studies have shown the relation between hostile sexism and different aspects of gender-based violence, such as rape proclivity in men (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003), justification of rape or less positive attitudes towards rape victims (Durán, Moya, Megías, & Viki, 2010; Sakalli-Ugurlu et al., 2007), justification of violence in a couple after betrayal (Forbes, Jobe, White, Bloesch, & Adams-Curtis, 2005), and attitudes towards domestic violence (Valor-Segura et al., 2008). Other studies have shown that benevolent sexism is related to prejudices against women who engage in premarital sex (Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003), tolerance of sexual abuse (Russell & Trigg, 2004) or blaming the victim in a case of rape (Abrams et al., 2003; Durán et al., 2010; Sakalli-Ugurlu et al., 2007; Viki & Abrams, 2002). Abrams et al. (2003), for example, found that individuals who defended ideas implying benevolent sexism attributed a greater responsibility to women that were victims of sexual violence when they perceived that the women did not fulfill traditional gender role expectations; in other words, the predictive capacity of benevolent sexism about blaming the victim is mediated by the perception of the victim's behavior as appropriate or inappropriate.

Although some studies have analyzed the relation between sexism (hostile and benevolent) and attitudes towards violence against women, most of them have focused on sexual abuse. Very little information is available about the relation between these constructs and domestic violence.

Nevertheless, as shown by some of the results of the studies mentioned above, although sexist beliefs and ideology have an influence on the perception of domestic

violence, this influence is probably not direct and permanent but depends on certain characteristics of the situation of violence (an analogous reasoning and results concerning sexual aggression can be found in Frese, Moya, & López-Megías, 2004).

According to some line of research, victim blaming and exonerating the aggressor could be accentuated when no-justification or explanation about the violent episode is given. Such a condition is of special interest because it maximizes ambiguity about the male actor's motives and female actor's behavior and might therefore increase the likelihood that individual differences in endorsement of ideological measures would predict people's reactions (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985). For instance, Moya, Glick, Expósito, De Lemus, and Hart, (2007) found that when women faced restrictions proceding from their partners and the partner offered no justification for his opposition, individual differences in women's Benevolent Sexism mattered – high Benevolent Sexism women responded to no justification positively. Thus, the ambiguous no justification condition appeared to provide fertile ground for women to interpret the partner's motives, allowing their own ideologies to color their construals. The absence of cause or justification in an episode of aggresion against women can be especially significant according to Just World Beliefs theory, because this situation can be perceived as threaten.

However, according to other line of reasoning, the tendency to blame the victim of domestic violence and exonerate the perpetrator may be greater when the woman does not fulfill her traditional role or challenges the male dominant position in the relationship. In Spain, cases of domestic violence shown by the mass media are often linked to situations in which women are challenging traditional roles. Research about domestic violence has shown the relevance of certain situational variables when judging or assessing a domestic violence situation. First of all, separation or divorce might be the only possible choice to end a situation of abuse for some women. However, starting the separation process may represent a risk factor and trigger the anger of certain violent men (Adelman, 2000; Kurz, 1996).

Another situational factor that often appears in cases of domestic violence and is closely related to the factor mentioned above is jealousy (Babcock, Costa, Green, & Eckhardt, 2004; Foran & O´Leary, 2008). Some studies have shown that violence perpetrated by the husband has been justified by perceivers in situations in which the wife is seen as being at risk of committing adultery or being unfaithful (Haj-Yahia, 2003; Haj-Yahia & Uysal, 2008; Viki & Abrams, 2002; Yoshioka et al., 2001). In general, we can say that any element of the situation that suggests that the woman does not follow her stereotypical role – that of being dominated by her husband or partner – and appears as challenging, independent, and the like, may enhance justification of the aggression by perceivers. Obviously, this justification and legitimacy is stronger in people who assume the traditional and sexist ideologies mentioned above: hostile and benevolent sexism and beliefs in a just world.

Finally, gender is an important variable concerning people reactions to domestic violence and frequently gender interact with people's ideology. Thus, previous studies have shown that, overall, men are more tolerant to gender violence (Nayak, Byrne, Martín, & Abraham, 2001; Newcombe, van den Eynde, Hafner, & Jolly, 2008; Valor-Segura et al., 2008). As an ilustration of the interaction between gender and people's ideology, Kristiansen and Giulietti (1990) found different perceptions and attributions of men and women regarding the perpetrator and victim of an instance of wife abuse as well as different relations in both gender among sex role attitudes and victim blame: males blamed and derogated the wife/victim more as their attitudes toward women became less favorable whereas among females, in contrast, those with positive attitudes toward women blamed, but did not derogate, the wife/victim more as their just-world beliefs became stronger. The authors interpreted the latter finding suggesting that women may blame a victim of violence toward women in an effort to gain perceived control over the possibility of their own potential victimization.

The present research

In our study, people of both sexes with very different socio-demographic characteristics dealt with four different accounts of situations of domestic aggression in a between-groups design. Three of these situations included a possible reason or cause of the aggression that reflected the situational aspects we just mentioned: the woman wanted to separate, to see an old male friend, or simply to take a trip with her female friends. No cause or reason was mentioned in the fourth situation. Our first hypothesis, derived from Just World Beliefs theory, was that observers would blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator more when no cause was mentioned than when a possible cause was mentioned.

The second hypothesis was related to the effects of the two types of ideology studied on the social perception of situations of domestic aggression: observers with a higher degree of sexism – especially hostile sexism –, and beliefs in a just world were expected to blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator more. As part of this hypothesis, Hostile Sexism was expected to be the best ideological predictor; in fact, people with hostile sexist beliefs are especially prone to justify discrimination and aggression against women.

The third hypothesis was aimed at analyzing how these ideological measures could predict the reactions of

participants facing an episode of abuse depending on the cause mentioned as a possible trigger of the aggression. Different patterns were expected depending on the ideological measure. In the case of Belief in a Just World Belief (BJW) we expected than when no justification of the aggression was provided (compared to those episodes where a cause of the aggression was mentioned), participants who were high (but not low) in Just World Beliefs were more likely to justify the aggression; people with this ideology were expected to feel more threatened and less in control and tend to think "she must have done something to deserve that" (hypothesis 3.a). Regarding sexism we expected that when a cause of the aggression was provided (compared to the episode where no cause of the aggression was mentioned), participants who were high (but not low) in hostile and benevolent sexism were more likely to justify the aggression. Thus, Benevolent Sexism (BS) and Hostile Sexism (HS) are especially relevant when the wife was meeting an old male friend, planning a trip with some female friends, or asking for a divorce, because all of these causes implied in some way that the woman was disrupting traditional relations between men and women (hypothesis 3.b). We also expect an interaction between BJW and sexism. According to Furnham (2003), various studies have shown that other related belief systems such as attitudes towards women are more powerful predictors of reactions to traumatic events than BJW and may act as moderator or mediating variables. Thus, we expect that the relation between BJW and victimg blaming or exonerating the aggressor would be stronger when the participants are high in sexism (hypothesis 3.c).

As mentioned above, the present study involved participants of both sexes. Previous studies have shown that, overall, men are more tolerant to gender violence. In addition, males are less likely than females to experience domestic violence, and based on the findings of Jensen and Gutek (1982), and Shaver's (1970) theory that similarity with the victim lessens victim-blame, it would predict among men lower levels of blame for the target of domestic violence. However, men also tend to have a more traditional gender ideology (Glick & Fiske, 1996), and greater Belief in a Just World (O'Connor, Morrison, McLeod, & Anderson, 1996). Therefore, it is not clear whether gender itself is directly related to acceptance of gender violence or traditional gender differences are mainly due to ideological differences between men and women. Moreover, as previously mentioned (Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990) sometimes gender is a moderated factor in the relationship between JWB, gender ideology and victim blaming. Consequently, the effect of gender on the dependent measures, and its interaction with the experimental manipulation and participants's ideology will be analyzed with no especific hypotheses formulated.

Method

Participants

The study involved the participation of 485 people aged between 18 and 70 years. Mean age was 31.35 years (SD = 12.47); 41.8% of the participants were male and 58.2% were female. Regarding educational level, 38% had university studies, 21% had higher secondary education, 24.6% of participants had basic secondary education, and 16.4% had primary education. As for the occupations of the participants, 62.5% had full-time or part-time jobs and 37.5% did not have a job.

Procedure

The sample was obtained through incidental sampling in which researchers requested the participants' cooperation in the study. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymous and total confidentiality was guaranteed in the treatment of the data. Participants voluntarily accepted to answer the measures shown individually at the request of the researchers. An independent variable called "cause of the aggression" was manipulated at four levels and between groups, so that each participant only dealt with one single level of the variable. The experimental condition was randomly assigned.

Instruments

The battery of questionnaires included the following measures, among others:

Socio-demographic characteristics. Participants were asked about their sex, age, level of completed studies (primary education, basic secondary education, vocational training, higher secondary education or university studies) and occupational status (no paid job, full-time job, part-time job, occasional job all-year round, work by the hour or holiday job).

Episode of aggression. After the previous questions a situation was described. It was supposedly the transcription of a phone call made by a woman to a victim support help line. The situation was an account of a violent attack by the woman's husband. Four different situations were presented in a between-groups design. The control condition is presented next, followed by the differences with the other conditions (which replace the text in bold in the control condition):

1) *Control.* "Hello, my name is Maria....I'm sorry but...., I'm very nervous and I don't know where to start. What happened is that,... well..., yesterday evening my husband hit me. We've been married for 13 years and our relationship is normal, you know, we argue sometimes, but I suppose it's just like everybody

else. But we'd never reached this point... Yesterday, well, ... yesterday when he came home from work and we started to have dinner, ... I'm sorry but ....., **well, we started to talk about the usual things, you know, ... work, the children, the mortgage... and I told him a few things I thought and he .... well.... he became more and more aggressive and .... he started to yell at me...., he said I was stupid, that I didn't know what I was talking about and only said stupid things.** At one point he stood up and started to yell at me at me and insult me. I didn't know what to do, I asked him why he was treating me that way and told him we should try to talk calmly.... It made him even more furious and he became more aggressive, to the point that he slapped me in the face and threw me to the floor and .... he shouted at me to shut up over and over again. I don't know what to do, we've been married for many years and have two children. This kind of argument is more and more frequent, although this time he's gone way too far. I'm scared of staying home in case he hits me again, but I'm also scared of leaving him. What can I do?"

2) *Jealousy. "....* **well, the phone rang. It was a male friend from childhood whom I've always got along very well with, who was in town and was going to be alone for a couple of days and wanted to take me out for dinner. I accepted and told my husband when I came back to the table.** At one point he stood up and started to yell at me and insult me…"
3) *Separation. "...* **well… I felt it was a good time to tell him something I had been thinking about for a long time, and I told him I couldn't go on this way, that our relationship didn't make sense any more and I had decided the best thing would be to separate** …"
4) *Female friends. "...* **well, we started to talk about the holidays and how we were going to organize them. I told him this year I felt like doing something different, that my female friends were planning to take a trip inland and I'd like to join them…."**

Victim blaming. After presenting the violent episode, we included a set of questions with a 7-point Likert response format: "Do you think she is exaggerating the facts?" (1, "I think she is not exaggerating at all" and 7 "I think she is exaggerating a lot"); "Do you think she caused the argument in any way?" (1, "I think she did not cause it at all" and 7 "I think she caused it completely"); "How serious do you consider the episode described to be?" (1, "not serious at all" and 7 "very serious") (reversed item); "To what extent do you consider the woman may be partly to blame for what happened? (1, "not to blame at all" and 7 "completely to blame");" "To what extent do you think the aggression is justified?" (1, "totally unjustified" and 7 "totally justified"); "How likely do you think it is that the aggression will happen again?" (1, "not likely at all" and 7 "completely sure it will happen again") (reversed item). Scores in these six items were averaged (the alpha coefficient obtained for this scale was .79). Higher scores indicated that the consequences of the aggression were minimized and the woman in the situation was blamed for the aggression.

Exoneration of the perpetrator. To measure how the participants exonerated the husband, we included three questions with a 7-point Likert response format: "Do you think the husband's behavior is due to the following?": "In fact, he is worried about her" and "he is a responsible person" (1, "totally disagree" and 7 "totally agree"), "To what extent do you consider the man may be partly to blame for what happened?" (1, "not to blame at all" and 7 "completely to blame") (reversed item). Scores in these three items were averaged (the alpha coefficient obtained for this scale was .69). Higher scores indicated that participants exonerated the husband more of the aggression.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996 – validated in Spain by Expósito, Moya, & Glick, 1998). The ASI comprises two 11-item subscales that measure hostile sexism (HS) (e.g., "Women are too easily offended,") and benevolent sexism (BS) (e.g., "Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess."). All items are statements to which participants respond on a 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale. The alpha coefficient of the hostile sexism subscale was .91; that of the benevolent sexism subscale was .87. These results are similar to those obtained by Glick, Sakalli-Ugurlu, Ferreira, and Aguiar (2002).

Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS) (Lipkus, 1991). It consists of 7 items with a 6-point Likert response format where 1 means total disagreement with the statement and 6 means total agreement with it. A few examples of these items are "I feel that people get what they are entitled to," and "I basically feel the world is a just place." The internal consistency of the measure in our sample was .78, similar to that obtained by Lipkus (1991), which was .82 in a sample of 402 participants.

Results

Preliminary analysis

Before presenting the results of our experimental manipulation, we compared the answers of men and women in the ideological measures included in the study (HS, BS, and BJW) and the two dependent variables considered. The results are shown in Table 1. Men scored higher than women in Hostile Sexism, Benevolent Sexism and Beliefs in a Just World, and blamed the victim and exonerated the perpetrator to a greater extent (all the comparisons, $ps < .01$, except in JWB, $p = .01$).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of main measures

	Men		Women	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Hostile Sexism	2.54	1.14	1.66	1.08
Benevolent Sexism	2.37	1.08	2.04	1.16
Belief in a Just World	2.91	.99	2.69	.84
Victim Blaming	2.21	.94	1.77	.85
Exoneration of Perpetrator	2.27	1.22	1.81	1.08

The results reveal that the ideological measures correlated positively and significantly with each other. In order to control the statistical effect of sexism, the correlations of HS and BS with BJW scores are partial. HS correlated significantly with BS ($r = .58$, $p < .001$) and BJW ($r = .15$, $p < .01$). BS also correlated significantly with BJW ($r = .10$, $p < .05$).

Differences in victim blaming and exoneration of the perpetrator depending on the cause of the aggression and ideological predictors

To study how participants reacted to different situations of aggression, we carried out two one-way analysis of variance with one between groups factor. We considered the cause of the aggression as an independent variable and the mean score of each of the two measures used – blaming the victim and exonerating the perpetrator – as a dependent variable.

The results showed a significant effect of the cause of the aggression in the variable "blaming the victim," $F(3,480) = 4.18$, $p = .006$. Participants in the control situation obtained a mean score of 2.2 ($SD = .93$), those in the separation situation obtained a score of 1.83, ($SD = .88$), those in the female friends situation obtained a score of 1.85($SD = .82$), and those in the jealousy situation obtained a mean score of 1.96 ($SD = .99$). Data showed a tendency to blame the victim for the aggression when no cause was shown (control condition) as the trigger of the episode of violence and a similar pattern in the three conditions in which a cause attributed to the woman was mentioned. The post-hoc analysis (DMS) showed that differences between the control condition and the other three conditions were significant in all cases (all $p < .05$); differences among these three conditions were not significant in any case.

A similar trend was observed in the variable "exonerating the perpetrator," but the effect of the cause of the aggression presented was not significant, $F(3,484) = 2.32$, $p = .16$. Participants in the control situation obtained a mean score of 2.2 ($SD = 1.02$), those in the female friends situation had a mean score of 1.9 ($SD = 1.21$), those in the jealousy situation had a score of 2.02 ($SD = 1.3$), and the score obtained in the separation situation was 1.91($SD = 1.08$).

Independent variables included categorical variables (our manipulation of cause of the aggression) and continuous variables (Hostile Sexism, Benevolent Sexism, and Belief in a Just World scores); therefore, we conducted multiple regression analyses using dummy-coded variables for cause of the argument (control or no cause = 0, jealousy, = 1, separation = 1, and female friends = 1). Experimental conditions were clustered this way because we expected the main differences in participants' perceptions of the episodes to depend on whether a cause of the aggression was mentioned or not. Following the procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991), we entered the dummy variable representing our experimental manipulation in Step 1. Participants' gender and their centered scores in the Global Belief in a Just World (BJW), Hostile Sexism (HS) and Benevolent Sexism (BS) scales were entered in Step 2. Step 3 included the two-way interactions between the dummy-coded variable for cause of the argument (control or no cause = 0, jealousy, = 1, separation = 1, and female friends = 1) and the other variables included in Step 2. This was done to verify if ideological variables affected dependent variables differently depending on whether a cause of the argument was mentioned or not. For reports of regression contrasts involving ASI scores, we used comparisons at +1 and -1 standard deviations.

We found three significant main effects in our dependent measure blaming the victim. Participants blamed the victim more if (a) no cause was mentioned, $t(475) = -3.55$, $\beta = -.16$, $p < .001$; if they were: (b) high (rather than low) in HS, $t(475) = 7.53$, $\beta = .39$, $p < .001$; and (c) high (rather than low) in BJW, $t(475) = 3.55$, $\beta = .15$, $p < .001$. Three two-way interactions were also significant: the interaction between BJW and cause of the argument, $t(471) = -1.99$, $\beta = -.17$, $p < .05$, between BS and HS, $t(471) = 2.28$ $\beta = .10$, $p < .05$, and between HS and BJW, $t(471) = 2.14$ $\beta = .10$, $p < .05$. Participants' Beliefs in a Just World scores predicted victim blaming more when no cause of the argument was mentioned, $\beta = .33$, $t = 3.7$, $p < .001$ than when a cause was mentioned, $\beta = .23$, $t = 4.5$, $p < .001$. To understand the HSxBS interaction we followed the process suggested by Aiken and West (1991). Test of simple slopes revealed that participants' HS predicted victim blaming when they were

high in BJW (+1SD), β = .30, $t(475) = 3.52$, $p < .001$, but no when they were low in BJW (-1SD), β = .17, $t(475) = 1.12$, $p = .26$ (figure 1). That is, as higher was the participants belief in HS more they blamed the victim but only if they belief in Just World Beliefs. In the case of the interaction HSxBS test of simple slopes revealed that participants' HS predicted victim blaming when they were also high in BS (+1SD), β = .37, $t(479) = 6.26$, $p < .001$, but no when they were low in BS (-1SD), β = .21, $t(479) = 1.64$, $p = .10$ (figure 2).

We conducted a similar regression analysis using the score that represented exonerating the perpetrator as a dependent variable. We found three significant main effects. Participants exonerated the perpetrator more if (a) no cause was mentioned, $t(475) = -2.21$, β = -.10, $p = .027$, if they were (b) high (rather than low) in HS, $t(475) = 4.83$, β = .27, $p < .001$, and (c) high (rather than low) in BJW, $t(475) = 3.21$, β = .14, $p < .01$. No two-way interactions were significant.

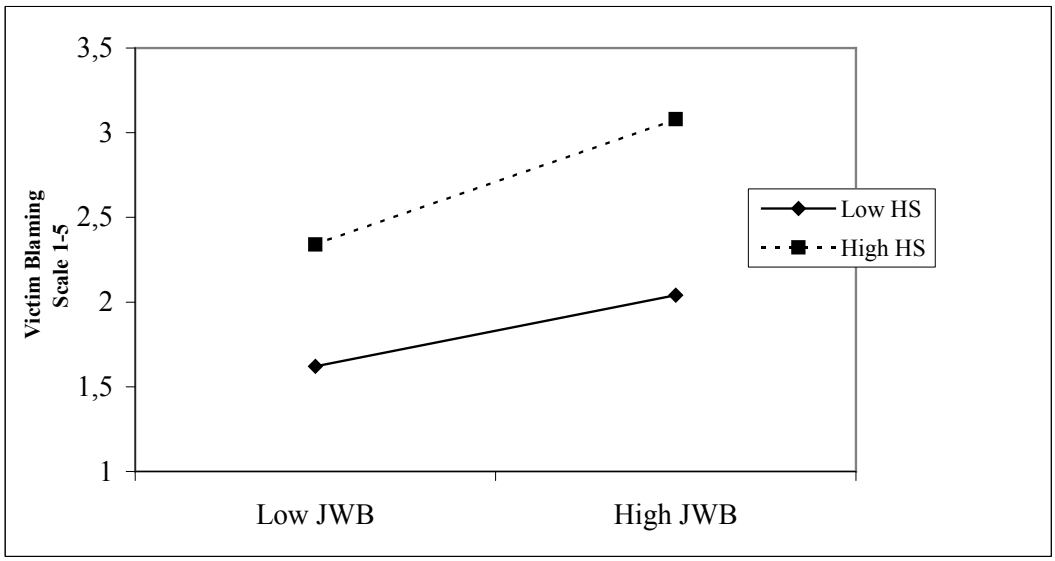

Figure 1. Interaction between BJW and HS on Victim Blaming.

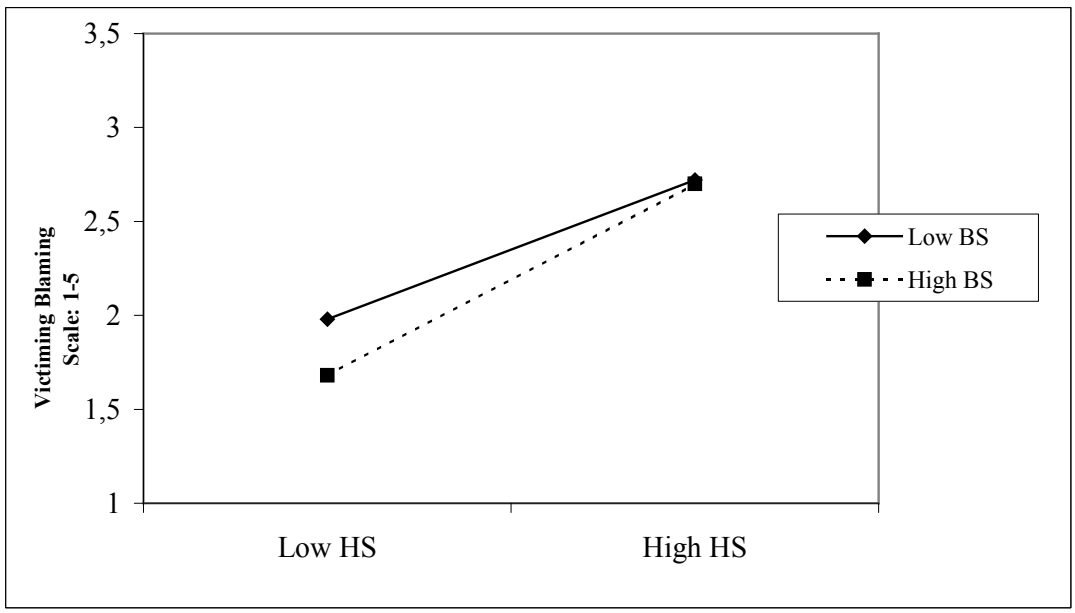

Figure 2. Interaction between HS and BS on Victim Blaming.

Thus, our first hypothesis was partially confirmed by the data: observers blamed the victim more when no cause of the argument was mentioned (the same trend was observed in exonerating the perpetrator, but this effect did not reach the significance level).

The second hypothesis of our study (that victim blaming and exoneration of the perpetrator would be greater the higher the perceiver's degree of sexism – especially hostile sexism – and the more the perceiver believed in a just world) was confirmed by the data: Hostile Sexism and Belief in a Just World (but no Benevolent Sexism) were significantly related to victim blaming and exonerating the aggressor. The part of the second hypothesis according to which we expected the best ideological predictor to be Hostile Sexism was confirmed: people with hostile sexist beliefs are especially prone to justify discrimination and aggression against women.

Our third hypothesis (that BJW would predict victim blaming and exonerating the perpetrator with greater intensity in the episode where no cause was provided – control condition – and that sexism would be more related to the justification of the aggression when a cause was mentioned) received mixed support. In the case of BJW, the hypothesis was supported by the data in the case of victim blaming (but no in the measure of exonerating the aggressor), since Belief in a Just World led to blaming the victim more where no cause was provided (control condition). According to our hypothesis, people with this ideology feel more threatened and less in control and tend to think "she must have done something to deserve that." However, no differences were found in the relation between Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism and victim blaming and exoneration of the perpetrator depending on whether the cause of the aggression was mentioned or not.

Discussion

In the context of the social changes that have taken place over the last few decades, people seem unlikely to dare admit publicly or explicitly that a situation of aggression to women might be legitimated or justified. The results of this study show that participants do not generally tend to blame the victim for what happened or exonerate the perpetrator. However, the results show that when no specific cause is presented as having triggered the aggression there is a tendency to blame victims of domestic violence and to exonerate the perpetrators. In other words, when faced with doubt or uncertainty people tend to be suspicious of women and give some credibility to male perpetrators of abuse about a possible reason for their behavior. This result might be explained by the existence of a social context that is contrary to any kind of justification of domestic violence and makes any excuse seem unacceptable (in Spain there has been a clear social campaign to condemn this type of aggression for some years now). However, when no cause is mentioned as the trigger of an aggression, it may increase the ambiguity of the situation and allow people's sexist ideology and beliefs of to be expressed, justifying the aggression in this case (Frese et al., 2004). This result support just world beliefs theory. Perceivers' just-world beliefs are typically threatened when something terrible happens to another person; one strategy to protect their sense of justice and to reaffirm their beliefs is victim blaming (and exonerating the aggressor). Making these rationalizations allows people to maintain their belief that a similar misfortune will not occur to them, as long as they are careful and are of ''good'' character (Lerner & Miller, 1978). The threat to people beliefs about deservingness is higher when the situation contain elements of injustice and the victims would have to appear as undeserving of their fate (Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Jones & Aronson, 1973). In our study, that seems to be the case when no cause of the aggression was mentioned.

Another finding that supports beliefs in just world theory is the relationhip found between the scores in BJW and the two dependent measures, although research no always has shown this pattern of findings (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008). Especially important is the result showing that the relation between BJW and victim blaming was stronger when no cause of the argument was presented; this may be because people with this ideology need to explain reality in this case, supporting in that way the general notion that, if a need to believe in a just world leads to certain types of responses in a given experimental condition, then this response should occur primarily for people expressing a strong endorsement of such a belief.

Our results show that sexist beliefs contribute to blaming victims of domestic violence and exonerating perpetrators. Thus, people with more traditional beliefs show a reaction that tends to legitimize abuse more than others (Haj-Yahia, 2003; Haj-Yahia & Uysal, 2008; Khawaja, Linos, & El-Roueiheb, 2008; Vieraitis et al., 2007; Yoshihama, 2005; Yoshioka et al., 2001). In the present study, we also found that hostile sexism is the ideology that better predicts blaming women who are victims of gender-based violence. This is consistent with earlier studies that found that participants with higher scores in sexism assess violence against women more positively (Abrams et al., 2003; Glick et al., 2002; Russell & Trigg, 2004; Sakalli, 2001; Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). This result matches the findings of the research carried out by Glick et al. (2002) and Sakalli (2001), who found that participants with high scores in hostile sexism showed more positive reactions to violence against women than those with lower scores in this variable. As ideology specially related to gender relationships, hostile sexism appeared as a better predictor of reactions to domestic violence than beliefs in just world beliefs, an ideology of broader scope. Although BS was correlated with victim blaming and aggressor exoneration, this relation disappeared when the effect of HS was took

into account. However, an important finding is that HS needs to be combined with other ideologies to blame the victim of domestic violence as show the interactions found between HS and BJW and between HS and BS: participants' HS was related with victim blame only when participants also belief in Just World Beliefs and were high in BS.

Finally, an important finding of this study is that male participants blamed the victim and exonerated the perpetrator more than female participants. Males were also found to have more traditional ideologies. However, when participants' gender and ideological variables were included in a regression analysis to predict victim blaming and exoneration of the perpetrator, gender was never found to have a significant predictive value. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that gender differences in victim blaming and exoneration of the perpetrator in domestic violence can be explained by ideological differences between men and women and not by gender differences.

All the arguments put forward so far support the thesis that domestic violence contains certain structural elements based on cultural principles and social customs that have defended and even instilled women's subjugation to men since ancestral times (Haj-Yahia, 2003; Haj-Yahia & Uysal, 2008; Vieraitis et al., 2007; Yoshihama, 2005). These structural characteristics may lead to a situation in which many individuals feel it is legitimate to perpetrate violence against women and society tolerates it as if it were natural (Alberdi & Matas, 2002; Straus, 2006).

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