

Who's To Blame?

Perceptions of Domestic Violence in Biracial Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated perceptions of domestic violence victims in mixed-race relationships, specifically focusing on Hispanic and Caucasian mixed-race couples. Perceptions of victims are influenced by several factors, including the racial composition of the relationship, the perceiver's previous exposure to violence, and the gender and attitudes towards women the perceiver possesses. One hundred and eighteen participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, each reading a vignette depicting a domestic violence case. The race of the perpetrator and the victim was manipulated while the gender of both remained constant. A modification of the Domestic Violence Blame Scale (Petretic-Jackson, Sandberg, & Jackson, 1994) was used to assess the perceptions of the victim and the perpetrator in the vignette. Participants also completed a questionnaire assessing their attitude towards women and provided basic demographic information. It was predicted that participants would place the highest amount of blame on the victim when the violence was perpetrated by a Hispanic man on a Caucasian woman. Additionally, participants were predicted to place a higher amount of blame on victims in mixed-race relationships. While the hypotheses were not supported, results indicated that positive attitudes towards women were correlated with the amount of blame placed on the victim. Future research should focus on expanding in the area of domestic violence and mixed-race couples; additionally, more research should be conducted that focuses on different relationship compositions and comes from varied populations.

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence, is a national and global issue. It is a preventable public health problem that affects millions of people worldwide, but predominantly women. In the United States, one in four women report experiencing this type of crime (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2009). However, a report recently issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) indicates that many of the current statistics on domestic violence underestimate the problem. Many victims do not report abuse to friends, family, or law enforcement (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Another study cited by the American Bar Association's Commission on Domestic Violence (2009) indicates that about 92 percent of women do not discuss their abuse with their physician; 57 percent of respondents indicated that they did not discuss the incidents with anyone.

Domestic Violence Defined

Domestic violence encompasses a great variety of behaviors as well as great variation in the perception of those behaviors. As a result, many definitions exist and can vary for researchers, victims, practitioners, and law enforcement officials. Safe Horizons (2009)—a national organization for the prevention of domestic violence—defines domestic violence as any sort of act used by one individual to gain control over another through fear and intimidation. It involves sexual, emotional, and physical abuse and can occur in any type of relationship (Safe Horizons, 2009). The CDC (2009) also includes threats of abuse in its definition of intimate partner violence. This includes “the use of words, gestures, weapons, or other means to communicate the intent to cause harm” (CDC, 2009).

Intimate partner violence, as domestic violence is often called, occurs along a continuum, from a one-time occurrence of abuse to constant battering (CDC, 2009). In most cases, intimate partner violence begins with emotional abuse, which evolves into physical or sexual forms of abuse. In many cases of domestic violence, several forms of abuse may occur simultaneously (CDC, 2009). Although violence can occur in any relationship and be

experienced by women and men, women are far more likely to become victims of domestic violence. In the United States each year, about 4.8 million women become victims of intimate partner assaults, as opposed to about 2.9 million men (CDC, 2009). Women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest per capita rates of intimate violence—about 20 per every 1000 women (Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2002). In addition, one in five college women will experience some form of dating violence while continuing their education (ACADV, 2002).

Victim Blame and Factors of Perception

Negative or unexpected acts lead observers to locate the cause and attempt to hold someone—or something—responsible for these acts (Meyers, 2009). In domestic violence cases, observers have a tendency to blame the victims of these crimes for the abuse. Researchers have offered several explanations as to why this tendency might occur. One theory, known as the *defensive attribution hypothesis* (Shaver, 1970), proposes that victims are blamed so observers do not have to acknowledge their own helplessness. Another explanation for the victim-blame tendency can be attributed to depersonalization and simplified to the statement, “bad things do not happen to good people.” By depersonalizing a terrible act, observers can mentally distance themselves from that act in order to maintain a sense of control over their lives (Reddy, Knowles, Mulvany, McMahon, & Freckelton, 1997; Meyers, 2009). Additionally, victims of domestic violence in particular have a tendency to blame themselves for the abuse, rather than their abuser (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2010). This occurs because many victims suffer from low self-esteem and attempt to rationalize their partner’s behavior (NCVC, 2010).

Research has indicated several factors that influence how a victim is perceived and could potentially increase the likelihood that the victim will be blamed for the abuse. One of the most influential factors that contribute to the perception and perpetration of domestic violence is if an individual has previously experienced violence of some kind (CDC, 2009). Factors influencing victim blame also include the gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation of the victim of the crime, as well as those of the perceiver (Reddy et al., 1997). Several studies have shown that, in general, male perceivers have more of a tendency than female perceivers to blame the victim of intimate partner violence for her abuse (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Reddy et al., 1997). However, some research has also indicated that attitudes about women and gender roles seem to be good predictors of the occurrence of victim blame (Reddy et al., 1997). Men and women with more traditional ideas of gender roles are more likely to blame the victim for the abuse than women and men who hold more non-traditional views (Reddy et al., 1997).

Domestic Violence and Ethnicity

Intimate partner violence is not limited to only one race; it affects women of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A study of intimate partner violence conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice compared victimization rates among women and men, and specific racial groups (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The researchers discovered that victims who are non-white report significantly more incidents of domestic—or intimate partner—violence than white victims do, indicating that all racial minorities experience more intimate partner violence than whites. Out of these minority groups, Asians tend to report lower rates of violence, whereas Native American and African American victims tend to report higher rates of intimate partner violence than do Caucasian victims (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Results regarding Hispanic populations are less straightforward. Hispanic and non-Hispanic women appear to experience domestic violence in intimate relationships at a similar rate; however, Hispanic women were significantly more likely to report that they experienced sexual abuse by a current or former intimate partner than non-Hispanic women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States. According to the Census Bureau (Owens, 2006), between 2000 and 2006 the Hispanic growth rate (24.3%) was more than three times the growth rate of the total United States population (6.1%). In other words, nearly half of the nation’s growth during this time can be attributed to the rise in the Hispanic population; at its current rate, an estimated 60 percent of the United States population will be Hispanic by the year 2020 (Owens, 2006). As with any other ethnic group in America, Hispanic individuals experience a great deal of stereotyping. They are often viewed by Caucasian Americans as “lesser” individuals, working low-income occupations. Hispanics are perceived as having a low intelligence level and tend to be rated as one of the laziest ethnic groups along with African Americans (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1998). A common stereotype of Hispanic men in general is that they drink in excess, beat their wives, and commit unpredictable acts of violence (Gutmann, 1996). This stereotype might be used to justify the prevalence of intimate partner violence that occurs in relationships with Hispanic men.

In addition to inadequate research on the Hispanic population, previous research has paid minimal attention to the perceptions observers’ hold of mixed-race couples in terms of domestic violence. One study on biracial relationships suggested that victims in biracial or mixed-race relationships were more likely to experience victim blame in a domestic violence incident than victims of their race that were not in a biracial relationship (Meade,

2001). Given the relative lack of empirical research on mixed-race couples and on domestic violence in the Hispanic population, the current study focused on the perceptions of domestic violence in Hispanic, Caucasian, and mixed-race (Hispanic/Caucasian) couples. It was hypothesized that Caucasian participants would place the highest amount of blame on the victim when the violence is perpetrated by a Hispanic man on a Caucasian woman. In addition, victim blame was predicted to be higher in the perceptions of biracial couples than same-race couples.

METHOD

The participants in this study were 118 undergraduate students (87 % Caucasian; 69.5 % female; median age of 19 years) who received course credit for participation through the Psychology 100 course at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Participants read a vignette that depicted a domestic violence case (See Appendix A) and responded to questions about that vignette (See Appendices A and B). Across all vignettes, the victims were female and the perpetrators were male; however, the race of the victim and perpetrator were manipulated to see how participants' perceptions changed. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (See Table 1). In two conditions, the vignettes described same race couples—either Caucasian or Hispanic. Vignettes in the remaining two conditions featured biracial relationships—one where the perpetrator was Caucasian and the victim was Hispanic and the other where the perpetrator was Hispanic and the victim was Caucasian.

Table 1. Condition Assignment

Condition	Perpetrator Ethnicity	Victim Ethnicity
A	Caucasian	Caucasian
B	Caucasian	Hispanic
C	Hispanic	Caucasian
D	Hispanic	Hispanic

Participants provided responses to questions regarding the blame of the victim and the perpetrator in the vignette using a modification of the Domestic Violence Blame Scale (Petretic-Jackson, Sandberg, & Jackson, 1994) (See Appendix B). In addition, participants completed a questionnaire assessing their attitude towards women (See Appendix C) and provided basic demographic information (See Appendix D). After the study was completed the participants were debriefed.

RESULTS

Analyses of the data indicated that the initial hypothesis that Caucasian participants would place the highest amount of blame on the victim when the violence is perpetrated by a Hispanic man on a Caucasian woman was not supported. The secondary hypothesis that victim blame would be higher in the perceptions of biracial couples than same-race couples was also not supported. A 4 x 3 mixed design ANOVA indicated that there was no significant effect of condition and victim blame, $F(6, 228) = 1.20, p = .306$. There was however, a main effect of blame, in which the victim was blamed less than the perpetrator or society in all conditions, $F(2, 234) = 197.59, p < .001$ (See Table 2, and Figure 1).

Table 2. Average Level of Blame Across Conditions

Condition	Victim Blame*	Perpetrator Blame	Societal Blame
A	1.45	3.09	3.08
B	1.65	3.14	2.77
C	1.55	3.06	3.15
D	1.50	2.92	2.82

*The level of victim blame was significantly lower than the level of perpetrator blame and societal blame across all four conditions ($\alpha = .01, p < .001$). However, when each condition was compared, the level of victim blame was not significantly different ($\alpha = .01, p = .306$).

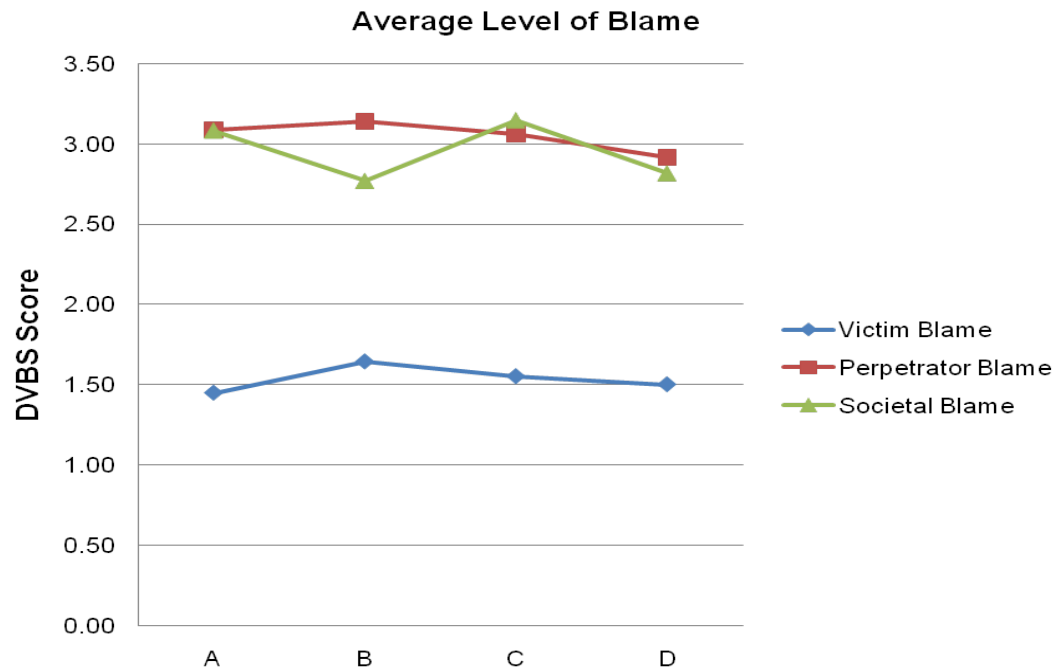


Figure 1. Average Level of Blame Across Conditions

A correlational analysis indicated that there was a significant negative correlation between victim blame and attitudes toward women (See Figure 2).

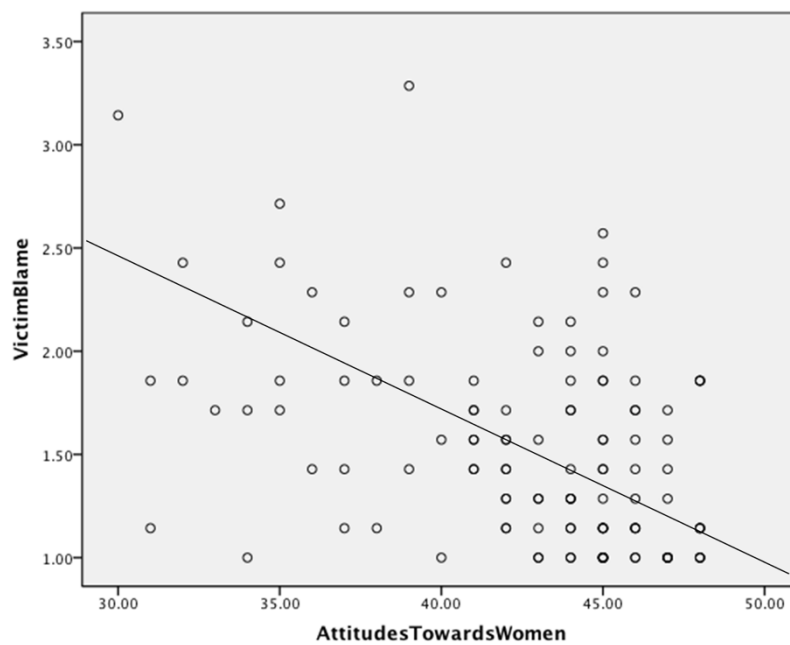


Figure 2. Victim Blame and Attitudes Towards Women

Specifically, a higher score on the Attitudes Towards Women scale was associated with a lower score on the Domestic Violence Blame Scale in the area of victim blame. Additional analyses indicated that there was no effect of gender on victim blame; male and female respondents were equally likely to blame the victim. There was also no significant effect of previous exposure to domestic violence.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of domestic violence victims in mixed-race relationships, specifically focusing on Hispanic and Caucasian mixed-race couples. In addition to the ethnic composition of the dating relationship, several factors that influence victim blame were considered in this study. The most important factor was if an individual had previously experienced violence of any kind; other factors included the gender of the perceiver and their attitudes about women. Previous research has indicated that these factors influence the perceptions of domestic violence victims.

A correlational analysis of the data collected in this study indicated that there was a significant negative correlation between attitudes towards women and victim blame. On the Attitudes Towards Women scale (See Appendix C), a higher the score indicates that an individual has a more pro-feminine and non-traditional views towards gender roles; a lower score indicates a more traditional perspective of women and gender roles. In this study, a more pro-feminine view was associated with lower victim blame, regardless of the participant's biological sex. Specifically, a higher score on the Attitudes Towards Women scale was related to a decreased likelihood that the participant would blame the victim. These results appear to support previous research on victim blame and attitudes about women and gender roles (Reddy et al., 1997).

Contrary to the initial hypotheses, the ethnic composition of the relationship did not influence the amount of blame that was placed on the victim. Previous research in the area of mixed-race couples indicated that the victims of domestic violence in mixed-race relationships were more likely to be blamed for abuse than victims of their same ethnicity that were involved in a relationship in which the couple was of the same racial background (Meade, 2001). It was therefore believed that the victims in the mixed-race conditions would be viewed in a harsher manner by participants and be blamed more for their abuse. When Meade's trend was paired with the negative stereotypes of Hispanic men—for example, they beat their wives and commit unpredictable acts of violence (Gutmann, 1996)—it was believed that the victim of domestic violence in the mixed-race condition in which a Caucasian woman was dating a Hispanic man would have the highest amount of blame placed upon the victim. This was not the case in this study. Participants did not blame the victim more in the mixed-race relationships. In fact, participants were least likely to blame the victim across all the relationship conditions when other sources of blame such as the perpetrator and society were factored in. Although the results of this study do not support previous research in this area, it does not necessarily indicate that the ethnic composition of a relationship does not play a role in how domestic violence victims are perceived. Not only is there limited research in the area of mixed-race couples and domestic violence, there are also numerous factors may have influenced these results.

Social desirability is one factor that potentially influenced the results of this study. Social desirability is the tendency for an individual to respond in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Individuals respond to certain situations in specific ways because these responses have been deemed appropriate to them through experience. Basically, they respond in a way so other people will perceive them as a "good" person, despite the fact that the individual may have some internalized biases. In this particular study, social desirability plays a role in how participants *report* their perceptions of the victim. As a member of society, a majority of people know that they probably should not blame a victim for a crime that is committed against them. An individual may believe that the victim should be blamed, but do not want to admit that they find fault with the victim because admitting this fact would make them look "bad." In perception studies, it is inevitable that researchers will encounter the effects of social desirability, and there are limited ways to minimize its effects.

A potential influencing factor could also be the strength of the manipulation. The ethnicity of the perpetrator and the victim were manipulated through a name change, with stereotypical ethnic names (See Appendix A). Over 50 percent of the participants were unable to identify the ethnicity of the perpetrator and the victim; only 33 percent of participants were able to correctly identify the ethnicity of both. While it is possible that participants did not remember the ethnicity of the two people in the vignette that they read, social desirability may also play a role in their responses. It is possible that participants *were* able to identify the ethnicity of the perpetrator and the victim based on the name, but did not want to admit that they were using stereotypes to identify either the victim or the perpetrator. Admitting that they could perceive a difference in ethnicity based on name would be admitting to being racist, which is not viewed positively in our society. Additionally, the domestic violence case provided may not have been severe enough in nature to provoke a strong response from respondents (See Appendix A). Using a more

severe case example and providing more detailed descriptions of the individuals that comprise the relationship would be one way future researchers could perhaps obtain different results.

The sample composition could have also affected the results. Eighty-seven percent of the participants of this study were Caucasian college undergraduates, with a median age of 19. It is possible that a more diverse sample would have yielded different results. Undoubtedly, a more diverse sample could survey individuals with more diverse experiences and perspectives, which would yield more diverse responses, or diverse perceptions on how and where the blame should be placed. In addition to the ethnic composition of the sample, the gender ratio of participants potentially influenced the results. The sample was almost 70 percent female. In general, previous studies have shown that male perceivers have a greater tendency than female perceivers to blame victims of intimate partner violence for the abuse (Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Reddy et al., 1997). This was not confirmed by this study; male and female participants were equally likely to blame the victim. However, since the sample was not equally representative of both genders, the results were skewed in favor of the victim, since women in general are less likely to blame a victim for abuse. A more equivalent male to female ratio could potentially counter this effect. Future research in this area should draw from a more gender-, racially- and age-diverse sample, to gain a greater perspective on how domestic violence victims in mixed-race relationships are perceived.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Bianca Basten, Ph.D. and the Psychology Honors Program Coordinator Betsy Morgan, Ph.D. for their guidance and support throughout this project. I would also like to acknowledge the UW-La Crosse Psychology Department and the Undergraduate Research Committee for their financial assistance.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Vignette Condition A – Caucasian Male/Caucasian Female

Mary Jones first met John Williams during the fall semester while working for campus food services at their college. The two later discovered they were in the same biology class, and would often study together before or after work. The two got along well and became good friends. After about a month, John worked up the courage to ask Mary on a date. Mary was very flattered, and since she enjoyed being around the polite, agreeable John, she agreed to go out with him. The two began dating and spending more time together. For the last seven months, John Williams and Mary Jones have been in a committed dating relationship.

The past couple months have been rough. The two have different class and work schedules this semester, and have been unable to spend as much time together as they would like to. They try to schedule certain times during the week to hang out together, but sometimes have to cancel due to unexpected work and school responsibilities. John's behavior has also changed slightly in the last few months. Recently, John has wanted Mary to spend all of her free time with him and grows upset if she hangs out with her other friends. He has grown overprotective, and often questions Mary about what she does when she is not hanging out with him.

One evening while returning from work, John saw Mary talking to another guy outside the student center. He returned to his room and waited for Mary to arrive for their movie night. Mary arrived at John's room ten minutes later than they planned; she apologized profusely, saying she had lost track of time. John asked her what she had been doing; Mary told him that she had been working on an assignment. John nodded and then said he didn't believe her because he had seen Mary talking outside the student center with "some guy." Mary laughed and told John that the guy was a friend of hers; they had been working on a group project together and were having a last minute discussion about their assignment. John said he still didn't believe her, and accused Mary of "having a thing" for the guy he had seen her with. Mary denied this, but John kept insisting, over and over, that she liked this other guy. Mary shook her head in disagreement, and suddenly John slapped her across the face. John then told Mary that he had better not ever see her talking to "that guy" again, or any other guy for that matter, and didn't want her to hang out with anyone but him for the next week.

Alternate Vignettes – Ethnicity Manipulated Through Name Change

Condition B: Caucasian male/Hispanic female – John Williams & María Sanchez

Condition C: Hispanic male/Caucasian female – José Rodriguez & Mary Jones

Condition D: Hispanic male/Hispanic female – José Rodriguez & María Sanchez

APPENDIX B

*Domestic Violence Blame Scale**

1. The amount of sex and violence in the media today strongly influenced the boyfriend to physically assault his girlfriend.
2. The boyfriend who physically assaulted his girlfriend should be locked up for the act.
3. The boyfriend who physically assaulted his girlfriend is "mentally ill" or psychologically disturbed.
4. Domestic violence can be mainly attributed to peculiarities in the boyfriend's personality.
5. It is the girlfriend who provoked the boyfriend to physically assault her.
6. The girlfriend encouraged domestic violence by using bad judgment, provoking the boyfriend's anger, and so on.
7. The girlfriend was physically assaulted by her boyfriend because she deserved it.
8. Domestic violence can be avoided by the girlfriend trying harder to please her boyfriend.
9. As stress on the relationship increased, so did the probability of domestic violence.
10. The boyfriend who physically assaulted his girlfriend cannot control his violent behavior.
11. The boyfriend who physically assaulted his girlfriend had a dominant, aggressive father who also engaged in domestic violence.
12. The rise of the "women's movement" and feminism has increased the occurrence of domestic violence.
13. Girlfriends exaggerate the physical and psychological effects of domestic violence.

14. In our society, it is a boyfriend's prerogative to strike his girlfriend in his own home.
15. Boyfriends physically strike their girlfriends because in our society this is defined as acceptable masculine behavior.

**Responding to the DVBS*

Participants were asked to keep the vignette they had just read in mind as they responded to the above questions. Participants indicated their agreement or disagreement to each of the above statements on a six-point scale that accompanied each item:

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 strongly agree

Scoring the DVBS

Add the individual responses for the items listed in each factor and divide by the appropriate number to obtain each factor score mean. Mean scores will range from 1 to 6, with scores higher or lower than 3.5 indicating some amount of relative agreement or disagreement that the factor is blameworthy for the occurrence of domestic violence.

Victim Blame Questions: 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14

Perpetrator Blame Questions: 2, 3, 4, 10, 11

Societal Blame Questions: 1, 9, 15

APPENDIX C

Attitudes Towards Women⁺

1. Telling dirty jokes should be mostly a masculine prerogative.
2. Women should take increasing responsibility for leadership in solving the intellectual and social problems of the day.
3. Under modern economic conditions with women being active outside the home, men should share in household tasks such as washing dishes and doing the laundry.
4. The husband should not be favored by law over the wife in the disposal of family property or income.
5. Sons in a family should be given more encouragement to go to college than daughters.
6. On the average, women should be regarded as less capable of contributing to economic production than are men.
7. Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers.
8. In general, I believe the father should have greater authority than the mother in the bringing up of children.
9. The intellectual leadership of a community should be largely in the hands of men.
10. Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men.
11. Women should be given equal opportunity with men for apprenticeship in the various trades.
12. There should be a strict merit system in job appointment and promotion without regard to sex.

⁺Responding to the ATW

Participants were given four options to choose from in responding to the above questions for the Attitudes Towards Women scale:

- A. Agree strongly
- B. Agree mildly
- C. Disagree mildly
- D. Disagree strongly

Scoring the ATW

In scoring the items, A=1, B=2, C=3, and D=4 except for the items where the scale is reversed (*Items 2, 3, 4, 10, 11, 12 are reverse scored). A high score indicates a pro-feminist, egalitarian attitude while a low score indicates a traditional, conservative attitude.

APPENDIX D

Demographic Questions

Instructions: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Your responses are completely confidential and cannot be connected to you in any manner.

1. Age: _____
2. Sex
☐ Male
☐ Female
3. Year in school
☐ Freshman
☐ Sophomore
☐ Junior
☐ Senior
☐ Other
4. What is your major? _____
5. Please indicate your ethnicity/race. Select all that apply.
☐ Asian
☐ Hispanic/Latino/Chicano
☐ African American
☐ Caucasian
☐ Native American
☐ Other
6. How much exposure to cultures other than your own did you have growing up?
 No Exposure Some Exposure Daily Exposure
 Exposure: 0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100
7. How much exposure to the Hispanic culture did you have growing up?
 No Exposure Some Exposure Daily Exposure
 Exposure: 0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100
8. Do you know someone who has been in a mixed race relationship? (i.e. the individuals in the relationship are from two different ethnic or racial backgrounds) Select all that apply.
☐ Yes, I have been/am in a mixed race relationship
☐ Yes, a friend of mine was/is in a mixed race relationship
☐ Yes, a family member was/is in a mixed race relationship
☐ No, I do not know anyone who has been in a mixed race relationship
9. If you know someone who has been in a mixed race relationship, what was the race/ethnicity of the individuals in that couple? _____

The following questions are personal in nature. Your responses to the following questions will be kept completely confidential, and cannot be connected to you in any manner. Please answer as truthfully as possible. If you do not feel comfortable answering the question, please select "prefer not to answer."

10. Has someone you know ever been a victim of domestic or dating violence? (E.g. rape, physical or mental/emotional abuse, threats of abuse, etc)
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Prefer not to answer
11. If yes, please indicate which type(s) of domestic or dating violence were experienced. Select all that apply.
☐ Rape
☐ Physical abuse (pushing, slapping, beating)
☐ Mental/Emotional abuse
☐ Threats of abuse
☐ Stalking
12. Have you ever been a victim of domestic or dating violence? (e.g. rape, physical or mental/emotional abuse, threats of abuse, etc)
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Prefer not to answer
13. If yes, please indicate which type(s) of domestic or dating violence were experienced. Select all that apply.
☐ Rape
☐ Physical abuse (pushing, slapping, beating)

- ☐ Mental/Emotional abuse
 - ☐ Threats of abuse
 - ☐ Stalking
14. What ethnicity was the female in the scenario you read?
- ☐ Caucasian
 - ☐ Hispanic/Latina/Chicana
 - ☐ African American
 - ☐ Couldn't tell
15. What ethnicity was the male in the scenario you read?
- ☐ Caucasian
 - ☐ Hispanic/Latina/Chicana
 - ☐ African American
 - ☐ Couldn't tell