

Behind Closed Doors: A look at sex and gender roles of abuser in monogamous heterosexual relationships and how they influence perceptions of severity of abuse

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Introduction

Domestic abuse has always been a dirty little secret that has remained quiet or gone unchallenged until the past few decades. Once attention was brought to the matter many people began to open their closed doors and tried to seek help. Recently however, it has been thrust into the limelight of popular culture in the past several years through celebrity couples' relationships and their omnipresence in the media. Popular R&B couple Chris Brown and Rihanna seemed like America's sweethearts until early 2009 when Brown severely brutalized Rihanna, opening up the horrifying secret of abuse in their relationship (MSNBC, 2009). Later that same year, golfer Tiger Woods and supermodel wife Elin Nordegren got into an argument when news of Wood's infidelity surfaced and which drove Elin to attack him, ironically, with his own golf club (Huffington Post, 2009). While celebrity gossip is always entertaining, there lies a more profound issue here. The fact of the matter is that when Rihanna (a female) was victimized, the whole world felt such empathy for her and the result was Brown's record sales and fan support dropped dramatically. In the case of Woods and Nordegren, society's reaction was different. They chose to laugh off and make jokes over Nordegren beating upon Wood's. Following the incident were spoofs about it on popular television show Saturday Night Live and other major programs. It is my hypothesis that the gender of the abuser in monogamous heterosexual relationships will influence perceptions of severity/seriousness of abuse.



STORY HIGHLIGHTS

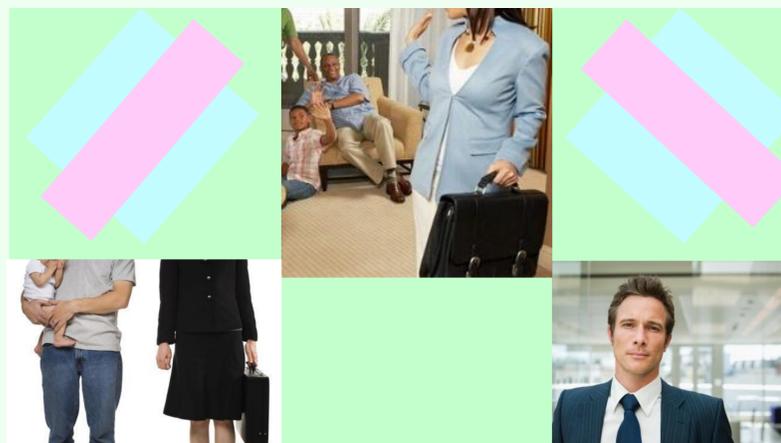
Note: E/S indicates that characters (Evelyn or Scott) were switched between conditions, so that either the wife or husband was the abuser, and the couple either had traditional or non-traditional gender roles.

HEADLING: A wife (or husband) brutalized by her husband (or wife)

Last night, Seattle residents Scott (or Evelyn) Biers, a corporate business analyst for Thompson West, and E/S Biers, a stay-at-home mother (or Father) of two children under the age of ten, got into a domestic altercation, which resulted in a hospitalized E/S.

E/S was reportedly making dinner when her husband / his wife, an habitually volatile (wo)man, arrived home after work and began yelling. E/S soon became extremely aggressive... S/he physically pushed E/S to the brink of the staircase, and struck him/her with the broom. E/S tumbled down the staircase where (s)he remained unconscious.

A neighbor who heard the commotion dialed the police, who arrived on the scene and rushed E/S to the emergency room. This was not the first domestic dispute between Scott and Evelyn. As for their two children, E/S has never struck the boys. E/S is being held in the county jail on charges of domestic assault.



Methods

Male and female undergraduate students (N=42) from a small, Midwestern university participated in the study. Participants were asked to carefully read through a short news article, which was altered slightly between the conditions in order to convey the independent variables. The article depicted a story of a repeatedly abusive individual who attacked his/her spouse by bludgeoning the victim in the head with a broom and then the victim falling down the stairs. Afterwards, the subjects were then asked to complete a survey that asked questions regarding severity of the crime that was described in the corresponding news article.

Design

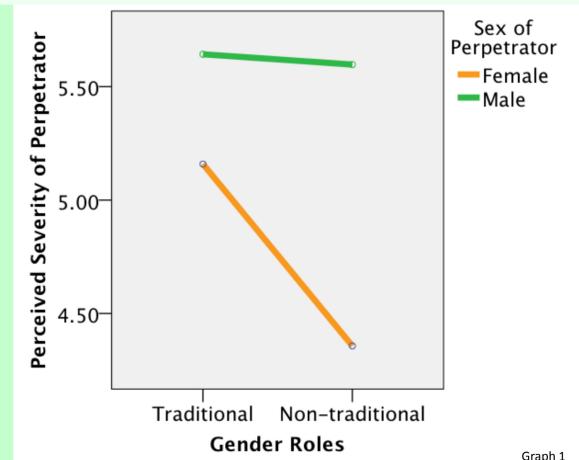
These questions were set up on a seven-point Likert scale. For example: "The severity of this crime warrants legal repercussions." The subject would then indicate on the Likert scale where his or her beliefs stood (1 – *strongly disagree* to 7 – *strongly agree*).

Sex of Perpetrator

Two conditions had the scenario in the news article set up where the husband was the abuser/perpetrator with the wife as the victim and two conditions had it set up where the wife was the abuser/perpetrator and the husband as the victim.

Gender Roles of Spouses

Two conditions contained traditional gender roles where the husband was working outside of the house as a businessman and the wife was a stay-at-home mother. The other two conditions contained non-traditional gender roles where the wife was working outside the house as a businesswoman and the husband was a stay-at-home father.



Graph 1

Gender Roles	Sex (of perpetrator)	Mean	St. Dev.
Traditional	Male	5.6429	.55328
	Female	5.1587	.60796
Non-traditional	Male	5.5974	.47302
	Female	4.3571	.60703

Main Effect: Gender Roles $F(1,38) = 5.96, p < .019$
Main Effect: Sex of Perpetrator $F(1,38) = 24.69, p < .001$
*Interaction: Gender Roles and Sex $F(1,38) = 4.74, p < .036$

Results & Discussion

After looking over the results that have been collected, there are some points that are worth mentioning. The main effect of the "Sex of Perpetrator" appears to be larger than it may actually be because of the condition in which the the wife was a businesswoman and was abusive to her stay-at-home husband. This being said, there is no denying the significance that males were judged more harshly regardless of gender roles. This fits with the hypothesis perfectly. The largest curiosity resides in that fourth condition (in which the female was a businesswoman and abusive). A personal belief is that subjects in this condition were presented with two separate anomalies that defy the average situation in American families – both the female being the breadwinner of the family as well as her being abusive to her husband – that they were uncertain of how to feel as no schema exists for this type of situation. Ultimately, one may contend that seeing males in a position of stereotyped weakness (a stay-at-home father) may lead them to lack empathy for his situation given his choice of lifestyle. However, there are many possible explanations and more research must be done to determine anything farther. There were also two limitations within this study. First, the sample size is quite small, which may lead to error. Second, there were only a few males who participated in the study. Gender differences may call for different results if the sample was more representative of both males and females. Ultimately, we must be cautious in making connections between gender roles and domestic violence perceptions, but the results are very interesting to ponder. So far what has been elicited is purely descriptive.