RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTION FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A STUDY OF CHINESE PUBLIC SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

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This study examined how Chinese public service professionals attributed responsibility to victims and perpetrators of violence against women (VAW). A total of 2,308 Chinese public service professionals in Hong Kong completed questionnaires on attitudes toward women, VAW-related perceptions, and assignment of responsibility to actors in written VAW vignettes. Compared to agency professionals consisting of medical doctors, lawyers, and police officers, communal professionals consisting of psychologists, social workers, and nurses attributed a higher level of responsibility to VAW victims and perpetrators. For both professional groups, attitudes toward women and educational attainment were the most salient predictors of responsibility attribution to VAW victims and perpetrators. Perceived VAW effects on victims were also a robust predictor of responsibility attribution to perpetrators. With regard to group differences, gender was predictive of responsibility attribution for communal but not for agency professionals. Except for perpetrator responsibility attribution for agency professionals, age was also predictive of how professionals assigned responsibility to VAW victims and perpetrators.

Violence against women (VAW) has become an important public health issue and research topic for scholars across various disciplines in many countries (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Koss, 1990, 2000; Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita, & Russo, 1994). In a broad sense, VAW includes homicide, battery and assault, sexual harassment, rape, child and elder abuse, incest, and wife battering (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Koss, 1990). The present study aims to examine various factors associated with public service professionals' attribution of responsibility to VAW victims and perpetrators. An understanding of these factors is important as they will determine how public service professionals view and treat VAW victims and perpetrators as well as how policymakers gauge the amount of societal resources for services and prevention of VAW (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996; Finn & Stalans, 1995; Koss, 2000; Koss et al., 1994).

Factors Associated With Responsibility Attribution

Attributions are explanations that people offer to explain why certain events happen. They involve people's perceptions of events, and thus are not statements of absolute truth that can be proven. Attributions of cause, responsibility, and blame are hierarchically related to each other (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Calhoun & Townsley, 1991; Shaver & Drown, 1986). For blame to be attributed to someone, both responsibility and cause must be attributed; and for responsibility to be attributed to someone, cause must be attributed as well. Furthermore, responsibility attribution is continuous and multidimensional, that is, people can attribute various degrees or levels of responsibility to victims and perpetrators of negative events (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Calhoun & Townsley, 1991; Storma, Lang, & Stritzke, 1997; Whatley, 1996). Responsibility attribution also varies according to subjective factors such as ethical and moral values, differences in available information, and past experiences. Characteristics of observers as well as victims and perpetrators of negative events also variously influence people's responsibility attribution (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Calhoun & Townsley, 1991; Coller & Resick, 1987; Deitz, Littman, & Bentley, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994; Whatley, 1996). As the present study aims to examine human service professionals' responsibility attribution to VAW victims and perpetrators, the following literature review will focus on the influences of observer characteristics.