

Police Involvement in Cases of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women

The Influence of Perceived Severity and Personal Responsibility

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The influence of perceived severity and sense of personal responsibility of police officers on their level of involvement in cases of intimate partner violence against women is analyzed. Three levels of police involvement are considered: low, medium, and high. The sample consists of 143 Spanish police officers. A $2 \times 2 \times 3$ factorial design is conducted to test hypotheses. Effects of perceived severity and personal responsibility are found only at the highest level of police involvement. For low and medium levels of involvement, no differences in perceived severity and personal responsibility of police officers are found.

Keywords: *intimate partner violence; police; responsibility*

The police response to incidents of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is not only one of the few mechanisms available to victims to stop the violence but also plays an important symbolic function because it represents societal disapproval and reprobation (Holder, 2001). As Brown (1984) put it, “since domestic violence in particular tends to transpire in private environments, victims or witnesses of these assaults must generally call the police if the law is to be set in motion and symbolize society’s condemnation of violence” (p. 278). Yet a police officer’s discretion will play an important role in determining the response to a particular incident of IPVAW. In this article, we analyze the influence of police officers’ perception of the severity of incidents of IPVAW and their sense of personal responsibility on their level of involvement in response to cases of IPVAW.

When there are no mandatory laws that restrict the discretion of police in handling incidents of IPVAW—and even when there are—the same incident of IPVAW can receive different police responses depending on extralegal criteria. According to

scholars (e.g., Avakame & Fyfe, 2001; Belknap, 1995; Hart, 1993; Robinson & Stroshine, 2005; Smith, 2000), the classic police response can be characterized by indifference, leniency, and victim-blaming attitudes, with no real police involvement and a bias against making arrests, as domestic violence tends to be considered a family or private problem and not a police problem (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996). For example, Brown (1984) found that the police rarely made referrals to helping agencies and that the most common police action was to talk to the assaulter or batterer. Also, as Jordan's (2004) review shows, police have historically been reluctant to arrest domestic violence offenders, even when the incident involved physical injuries to the victim. The higher arrest rates are found more recently, ranging from 29% to 36% of cases (Bourg & Stock, 1994; Buzawa & Hotaling, 2000; Mignon & Holmes, 1995; Robinson & Chandek, 2000).¹

For the victims and the bystanders, the type of police response to incidents of IPVAW (e.g., noninvolvement, advice, mediation, laying charges, or arrest) is also highly symbolic, because it represents the level of social tolerance to and the threshold from which a conduct is considered criminal or not, and accordingly, whether or not it deserves societal punishment (Brown, 1984; Gracia, 2004; Holder, 2001). Police attitudes and responses to IPVAW not only play an important role in shaping the social environment (of tolerance or intolerance) in which victims are embedded but also have an important effect on victims' satisfaction with the police and victims' personal well-being. For example, research has shown that positive police responses enhance victims' self-image, encourage them to seek mobilization of the law, increase victim satisfaction with the police, as well as their willingness to call the police for help in the future (Apsler, Cummins, & Carl, 2003; Brandl & Horvath, 1991; Brown, 1984; Chandek, 1999; Martin, 1997). However, negative police responses and attitudes are among victims' reasons for not reporting incidents of IPVAW (Erez & Belknap, 1998; Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002; Hoyle, 1998; Wiehe, 1998).

Police response policies to IPVAW can be organized into three categories (Egan, 1999): (a) mediative policies in which the police act as a peacemaker or mediator, offering conversation, giving advice, or maintaining a presence until the offender calms down or the situation otherwise dissipates; (b) proarrest policies that encourage arrest in domestic violence cases but leave the discretion to the officers; and (c) mandatory arrest policies that dictate that arrest must take place whenever probable cause exists, even in misdemeanor offenses. Research has traditionally focused on the effects (e.g., the effect of arresting domestic violence suspects on their subsequent behavior) of different police approaches to policing domestic violence (see Fagan, 1996; National Institute of Justice, 1998; Sherman & Berk, 1984; Sherman, Schmidt, & Rogan, 1992). Jordan (2004) summarizes in three areas the empirical research examining police responses to violence against women: factors that influence help seeking by victims, patterns of arrest, and the effectiveness of arrest practices by law enforcement officers (also see Sherman, 2005; Sherman et al., 1992). However, there has been less attention paid to psychosocial factors influencing types

of police responses (e.g., nonintervention, mediation, laying charges, or arrest), an issue that becomes particularly salient when there are no mandatory arrest policies that restrict the discretion of police, as is the case in Spain, where the study reported here was conducted.²

The Present Study

Research has explored different sets of variables influencing police decisions (mainly the decision to arrest). For example, a review by Robinson and Chandek (2000) identified three sets of variables associated with arrest decisions in cases of domestic violence: demographic characteristics of victims, offenders, and police officers (e.g., gender, length of experience); attitudinal variables (e.g., victim preference for arrest or officer's perception that the victim will drop charges or is uncooperative); and situational variables (e.g., weapons involved, repeated incidents, presence of additional witnesses; also see Jordan, 2004). However, research has paid less attention to the influence of these variables in determining the level of police involvement in IPVAW, ranging from mediative responses (talking, advising, or mediating) to law enforcement actions (completing a crime report, laying charges, or making an arrest) either in response to the victim's wishes or at police discretion. The present study aims to contribute to this body of literature by studying the influence of two relatively unexplored variables on the level of police involvement in cases of IPVAW incidents: the perceived severity of the incident and sense of personal responsibility.

Although research has observed that the severity of the violence is positively correlated with victims' police contact (e.g., Bachman & Coker, 1995; Johnson, 1990), less attention has been paid to how officers' appraisal of the severity of the incident influences their responses to IPVAW. For example, research shows that in cases of minor assaults, the police are less likely to make an arrest when the suspect is an intimate partner of the victim than when the suspect is an identifiable stranger (Felson & Ackerman, 2001). Police responses may also depend on the perceived severity of all or only certain types of incidents of IPVAW. For example, if IPVAW is considered by police officers as such only when it involves extreme, severe, or repeated violence, it is more likely that some violence (minor incidents) toward women in intimate relationships may be deemed acceptable or tolerable (Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Loseke, 1989; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). Research on bystander intervention showed that violence between intimates is perceived as less serious than violence between strangers (Shotland & Straw, 1976). Thus, incidents of IPVAW appraised as "not serious enough" (Gracia, 1995) will probably get a low involvement police response (nonintervention, talking or advising, or responding only at the victim's request).

In this article, we also explore the influence of police officers' sense of personal responsibility on their responses to incidents of IPVAW. Personal responsibility refers to the sense of obligation to a situation (e.g., "it is not my business"), and in terms of behavior management as an internal reason to act, it can be related to self-directed

behaviors (Watson & Tharp, 1993). According to the psychosocial research tradition on helping behavior (see Batson, 1998, for a review), a number of factors, such as the relationship between victim and offender, victim-blaming beliefs, and the norm of privacy may diminish the sense of personal responsibility of bystanders, reducing the probability of help being offered.³ For example, bystander research has shown that people are more reluctant to intervene when the victim and the perpetrator are perceived to be related (e.g., dating couples, spouses, other family; Levine, 1999; Shotland & Straw, 1976). A review by Jordan (2004) suggests that police officers are less likely to arrest intimate partner offenders than nonintimate partners who commit physical assault or rape. Also, research has shown that those who are believed to cause their own troubles (i.e., it is their responsibility, not mine) are less likely to receive help (Lerner, 1970, 1980; Weiner, 1980). For example, research in Europe has found widespread victim-blaming attitudes that contribute to a climate of social acceptability of IPVAV (European Commission, 1999; Gracia & Herrero, 2006). These victim-blaming attitudes, as they diminish the sense of personal responsibility, may also influence the level of police involvement in cases of IPVAV (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996). Finally, as Darley and Latané (1970) point out, the collision between norms for helping (e.g., “help those in trouble”) and norms for not helping (e.g., “mind your own business”) may be particularly salient when intimate partner violence is perceived as a private or family matter, reducing the sense of personal responsibility and influencing police responses to IPVAV (e.g., Bell, 1985; Brown, 1984; Felson et al., 2002). In terms of a cost-reward model of helping behavior (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981), the lower the sense of responsibility to help, the lower the psychological costs for not helping, and the lower the probability of help being offered. Therefore, we expect that the lower the sense of responsibility of police officers in cases of IPVAV, the lower the level of their involvement.

Drawing from these ideas, in this article we analyze the influence of perceived severity of incidents of IPVAV and the sense of personal responsibility on the level of police involvement in response to incidents of IPVAV. Three levels of police involvement are considered: (a) low involvement, characterized by mediative responses (such as talking, advice, and mediation); (b) medium involvement, characterized by conditional law enforcement responses (i.e., law enforcement actions that are set in motion only at the victim’s request); and (c) high involvement, characterized by unrestricted law enforcement responses (i.e., law enforcement actions, such as completing a crime report, laying charges, or making an arrest that are set in motion, regardless of the victim’s preferences). The following hypotheses will be tested:

1. The greater the perceived severity of incidents of IPVAV, the greater the level of police involvement.
2. The greater the sense of personal responsibility, the greater the level of police involvement.

Finally, we used three demographic controls (gender, age, and years of experience as a police officer) that might be related to the outcome variables. Research shows that for any offense, female officers are less likely to make arrests than male officers (Robinson & Chandek, 2000). In relation to the domestic violence arrest decisions, Robinson and Chandek suggest that this is because female officers are more likely to adhere to victims' preferences than to policy mandates. Robinson and Chandek's review also suggests that older or more experienced officers made fewer arrests than younger officers.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty-three Spanish police officers (115 men, 28 women) participated in the study. The study was carried out in a large metropolitan area (Valencia, Spain), which has about one million inhabitants (the third largest metropolitan area in Spain). Participants in the study were recruited during a compulsory training course for professional promotion of police officers. All participants were in the first stages of their professional careers (the age of participants ranged from 18 to 38; years of experience as a police officer ranged from 1 to 6). The sample corresponded with the total number of police officers participating in the training course, and all of them agreed to participate in the study. Questionnaires were administered collectively in one session. Anonymity of responses was ensured.

Measures

To measure variables of interest in this study, we developed eight hypothetical scenarios describing incidents of IPVAW (see Appendix). Selection of these hypothetical scenarios was based on items used in the Spanish National Incidence Survey (Instituto de la Mujer, 2003) and on the advice and experience of community-based experts dealing with the problem of IPVAW (social services personnel and senior police officers) who were assembled to assist in the development of the instrument (see Schuller & Stewart, 2000; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005, for a similar approach).

Perceived severity. Perceived severity of incidents of IPVAW was evaluated using a scale in which participants had to rate on a 10-point scale the severity of eight hypothetical scenarios of IPVAW (e.g., "A couple has an argument, he hits the woman, and later asks for her forgiveness," "A woman is threatened and insulted constantly by her partner, who sometimes pushes or hits her"). Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was .88. A general index was obtained averaging the eight raw responses so that higher scores represent higher perceived severity of incidents of IPVAW (highest score for the scale = 10).

Personal responsibility. Sense of personal responsibility to act in cases of IPVAW was evaluated by participants who rated on a 10-point scale their sense of personal responsibility to act in the same eight hypothetical scenarios of IPVAW. Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was .90. A general index was obtained averaging the eight raw responses so that higher scores represent a greater sense of personal responsibility (highest score for the scale = 10).

Level of police involvement in cases of IPVAW. Levels of police involvement in cases of IPVAW were evaluated using a scale in which participants had to decide whether they would (yes) or would not (no) use different responses to eight hypothetical scenarios of IPVAW (same as those used in the above scales). Seven different responses to the hypothetical scenarios of IPVAW represented three levels of police involvement: (a) low involvement was evaluated with five items representing mediative responses (e.g., "I would talk to relatives," "I would offer advice to the couple," "I would reprimand the man"), Cronbach's alpha = .79; (b) medium involvement was evaluated with an item representing a conditional law enforcement response ("I would apply law enforcement actions only if the victim wishes so"), Cronbach's alpha = .64; (c) high involvement was evaluated with an item representing an unrestricted law enforcement response ("I would apply law enforcement actions regardless of the victim's wishes"), Cronbach's alpha = .78. Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was .71. For each respondent, a score for each level of police involvement (low, medium, and high) was computed. Modification was made to change the response scale from yes or no to a 10-point scale to keep this scale consistent with the other scales.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

First, we tested for differences in the variables of interest (perceived severity of incidents of IPVAW, sense of personal responsibility, and level of police involvement) as a function of three demographic controls (gender, age, and years of experience as a police officer). Three one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) for gender (men vs. women), age (18-25, 26-30, and > 30 years old), and years of experience as a police officer (< 2 years vs. \geq 2 years) revealed no significant differences (see Table 1). Although no differences were found between the groups, no differences were expected given the lack of variation in age and years of experience as police officers and the small number of women in the sample.

Table 1
One-Way ANOVAs Between Groups of Demographic Variables

Variable	Severity		Responsibility		Low Police Involvement		Medium Police Involvement		High Police Involvement	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender $\Lambda = .979$, $F(5, 134) = .58, p > .05$										
Men ($n = 114$)	8.27	1.13	7.36	1.58	1.90	0.85	1.77	1.36	4.83	2.48
Women ($n = 26$)	8.36	0.84	7.38	1.29	1.98	0.57	1.35	0.62	4.81	2.47
Age $\Lambda = .947$, $F(10, 266) = .74, p > .05$										
18-25 years ($n = 41$)	8.26	0.86	7.46	1.47	1.85	0.64	1.66	1.18	4.79	2.95
26-30 years ($n = 75$)	8.23	1.26	7.33	1.46	2.00	0.92	1.68	1.29	4.63	1.99
More than 30 years ($n = 24$)	8.51	0.77	7.34	1.85	1.77	0.65	1.80	1.35	5.50	2.87
Years being a police officer $\Lambda = .962$, $F(5, 134) = 1.05, p > .05$										
Fewer than 2 years ($n = 67$)	8.19	1.16	7.22	1.45	1.99	0.97	1.64	1.35	4.95	2.30
2 years or more ($n = 73$)	8.38	1.00	7.50	1.59	1.84	0.63	1.74	1.19	4.71	2.62

Note: *ns* are of groups with listwise deletion.

Perceived Severity, Personal Responsibility, and Level of Police Involvement in Cases of IPVAW

A repeated-measures ANOVA (with Greenhouse-Geisser correction) was computed to examine the effects of perceived severity (low vs. high) and personal responsibility (low vs. high) on levels of police involvement (low, medium, and high). For this analysis, groups of perceived severity (low vs. high) and personal responsibility (low vs. high) were formed according to the median score of each scale. The factorial structure ($2 \times 2 \times 3$) had 12 cells with 35 observations in each cell (valid cases were 140, three participants were missing data on the scale of personal responsibility). The results (see Table 2) yielded main effects of perceived severity, $F(1, 136) = 11.31, p = .001$; feelings of personal responsibility, $F(1, 136) = 22.88, p < .001$; and level of police involvement, $F(1.4, 194.9) = 150.11, p < .001$, as well as the interactions between perceived severity and level of police involvement, $F(1.4, 194.9) = 3.88, p = .035$, and between personal responsibility and level of police involvement, $F(1.4, 194.9) = 14.95, p < .001$.

To examine the interaction between perceived severity and levels of police involvement (see Figure 1 and Table 3), simple effects of police involvement within

Table 2
Perceived Severity, Personal Responsibility, and Level of
Police Involvement: 2 × 2 × 3 Factorial Design

Source	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value	Partial Eta-Squared
Within-subjects			
Police Involvement	150.11 ^a	< .001	.525
Severity × Involvement	3.88 ^a	.035	.028
Responsibility × Involvement	14.95 ^a	< .001	.099
Severity × Responsibility × Involvement	0.08 ^a	.862	.001
Between-subjects			
Perceived severity	11.31 ^b	.001	.077
Personal responsibility	22.88 ^b	<.001	.144
Severity × Responsibility	.75 ^b	.388	.005

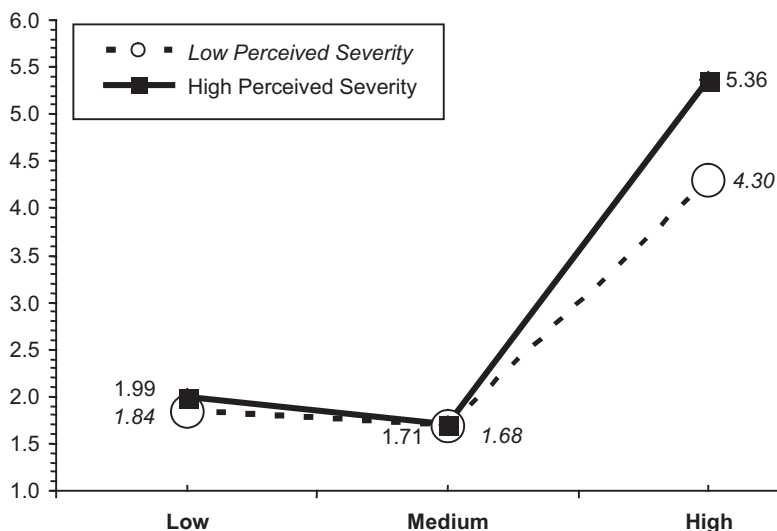
a. Greenhouse-Geisser = .717; $DF_{\text{numerator}} = 1.433$, $DF_{\text{denominator}} = 194.926$.

b. $DF_{\text{numerator}} = 1$, $DF_{\text{denominator}} = 136$.

perceived severity groups were tested using Bonferroni adjustment to correct for an experiment-wise Type I error rate (Maxwell & Delaney, 1990) and found to be significant for both the low, $F(1.4, 96.7) = 34.47$, $p < .001$, and high perceived severity groups, $F(1.4, 96.7) = 65.06$, $p < .001$. Police officers in both groups of perceived severity preferred a high level of involvement over medium–low perceived severity: $F(1, 136) = 56.14$, $p < .001$; high perceived severity: $F(1, 136) = 108.88$, $p < .001$, and low–low perceived severity: $F(1, 136) = 68.69$, $p < .001$; high perceived severity: $F(1, 136) = 128.75$, $p < .001$, levels of police involvement in response to the hypothetical incidents of IPVAV (see Table 3). In both severity groups, no significant differences were found between low and medium levels of police involvement (see Table 3). Also, simple effects of perceived severity within police involvement levels were tested using Bonferroni adjustment. No differences between high and low perceived severity groups were found for low and medium levels of police involvement. However, we found significant differences between low and high perceived severity groups for a high level of police involvement, $F(1, 136) = 7.83$, $p = .006$ (see Table 4), which indicates that police officers perceiving incidents of IPVAV as more severe tend to choose the highest level of police involvement (law enforcement actions irrespective of the victim's wishes), as compared to police officers who perceived the same incidents of IPVAV as less severe.

To examine the interaction between personal responsibility and levels of police involvement (see Figure 2 and Table 4), the same procedure was followed. Simple effects of police involvement within responsibility groups were tested and found to be significant both for the low, $F(1.4, 96.7) = 22.14$, $p < .001$, and high personal

Figure 1
Means of Three Levels of Police Involvement (Low, Medium, and High) as a Function of Perceived Severity Levels



responsibility groups, $F(1.4, 96.7) = 85.82, p < .001$. Police officers in both groups of personal responsibility preferred a high level of involvement over medium–low responsibility: $F(1, 136) = 39.66, p < .001$; high responsibility: $F(1, 136) = 135.25, p < .001$, and low–low responsibility: $F(1, 136) = 42.51, p < .001$; high perceived severity: $F(1, 136) = 172.01, p < .001$, levels of police involvement in response to the hypothetical incidents of IPVAW (see Table 4). In both responsibility groups, no significant differences were found between low and medium levels of police involvement (see Table 4). Simple effects of feelings of personal responsibility within police involvement levels were also tested. No differences between high and low responsibility groups were found for low and medium levels of police involvement. However, again we found significant differences between low and high responsibility groups for a high level of police involvement, $F(1, 136) = 24.19, p < .001$ (see Table 4), which indicates that police officers who feel more personally responsible to act in cases of IPVAW tend to choose the highest level of police involvement, as compared to police officers who feel less responsible to act in the same incidents of IPVAW.

Table 3
Simple Effects of Police Involvement Within Perceived Severity
and Perceived Severity Within Police Involvement

Contrast	<i>d</i>	95% Confidence Interval ^a	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i> _{1, 136}	<i>p</i> ^a	Partial Eta-Squared
Low severity						
PI-1 vs. PI-2	.16	-.33 to .66	.185	.79	1.000	.006
PI-1 vs. PI-3	-2.46	-3.25 to -1.66	.296	68.69	< .001	.336
PI-2 vs. PI-3	-2.62	-3.56 to -1.68	.350	56.14	< .001	.292
High severity						
PI-1 vs. PI-2	.29	-.21 to .78	.185	2.39	.747	.017
PI-1 vs. PI-3	-3.36	-4.16 to -2.57	.296	128.75	< .001	.486
PI-2 vs. PI-3	-3.65	-4.58 to -2.71	.350	108.88	< .001	.445
PI-1						
Severity: high vs. low	-.15	-0.49 to .18	.137	1.27	.785	.009
PI-2						
Severity: high vs. low	-.03	-0.55 to .49	.215	.02	1.000	< .001
PI-3						
Severity: high vs. low	-1.06	-1.98 to -.14	.379	7.83	.018	.054

Note: PI-1 = Low police involvement; PI-2 = Medium police involvement; PI-3 = High police involvement.
 a. Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons (six comparisons between levels of police involvement within severity groups and three comparisons between severity groups within levels of police involvement).

Figure 2
Means of Three Levels of Police Involvement (Low, Medium, and High) as a Function of Personal Responsibility Levels

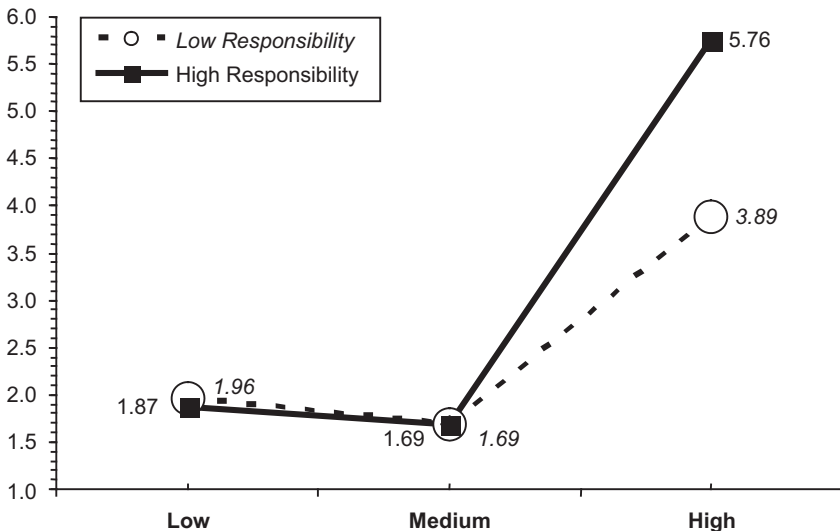


Table 4
Simple Effects of Police Involvement Within Responsibility
and Responsibility Within Police Involvement

Contrast	<i>d</i>	95% Confidence Interval ^a	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i> _{1, 136}	<i>p</i> ^a	Partial Eta-Squared
Low responsibility						
PI-1 vs. PI-2	0.27	-.23 to .77	.185	2.13	.881	.015
PI-1 vs. PI-3	-1.93	-2.73 to -1.14	.296	42.51	< .001	.238
PI-2 vs. PI-3	-2.20	-3.14 to -1.27	.350	39.66	< .001	.226
High responsibility						
PI-1 vs. PI-2	0.18	-.32 to .68	.185	0.95	1.000	.007
PI-1 vs. PI-3	-3.89	-4.68 to -3.09	.296	172.01	< .001	.558
PI-2 vs. PI-3	-4.07	-5.00 to -3.13	.350	135.25	< .001	.499
PI-1						
Responsibility: high vs. low	.09	-.28 to .46	.137	.43	1.000	.003
PI-2						
Responsibility: high vs. low	< .01	-.58 to .58	.215	< .01	1.000	< .001
PI-3						
Responsibility: high vs. low	-1.86	-2.88 to -.85	.379	24.19	< .001	.151

Note: PI-1 = Low police involvement; PI-2 = Medium police involvement; PI-3 = High police involvement.
 a. Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons (six comparisons between levels of police involvement within responsibility groups and three comparisons between responsibility groups within levels of police involvement).

Discussion

The study yielded some interesting results about the influence of perceived severity and personal responsibility of police officers on their level of involvement in cases of IPVAW. The results only partially confirmed our hypotheses because the expected effects of perceived severity and personal responsibility were not found at all levels of police involvement. These variables showed a significant effect only at the highest level of police involvement. For low and medium levels of involvement, differences in perceived severity and personal responsibility of police officers were not significant.

It is also worth noting that the significant effects of our variables of interest (perceived severity and sense of personal responsibility) occurred at the level of involvement considered by police officers in our sample as the most appropriate. Our results showed that police officers, irrespective of their appraisal of the severity of incidents of IPVAW and their sense of personal responsibility, preferred a high level of involvement in response to the hypothetical scenarios of IPVAW. This is somewhat

surprising in light of other studies reporting police responses to cases of IPVAW characterized by indifference, low involvement, or a bias against making arrests (Avakame & Fyfe, 2001; Belknap, 1995; Brown, 1984; Hart, 1993; Jordan, 2004; Robinson & Strohshine, 2005; Smith, 2000). It appears that for our sample of Spanish police officers, the approach to dealing with incidents of IPVAW perceived as most appropriate is to prosecute and criminalize incidents of IPVAW rather than mediating between victims and aggressors or being sensitive to victims' wishes. A possible explanation for this finding is that recent public education efforts (with an important presence of the issue of IPVAW in the mass media) and new legislative initiatives in Spain (e.g., a new bill with a holistic approach to violence against women was passed as recently as December 2004) have made an impact on law enforcement agencies, promoting the perception that the highest level of police involvement is the correct approach to deal with cases of IPVAW. This is a hypothesis worth considering in future studies on the impact of public education and legislative initiatives. Two alternative explanations are that responses reflect the preferences of the relatively young police officers in our sample, as some research suggests that older or more experienced officers preferred lower levels of involvement than younger officers (Robinson & Chandek, 2000) or that they reflect a bias due to social desirability. Although we cannot answer these questions with our data set, the fact that it was at this level of involvement where we found differences between police officers as a function of the perceived severity of incidents and sense of personal responsibility suggests that there is more to it than a mere effect of age or social desirability.

When we examined the effects of perceived severity and personal responsibility within police involvement levels, we found no differences for low and medium levels of police involvement. However, at the highest level of police involvement, we found differences between police officers as a function of their perceived severity and sense of personal responsibility. For the same hypothetical scenarios of IPVAW, those police officers who perceived them as more severe and felt more responsible tend to choose a high level of involvement as compared to those police officers in the groups of low perceived severity and sense of personal responsibility. But why do perceived severity and personal responsibility matter only for high—not for low or medium—levels of police involvement? Even when there are no mandatory laws that restrict the discretion of police, officers are compelled to act if they come across a situation of IPVAW. However, there is an important difference between low and medium levels of involvement on one hand and a high level of involvement on the other hand. For low and medium levels of involvement, police officers have to do something, either talking or advising (e.g., to diffuse a situation, or even advising the victim about the inconveniences of pressing charges), or enforcing the law in response to the victim's request, which is a part of their duties (e.g., filing a report). However, a high level of involvement implies that police officers have to decide to enforce the law (even when they are not requested to do so or against the victim's wishes). And of course, they can decide not to. Clearly, a high level of involvement is more demanding and costly for a police

officer, especially when there are not mandatory policies determining police responses. To enforce the law at their own discretion has important consequences and costs not only for the victims and offenders but also for the police officers (e.g., interviews, evidence collection, testifying, report writing), including psychological costs (e.g., disappointment if the victim drops the charges or is uncooperative). Good reasons are needed to outweigh those costs (Piliavin et al., 1981; Watson & Tharp, 1993), which probably explains why perceived severity and personal responsibility do work at high levels of police involvement but not at medium or low ones. This makes sense both from a decision model of bystander intervention (Latané & Darley, 1970) and from a cost-reward analysis of helping (Piliavin et al., 1981). According to Latané and Darley's model, the decision to act (and how to act) depends on a series of prior decisions that involve the appraisal of how serious a situation is and the decision to take personal responsibility. A cost-reward analysis (Piliavin et al., 1981) proposes that decisions to act (and how to act) depend on the result of weighing the probable costs and rewards of alternative courses of action (e.g., if the psychological costs of not helping are greater than the costs of helping, it is more likely that help will occur). Police have to act when facing a situation of IPVAW, but when they have to act at their own discretion, they also have to decide how to act. In deciding whether a high level of involvement is the appropriate response is when it appears that perceived severity and personal responsibility matter most.

Our research shows that individual differences in perceived severity and personal responsibility influence police responses to IPVAW when a high level of involvement is to be chosen. These results suggest that some police officers are more tolerant than others as they perceive some incidents of IPVAW as less serious and feel less responsible to act. As some research suggests (Felson & Ackerman, 2001; Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Piliavin et al., 1981; Shotland & Straw, 1976), a possible explanation for these differences is that some police officers tend to appraise the severity of the violence between intimate partners as less serious than violence between strangers and therefore feel less responsible. For these officers, it would be more difficult to reach the high level of involvement threshold than for other officers perceiving the same incident as more serious. However, we cannot discard the possibility that for some police officers, all violent incidents, irrespective of whether they occur between strangers or between intimate partners, are perceived as less serious. This possibility would be worth testing in future studies that include in the same research design assessments of police appraisals of both the severity of violent incidents between strangers and intimate partners. Research has also suggested that the perceived relationship between offenders and victims and related social norms of not helping in private matters (Darley & Latané, 1970; Shotland & Straw, 1976) and victim-blaming attitudes (Lerner, 1970; Weiner, 1980) can reduce the sense of personal responsibility and consequently the probability of help being offered (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996). For example, victim-blaming attitudes are still pervasive and become particularly conspicuous in differentiating citizens, including police officers, who tend to accept IPVAW from those who

do not (Gracia & Herrero, 2006). Finally, personality variables, such as a prosocial personality (see Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005) as well as variables at the ecological level, such as levels of social disorder in city areas (Gracia & Herrero, 2007; Herrero & Gracia, 2005), may also influence the perceived severity and sense of personal responsibility of police officers and therefore their level of involvement in cases of IPVAW. Again, the nature of our data does not allow us to fully disentangle the contribution of these variables to explain the differences between police officers observed in our study. Clearly, a direct measure of this set of variables and a multivariate approach would benefit future research on the determinants of police responses to IPVAW incidents.

Our results also illustrate the importance of police training. The fact that for the same scenarios all police officers do not perceive the same severity or have the same sense of personal responsibility reveals areas that should be targeted in training, monitoring, practice guidelines, and supervision programs aimed at increasing consistency and uniformity of police responses. The police response to IPVAW carries a message that symbolizes society's condemnation of this violence. The strength of this message also lies in the consistency and uniformity of the police response (Sadusky, 2001). Proarrest or mandatory arrest policies are ways to increase consistency and uniformity in police responses at the same time that a message of zero tolerance is carried forward. But our results also suggest that higher levels of police involvement can also be promoted by increasing the perceived severity of all incidents of IPVAW and the sense of personal responsibility of police officers, which is another way to transmit a message of zero tolerance (Gracia, 2004).

Finally, the study also has some limitations. First, because our findings are linked to a particular cultural context, caution should be used in generalizing the results. However, as this study was conducted in Spain, this is also a strength that adds to the existing literature that has been conducted mostly in the United States. Second, although we used demographic controls, due to the characteristics of the sample (i.e., relatively young police officers in the earlier stages of their professional careers), we had little variability in the variables of age and years of experience as police officers. Also, men were overrepresented in the sample, although this reflects the distribution of men and women among Spanish police officers. These issues concerning our demographic controls may have hindered a proper evaluation of their influence on the variables of interest examined in this article. On the other hand, it is possible that these variables play a relatively unimportant role in predicting police involvement, as other studies suggest (Robinson & Chandek, 2000). Third, the context in which this research was conducted (i.e., a professional training course for promotion) may have influenced the police responses as they may have felt compelled to answer in a socially desirable manner. Finally, another potential limitation is that we used hypothetical scenarios as a stimulus rather than actual situations, and it is possible that police officers' responses might differ from what they actually would do in a real situation (Fritzsche, Finkelstein, & Penner, 2000; Robinson & Chandek, 2000).

However, as Robinson and Chandek noted, using self-report studies or official data may also be problematic (e.g., recall error, reductionism). In this respect, future research would benefit from using multiple sources of data.

Appendix

Hypothetical Scenarios Describing Incidents of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women

1. A couple is having a quarrel; he insults her and threatens to beat her up.
 2. While having a quarrel, he hits his partner and afterwards he asks her for forgiveness.
 3. While having a quarrel, the woman slaps her partner and he slaps her back.
 4. A couple is always having quarrels, insulting each other, and threatening the other one continuously. They often end up hitting each other.
 5. A woman is often verbally abused and humiliated by her partner.
 6. A woman is continuously threatened and verbally abused by her partner, who sometimes pushes or even beats her up.
 7. A woman is frequently beaten up by her partner causing sometimes small injuries and bruises, but still she does not want to report the maltreatment.
 8. A maltreated woman who has reported the aggression and has separated from her partner is still threatened by him.
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Notes

1. Research conducted in Spain on police responses to incidents of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is almost nonexistent. Our literature review discusses research primarily from the United States. However, findings from this body of research with respect to the classic police response to cases of IPVAW quite accurately reflect policing in Spain.

2. IPVAW has recently become a central issue in the country's political and social agenda, with many public education and legislative initiatives, as well as an important presence in the media. For an English-language review of the recent developments in the social history of intimate partner violence in Spain, see Medina-Ariza and Barberet, 2003. Prevalence data in Spain are similar to those observed in other Western countries, with estimates ranging from 4% to 12% (Instituto de la Mujer, 2003; Medina-Ariza & Barberet, 2003). Despite this high prevalence, in Spain, as in other countries, instances of IPVAW are seldom reported to the authorities, representing only between 3% and 8% of the total estimated cases (Instituto de la Mujer, 2004).

3. In discussing police involvement in light of the psychosocial research on bystander intervention, it is important to note that police are not mere citizen bystanders. They are sworn to uphold the law, which raises them to a higher level of responsibility than a citizen bystander. The psychosocial processes influencing levels of personal responsibility are, however, of relevance to analyze individual differences in the level of involvement of police officers in response to the same scenarios of IPVAW.

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