

# Intimate Partner Violence and Same-Sex Couples: Examining the Antecedents of the Helping Intentions of Bystanders

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## Abstract

Researchers interested in intimate partner violence (IPV) have focused primarily on male-against-female cases. We conducted two experimental investigations to examine the influence of moral evaluation, attribution of responsibility, and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) on the willingness of bystanders to provide help to the victim in an IPV case involving a same-sex couple. Study 1 ( $N = 195$ ) surveyed a heterosexual participant sample, and Study 2 ( $N = 120$ ) surveyed a sample of gay and lesbian participants. In both studies, participants read a fictitious article describing an alleged IPV episode that occurred either in a male–male or a female–female couple. Each participant read an article describing one of two versions of a case of IPV: In one account, the victim admitted to infidelity and in the other, the victim did not confess to infidelity. The participants subsequently evaluated the victim and expressed their willingness (or lack thereof) to support and provide help to the injured party. In both studies, participants in the condition that

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included the admission of infidelity assessed the victim to be less moral and more responsible for the violent episode. Consequently, participants of both studies expressed lesser willingness to provide help to the victim. Moreover, in Study 1, the relationship between the admission of infidelity and the respondents' willingness to support the victim was moderated by RWA. Particularly, the admission of infidelity by the victim reduced the respondents' willingness to extend support only when they reported a medium to a high level of RWA ideology. By focusing specifically on same-sex IPV cases, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the reactions of witnesses with regard to IPV. Furthermore, it provides evidence about the underlying mechanisms mitigating the intervention of bystanders in such cases and identifies boundary conditions that exacerbate their (un)willingness to intervene.

### **Keywords**

intimate partner violence, same-sex couples, moral evaluations, attribution of responsibility, bystander's intervention, right-wing authoritarianism

Intimate partner violence (IPV) represents a widespread public health problem across the world (Kilpatrick, 2004). Although this violence may, by definition, occur in any close relationship, the greater bulk of research on the topic has focused primarily on male-against-female violence (Alexander, 2008; S. M. Seelau & Seelau, 2005; World Health Organization [WHO], 2013). This focus may result partially from the belief that cases of IPV are less common or widespread among same-sex couples and are thus less worthy of attention. However, S. M. Seelau and Seelau's (2005; see also E. P. Seelau et al., 2003) review of relevant literature has evidenced that the pattern of prevalence, recurrence, and escalation of violence in same-sex relationships mirrors male-against-female IPV cases (Brand & Kidd, 1986; Renzetti, 1992; Turell, 2000). Yet, with the exception of some relevant investigations (inter alia, Crittenden et al., 2017; Jacobson et al., 2015; Lockhart et al., 1994; Poorman et al., 2003; Rollè et al., 2018; E. P. Seelau et al., 2003; S. M. Seelau & Seelau, 2005; Sloan & Edmond, 1996; Wise & Bowman, 1997), researchers have paid scant attention to this aspect of the phenomenon of IPV.

The present investigation attends to the way people react when they are witness to a case of IPV that involves a same-sex couple. The reactions of bystanders toward male-against-female violence cases have been widely investigated; however, only a few studies have dealt with bystander evaluations of and reactions to violence involving same-sex couples. This article

attempts to bridge this research gap by examining the (un)willingness of both heterosexual (Study 1) and gay and lesbian (Study 2) third parties to provide help and support to victims of same-sex IPV. In so doing, the investigation also attempts to determine whether similar or different underlying mechanisms subsume the intervention of bystanders in cases of IPV in same-sex couples as in male-against-female IPV cases (Baldry et al., 2015; Pagliaro et al., 2018). Moreover, the article also aims to identify some boundary conditions that exacerbate the (un)willingness of bystanders to intervene in cases of violence that involve same-sex couples. In particular, the article proposes, in line with recent studies (e.g., Pagliaro et al., 2018), that the moral assessment of the victim is crucial in shaping a bystander's interpretation of the situation that is witnessed. How bystanders morally evaluate victims and attribute responsibility might, in turn, affect their willingness to report the episode and to provide help and support to the victims of IPV. Finally, the article also examines whether individual ideologies may influence the reactions of bystanders and suggests that responses are likely to be harsher and less helpful to the victim in bystanders who report high levels of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA).

## **The Role of Bystanders in IPV**

Social psychologists have widely investigated the behavior of bystanders who witness incidents involving people who need help and support. This interest stems from Latané and Darley's (1970) seminal work on the social loafing effect and it has increased over time, especially with respect to the topic of witnessed male-against-female IPV. Indeed, although IPV is widespread in Western societies, most cases remain unnoticed or at least unreported to authorities (e.g., Gracia et al., 2009; WHO, 2013). Thus, a better understanding about the ways in which victims of IPV can be better protected and supported is relevant not only at a theoretical level but also at a more critical practical level so that re-victimization or even worse consequences (Baldry & Winkel, 1998; Campbell et al., 2003) may be reduced or avoided. For this reason, social psychologists have extensively investigated what makes people believe that a (female) victim of IPV deserves and needs their help, support, and intervention and what, on the contrary, makes people—even police officers (Baldry et al., 2013)—unwilling to help in some cases (Baldry et al., 2015).

Bystanders may refrain from intervening in a case of IPV for several reasons, as the violence is often seen to result from a "private dispute" between intimate partners or ex-partners. For instance, people witnessing IPV might underestimate the phenomenon or may themselves be afraid of possible

retaliation. Perhaps characteristics such as personality traits or shyness may interfere with a third party's decision to help (Baldry & Pagliaro, 2014; Karakashian et al., 2006). However, bystanders can also withdraw themselves cognitively and socially, thinking that they should not intervene because it is none of their business (i.e., *moral disengagement*; Bandura, 1999); they may expect other people to act (i.e., *diffusion of responsibility*; Latané & Darley, 1970); or even perceive that the victims deserve what is happening to them to some extent (i.e., *just world belief*; Lerner, 1970). More recently, Banyard (2008, 2011; McMahon & Banyard, 2012) posited an integrative model of the intervention of bystanders, updating and completing Latané and Darley's (1970) classic "ontogenetic" model. This model relies on an ecological approach and considers the influence of both intra-personal (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, emotions, individual features) and contextual (e.g., features of the situation, peer influence, norms) factors of decisions about whether or not to help people who are being victimized. Thus, the intervention of bystanders is regarded to result from their own interpretation of the situation, shaped possibly by their attitudes (e.g., attitudes toward violence, sexism) as well as by the way relevant others judge the situation (e.g., group norms, shared representations of the phenomenon). Flood and Pease (2009) highlighted, for instance, the role of traditional, misogynistic attitudes in shaping the interpretation of male-against-female IPV cases. Such social mind-sets contribute to the perpetration of violence and also shape the victim's self-evaluation. Most importantly, they govern bystanders' reactions when exposed to this type of violence (see also Heise, 1998; Murnen et al., 2002). People who embrace a violence-supporting/condoning set of attitudes are more likely to blame the victim and to be more lenient toward offenders; thus, they are less likely to support the victim or to report the episode of violence to the police (Baldry et al., 2013; Berkel et al., 2004; Pavlou & Knowles, 2001; Penone & Spaccatini, 2019; West & Wandrei, 2002). An individual decision (not) to intervene in support of the victim is therefore strongly linked to the so called extra-legal factors, or personal and contextual characteristics related to a person's beliefs and stereotypes (Baldry, 1996). Past research has consistently shown that extra-legal factors influence lay people's behaviors as well as police decisions about intervention in an IPV case. For example, researchers have ascertained in earlier studies that a victim's admission of betrayal dramatically changes the interpretation of bystanders and modifies their reactions to the violent episode (Baldry et al., 2013, 2015; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2004; Pavlou & Knowles, 2001; Witte et al., 2006).

Pagliaro and colleagues (2018) have recently elaborated the mechanisms driving this effect. In particular, the authors have asserted that the moral evaluation of the victim represents a meaningful mediator of the reactions

of bystanders to male-against-female IPV. This outcome is unsurprising because literature derived from the social judgment and perception field has evinced that morality plays a leading role in the formation of impressions about an unknown target and that it moderates subsequent behavioral reactions (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Iachini et al., 2015; Pagliaro et al., 2016). Based on this evidence, Pagliaro and colleagues hypothesized that extra-legal factors may exert an impact on the moral evaluation of the victim as well. In particular, they advanced the argument further and found that the adjudging of an unfaithful victim as immoral is more likely to lead to the internal attribution of responsibility. An IPV victim is less likely to receive help and support once she is held responsible for her situation due to these moral judgments.

What still remains unclear, however, is how potential bystanders react to an episode of IPV involving same-sex couples. Nevertheless, although the literature on the topic is more limited than the corpus on the male-against-female IPV, some relevant investigations are exceptions that have dealt directly with this phenomenon.

## **Perceptions of IPV in Same-Sex Couple**

As explained above, classical literature on IPV has largely overlooked cases of same-sex violence even though aggression can be found in theory in every type of relationship (Hellemans et al., 2015). More recently, researchers have started to investigate the similarities and differences between the experiences, the interpretations, and the reactions to IPV in same-sex relationships vis-à-vis male-against-female violent behavior. Walters et al. (2013), for instance, exhibited that those who identified themselves as gays and lesbians reported similar rates of IPV to heterosexuals and, as in the case of male-against-female violence, they reported higher rates of psychological rather than physical aggression (Hellemans et al., 2015; Sorenson & Thomas, 2009). Despite this overlap in the reporting rates, other studies have elucidated the discrepancies in reactions to same-sex IPV and have discussed how attitudes and beliefs shape these reactions. S. M. Seelau and Seelau (2005) have suggested that gender-role stereotypes are critical in shaping bystanders' reactions rather than homophobic prejudice. In fact, their study presented participants with both male-against-female and same-sex vignettes, and the researchers found that violence perpetrated by a man or aggression against women was adjudged more severely than violence committed by women or aggression perpetrated against men. In congruence with this result, other researchers have discovered that the police are less likely to arrest a violent perpetrator in a case that does not involve male-against-female violence

(Connolly et al., 2000), and that a female victim is considered to need more help and support than a male victim, regardless of whether the person is engaged in a same-sex or opposite-sex relationship (Poorman et al., 2003; E. P. Seelau et al., 2003).

Some differences may be observed in instances of IPV involving same-sex couples in comparison to male-against-female IPV cases; for example, the reporting rates differ because of the ways in which gay men and lesbian women define violence and are willing to report it (Crittenden et al., 2017). However, the few studies that have examined whether and how attitudes vary in judgments regarding same and opposite-sex cases of violence suggest only some differences in attitudes toward violence in these different relations (Sorenson & Thomas, 2009). Crucially for the present purpose, this outcome seems to indicate unequivocally that “gay men and lesbians are seen as needing similar protections as heterosexual-women by respondents” (Crittenden et al., 2017, p. 811). Nevertheless, scholarly investigations regarding the manner in which attitudes toward the victim influence bystanders’ reactions to IPV in same-sex couples are still scant.

This article tries to bridge this research gap by integrating the extant findings on male-against-female IPV cases with insights showing that RWA and negative attitudes are crucial to the moral evaluation of gay men and lesbian women (e.g., Hassouneh & Glass, 2008; Sorenson & Thomas, 2009). The present investigation thus attempts to understand whether bystanders’ reactions toward same-sex IPV cases are comparable to their reactions to male-against-female IPV cases highlighted in previous literature and whether these reactions differ according to their perception of male–male and female–female violence. Based on the evidence presented above (Baldry et al., 2013; Pagliaro et al., 2018), the article aims to show that even in same-sex IPV cases moral evaluations of the victim and attribution of responsibility are both crucial in mediating the reactions of bystanders who witness an IPV incident. In particular, the article explores how negative moral evaluations of the victim and attribution of responsibility to the victim affect the likelihood of uninvolved witnesses intervening in support of the victim. Moreover, this study hypothesizes that a belief in RWA (Altemeyer, 1988) exacerbates the negative reactions of bystanders because previous research has proved that conservative beliefs influence the assessment of the target (i.e., Baiocco et al., 2013; Pacilli et al., 2011).

We postulated that a victim of same-sex IPV case admitting (as opposed to not admitting) infidelity would be perceived as less moral (H1) and would be held more responsible for the IPV (H2). We also posited that the study’s participants would be less willing to help a victim who admitted to infidelity (H3). It was further hypothesized that as in the case of male-against-female

IPV (Pagliaro et al., 2018), moral judgments and attribution of responsibility would mediate the effect of the admission of infidelity on the bystanders' behavioral intentions, and would reduce the willingness of bystanders to provide help and support (H4) to the victim of the violence. It was anticipated, moreover, that the admission of infidelity by the victim would influence the reactions of bystanders who believed in RWA. In particular, reactions to the admission of infidelity were expected to be harsher in bystanders with high levels of belief in RWA (H5). As homophobic attitudes influence the perception of IPV in same-sex couples, affect the evaluation of gay men and lesbian women, and influence the willingness of people to intervene in same-sex IPV cases (e.g., Herek, 2000; Renzetti, 1989; E. P. Seelau et al., 2003; Sorenson & Thomas, 2009), the study also controlled for the homophobic attitudes of the participants with regard to the hypothesized relationships. In addition, an exploratory approach was preferred in the absence of sufficient ground in the extant literature from which to draw specific predictions about differential reactions to male–male versus female–female violence.

We performed two experiments in Italy to test the abovementioned hypotheses. Study 1 investigated the reactions of heterosexual bystanders to same-sex IPV cases (male–male vs. female–female). The admission of infidelity was manipulated as an extra-legal factor on the basis of previous research (Baldry et al., 2015; Pagliaro et al., 2018) to understand whether bystanders' reactions to same-sex IPV were comparable to the outcomes reported in studies on male-against-female IPV. Study 2 sampled gay and lesbian participants to investigate whether their reactions to IPV in the same-sex IPV case they read were comparable to those of heterosexual individuals. In this manner, the present investigation could ascertain whether the perceptions of bystanders with regard to same-sex IPV may be biased by ingroup–outgroup dynamics according to their sexual orientation.

## Study 1

### *Method*

*Participants and design.* An a priori power analysis was conducted for sample size estimation (using GPower 3.1; Faul et al., 2007). With an alpha = .05 and power = 0.80, the projected minimum sample size needed to detect an effect size of  $f = 0.25$  is  $n = 128$  for a between-group comparison (analysis of covariance [ANCOVA] with four groups and one covariate). The researchers recruited 195 Italian undergraduates at the beginning of a psychology class (159 females, 30 males, 6 unknown; mean age = 20.89;  $SD = 4.16$ ). Participation in the study was voluntary. Among the participants in the study,

174 identified as heterosexual, 11 as bisexual, six as homosexual, one as “other,” and three respondents did not indicate their sexual orientation. Thirty-seven participants were discarded from the analyses either because they failed the manipulation check (see below for details) or because they did not declare themselves to be heterosexuals, or both (retained sample  $n = 158$ ). The gender of the participants was not considered in the main analyses because this variable was unbalanced in the study sample.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions resulting from a 2 (*Admission of infidelity*: Admission vs. Non-admission)  $\times$  2 (*Same-sex couple*: Male–Male vs. Female–Female) between-participant design.

**Procedure.** The study adopted a procedure successfully used in previous literature (Baldry et al., 2015; Pacilli et al., 2017; Pagliaro et al., 2018). According to the ethical standards of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki, participants were informed about all relevant aspects of the study (e.g., methods, institutional affiliations of the researcher) before they became involved in the experiment. Importantly, they were apprised of their right to refuse to participate in the study or to withdraw their consent to participate at any time during the study without fear of reprisal. Participants then confirmed that they had understood the instructions correctly, agreed to participate, and began filling out the questionnaire. Subsequently, participants were asked to read a fictitious article from a local newspaper. The article described a severe IPV case in which a same-sex victim (gay men or lesbian women, according to the condition noted above) was accused of infidelity and beaten up by a partner. Every participant randomly read one of two versions with regard to the admission or denial of infidelity on the part of the victim (see the appendix). Each participant’s understanding of the manipulation was verified by asking participants a multiple-choice question that asked them to recall the victim’s behavior. Seventeen participants failed this manipulation check.

After reading the IPV episode, participants assessed the victim on three dimensions of social judgment to determine whether the reactions of bystanders were affected by moral rather than more general positive/negative evaluations. These dimensions were morality, competence, and sociability (Leach et al., 2007). Thus, participants rated the victim (“to what extent do you consider the woman/man described in the paper as . . .”; on a scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *a lot*; Leach et al., 2007) on the attributes of *Morality* (trustworthy, honest, sincere, moral;  $\alpha = .88$ ), *Competence* (competent, intelligent;  $r = .61, p < .001$ ), and *Sociability* (sociable, friendly;  $r = .78, p < .001$ ).

Four items aimed to measure the participants’ *attribution of responsibility* to the victims for the IPV (e.g., “Anna/Marco is responsible for what had

happened”; from 1 = *completely disagree* to 9 = *completely agree*). Two of the items were removed due to low item-total correlation. After reversing as necessary, higher scores indicated greater attribution of responsibility ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ).

Next, the participants' *willingness to report the IPV episode and support the victim* was assessed. For this purpose, a scale developed by Baldry and colleagues (2015) was adopted. In this scale, participants are asked to imagine being possible neighbors of the victim and to indicate to what extent they would engage in each of eight listed behaviors (e.g., “reporting the case to the police”; “accompanying the victim to an anti-violence support center”; from 1 = *absolutely not* to 9 = *absolutely yes*). One of these items was removed due to low item-total correlation. The final index was created by averaging the answers recorded by the participants to the remaining seven items after reversing when necessary, with higher scores indicating increased willingness to report IPV episode and support the victim (Cronbach's alpha = .66).

The participants were then asked to record their responses on a 21-item (e.g., “Seeing a pair of men holding hands annoys me”; from 1 = *completely disagree* to 9 = *completely agree*; alpha = .69) scale pertaining to *homophobic attitudes* (Raja & Stokes, 1998; translated by Lingardi et al., 2005). They also registered their responses on the widely adopted, 10-item *RWA* scale (e.g., “Obedience and discipline serve above all to live well”; from 1 = *completely disagree* to 9 = *completely agree*; alpha = .67; Roccato & Russo, 2015), as a proxy of the conservative ideology.

Participants took approximately 20 min to fill the complete set of questionnaires. Afterward, they were thanked, debriefed, and made to sign a consent form to authorize the use of their data for scientific purposes only.

## Results

A 2 (*Admission of infidelity*: Admission vs. Non-admission)  $\times$  2 (*Same-sex couple*: Male–Male vs. Female–Female) between-participant ANCOVA was performed for each dependent variable. Homophobic attitude was considered as a covariate in all the analyses. The preliminary analysis also evinced that taking the gender of the participants into account as a covariate in the ANCOVA did not alter the pattern of results, and gender did not, per se, influence the main dependent variable. Differences in the degrees of freedom were attributed to instances of missing data.

*Evaluations of the victim.* Homophobic attitude was not found to be a significant covariate,  $F(1, 153) = 2.34, p = .13$ . The ANCOVA conducted on the evaluation of the victim's *morality* exhibited a significant main effect of the

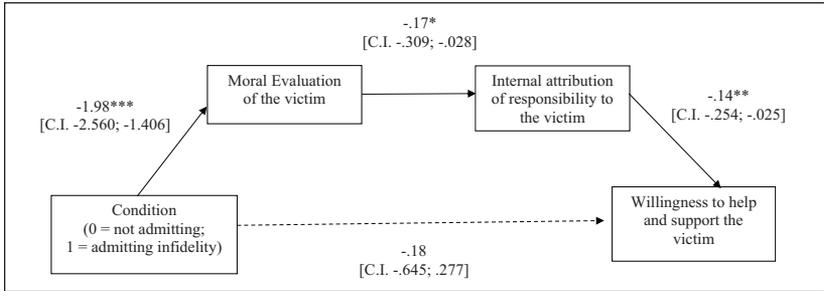
admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 153) = 45.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .23$ . In line with H1, the participants assessed the victim of IPV to be less moral in the admission of infidelity condition ( $M = 3.77, SD = 1.75$ ) than in the non-admission condition ( $M = 5.75, SD = 1.93$ ). Neither the main effect of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 153) = 1.87, p = .17$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 153) = 0.46, p = .50$ , was reliable.

Homophobic attitude also did not emerge as a significant covariate,  $F(1, 153) = 0.40, p = .53$ , with regard to the evaluation of the victim's *competence*. The main effect of the admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 153) = 0.54, p = .46$ , and of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 153) = 0.21, p = .65$ , and the two-way interaction,  $F(1, 153) = 0.00, p = .97$ , were not significant. An almost identical pattern emerged in the evaluation of the victim's *sociability*. Homophobic attitude did not emerge as a significant covariate,  $F(1, 153) = 0.11, p = .74$ . The main effect of the admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 153) = 2.70, p = .10$ , and of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 153) = 0.29, p = .59$ , and the two-way interaction,  $F(1, 153) = 0.00, p = .98$ , were not significant.

Overall, these results support the idea that even when evaluating an episode of IPV involving a same-sex couple, the admission of infidelity influences the moral rather than a more general evaluation of the victim. Moreover, this impact occurs regardless of the male–male or female–female combination of the concerned couple.

*Attribution of responsibility for the IPV to the victim.* Homophobic attitude emerged as a significant covariate,  $F(1, 153) = 7.44, p = .007$ , in this respect. The ANCOVA showed a significant main effect of the admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 153) = 58.64, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .28$ . In line with H2, participants expressed a higher attribution of responsibility to the victim in the admission of infidelity condition ( $M = 4.91, SD = 1.80$ ) than in the non-admission scenario ( $M = 2.87, SD = 1.57$ ). Neither the main effect of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 153) = 0.23, p = .64$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 153) = 0.01, p = .92$ , was reliable.

*Willingness to report the IPV episode and support the victim.* A similar pattern emerged with regard to the bystanders' willingness to intervene in support of the victim. Homophobic attitude emerged as a significant covariate,  $F(1, 153) = 3.86, p = .051$ . The ANCOVA yielded a significant effect of the admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 153) = 3.99, p = .048, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . In line with H3, participants were less willing to report the IPV episode or to support the victim when there was an admission of infidelity ( $M = 5.80; SD = 1.20$ ) than when there was no admission ( $M = 6.19; SD = 1.21$ ). Neither the main effect of the same-sex



**Figure 1.** Study 1.

Note. Mediation model in which the effects of admitting (vs. not admitting) infidelity on participants' willingness to help and support the victim are mediated by the moral evaluation of the victim and attribution of responsibility to them. Homophobic attitude was covaried out in the model. CI = confidence interval.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

couple,  $F(1, 153) = 1.05, p = .31$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 153) = 0.57, p = .45$ , was reliable.

**Mediation analysis.** A mediation analysis was conducted to test whether the effect of condition (coded as 0 = admission; 1 = non-admission) on the willingness to report the IPV episode and to support the victim was mediated by the moral evaluation of the victim and by the attribution of responsibility to the victim of the IPV. This pattern has been recently discerned in male-against-female IPV cases, especially when a female victim is battered by her partner (Pagliaro et al., 2018). Homophobic attitude was inserted as covariate in the model ( $b = -0.26$ , confidence interval [CI]:  $[-0.5318, 0.0094]$ ). Considering the analyses presented above showing that the same-sex couple did not influence the variable taken into account, this factor was removed from the model.

The procedure described by Hayes (2013) was followed in estimating indirect effects. According to the literature and to the rationale described above, the moral evaluation of the victim and the attribution of responsibility for IPV were modeled as sequential mediators (process model number 6), assuming that admission of infidelity would have elicited a negative moral evaluation and that this assessment, in turn, would have induced an attribution of responsibility for the IPV to the victim. This order also reflects the sequence in which the two constructs were assessed in the questionnaire.

The overall equation was significant,  $R^2 = .10, F(4, 153) = 4.28, p = .003$ . The model is depicted in Figure 1. As the figure shows, a victim admitting

infidelity elicited a negative moral evaluation, and this appraisal, in turn, led participants to attribute a higher degree of responsibility for the IPV to the victim. This internal attribution of responsibility for IPV made participants less willing to help and to support the victim. Supporting H4, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples proved that the indirect effect of the experimental condition on participants' willingness to help and support the victim *through* the hypothesized causal chain was significant ( $b = -0.05$ , CI:  $[-0.141, -0.005]$ ). The direct effect disappeared when considering the mediators ( $b = -0.18$ , CI:  $[-0.645, 0.277]$ ).

*Moderation analyses: The role of RWA on bystanders' willingness to intervene.* The mediation analysis presented above described the mechanisms that led heterosexual bystanders to (not) intervene in favor of a victim of an episode of IPV occurring within the ambit of a same-sex relationship. A moderation analysis was undertaken to understand the boundary conditions under which the admission of infidelity was likely to reduce the bystanders' willingness to intervene in support of the victim. A moderation model was tested in which the admission of infidelity was dummy coded as predictor (0 = admission; 1 = non-admission), RWA was considered to be a continuous moderator, and willingness to report the IPV episode and to support the victim was regarded as the dependent variable (process model number 1). Homophobic attitude was inserted as covariate in the model, and it was not significant ( $b = -0.24$ , CI:  $[-0.5068, 0.0397]$ ). The overall equation was significant,  $R^2 = .13$ ,  $F(4, 153) = 5.65$ ,  $p < .001$ . Crucially for the present purpose, the admission of infidelity by RWA interaction significantly increased the explained variance,  $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(1, 153) = 5.49$ ,  $p = .02$ . In congruence with H5, the relation between the admission of infidelity and the willingness to report the IPV episode and to support the victim was significant for medium ( $b = -0.43$ , CI:  $[-0.7922, -0.0645]$ ) and high ( $M + 1SD$ ;  $b = -0.86$ , CI:  $[-1.3759, -0.3457]$ ) levels of RWA, while it was not significant for low levels ( $M - 1SD$ ) of RWA ( $b = 0.00$ , CI:  $[-0.5109, 0.5192]$ ). This outcome implies that the more heterosexual bystanders embrace an RWA ideology, the more they are sensitive to extra-legal factors (e.g., the admission of infidelity) when they are deciding whether or not to intervene in support of the victim.

## Study 2

### Method

*Participants and design.* The sample size estimation was identical to Study 1, and the projected minimum sample size was  $n = 128$ . Snowball sampling was utilized to recruit 120 Italian participants who were perfectly balanced

by gender (60 females, 60 males; mean age = 24.36;  $SD = 4.11$ ) and who voluntarily participated in the study. All participants were declared gay men or lesbian women. Three participants were discarded from the analyses because they failed the manipulation check related to the admission of infidelity (retained sample  $n = 117$ ) as described above. The gender of the participants did not influence the dependent variables; thus, it was not considered in the main analyses. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions resulting from a 2 (*Admission of infidelity*: Admission vs. Non-admission)  $\times$  2 (*Same-sex couple*: Male–Male vs. Female–Female) between-participant design.

**Procedure.** The procedure, including the respect for ethical standards and informed consent, was identical to Study 1. Participants completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. All the measures were the same as in Study 1; only, internalized homophobia was assessed for the participants of Study 2 instead of homophobia (see below for details). Thus, after reading the IPV episode, participants evaluated the victim on *Morality* (trustworthy, honest, sincere, moral; Cronbach's alpha = .92), *Competence* (competent, intelligent Cronbach's alpha = .74), and *Sociability* (sociable, friendly; Cronbach's alpha = .90). They then completed the two items assessing the *attribution of responsibility* to the victims for the IPV ( $r = .20, p = .03$ ) and indicated their *willingness to report the IPV episode and to support the victim* along with the same seven items adopted in Study 1 (Cronbach's alpha = .70).

To assess participants' *internalized homophobia*, 22 items selected from two subscales of Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) "Lesbian and Gay Identity Scale" and Szymanski and Chung's (2001, 2003) "Lesbian Internalized Homonegativity Scale" were administered. These items were indicators of the internalization of negative attitudes about one's sexual orientation (e.g., "I try not to give signs that I am a lesbian. I am careful about the way I dress; the jewelry I wear; and the places, people, and events I talk about"; "Having lesbian/gay friends is important to me" [reversed], alpha = .73). Finally, participants were asked to complete the *RWA* scale (Cronbach's alpha = .55).

## Results

A 2 (*Admission of infidelity*: Admission vs. Non-admission)  $\times$  2 (*Same-sex couple*: Male–Male vs. Female–Female) between-participant ANCOVA was performed for each dependent variable. Internalized homophobia was considered as a covariate in all the analyses. The differences in the degrees of freedom were due to instances of missing data.

*Evaluations of the victim.* Internalized homophobia emerged as a significant covariate,  $b = 0.40$ ;  $F(1, 112) = 4.74, p = .03$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ . The ANCOVA conducted on the evaluation of the victim's *morality* evinced a significant main effect of admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 112) = 57.44, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .34$ . In accordance with H1, participants evaluated the victim of IPV as less moral in the admission of infidelity condition ( $M = 3.28, SD = 1.56$ ) than in the non-admission condition ( $M = 5.83, SD = 1.97$ ). Neither the main effect of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 112) = 0.08, p = .78$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 112) = 0.96, p = .33$ , was reliable.

Internalized homophobia did not emerge as a significant covariate,  $F(1, 112) = 0.69, p = .41$ , with regard to the evaluation of the victim's *competence*. The main effect of the admission of infidelity was significant,  $F(1, 112) = 6.45, p = .013, \eta_p^2 = .05$ , and it evidenced that participants evaluated the victim of IPV as less competent in the admission of infidelity condition ( $M = 4.54, SD = 1.92$ ) than in the non-admission condition ( $M = 5.39, SD = 1.53$ ). Neither the main effect of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 112) = 0.02, p = .89$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 112) = 0.02, p = .88$ , was reliable. An almost identical pattern emerged in the evaluation of the victim's *sociability*. Internalized homophobia did not emerge as a significant covariate,  $F(1, 112) = 0.88, p = .35$ . The main effect of admission of infidelity approached significance,  $F(1, 112) = 3.84, p = .053, \eta_p^2 = .03$ , showing that participants evaluated the victim of IPV as slightly less sociable in the admission of infidelity condition ( $M = 5.17, SD = 2.01$ ) than in the non-admission condition ( $M = 5.87, SD = 1.59$ ). Neither the main effect of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 112) = 0.02, p = .88$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 112) = 0.01, p = .94$ , was reliable.

In sum, these results support the idea that even when gay men and lesbian women are evaluated in an episode of IPV that occurred within a same-sex couple, the admission of infidelity influences the moral evaluation of the victim. In this case, the victim was also evaluated as less competent and less sociable, even though the effect on morality was stronger. Moreover, this appraisal occurs regardless of the male–male or female–female configuration of the relationship.

*Attribution of responsibility for the IPV to the victim.* Internalized homophobia emerged as a significant covariate,  $b = 0.57$ ;  $F(1, 112) = 9.96, p = .002$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ . The ANCOVA yielded a significant main effect of the admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 112) = 17.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$ . In congruence with H2, participants attributed higher responsibility to the victim in the case of the admission of infidelity ( $M = 4.29, SD = 1.78$ ) than in the non-admission condition ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.75$ ). Neither the main effect of the same-sex

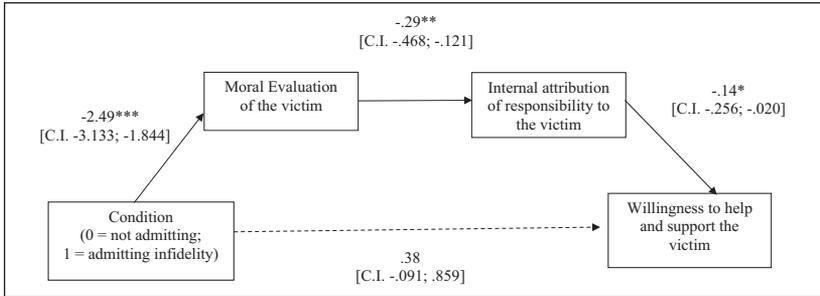
couple,  $F(1, 112) = 0.00, p = .98$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 112) = 1.89, p = .17$ , was reliable.

*Willingness to report the IPV episode and support the victim.* Internalized homophobia did not emerge as a reliable covariate,  $F(1, 112) = 2.82, p = .096$ . Neither the main effects of admission of infidelity,  $F(1, 112) = 0.14, p = .71$ , or of the same-sex couple,  $F(1, 112) = 0.86, p = .36$ , nor the interaction,  $F(1, 112) = 0.97, p = .33$ , was reliable with regard to bystanders' willingness to intervene in support of the victim. Thus, in this case, the admission of infidelity did not directly affect the bystanders' willingness to intervene in support of the victim.

*Mediation analysis.* A mediation analysis was conducted next as in Study 1 to test whether the admission of infidelity (coded as 0 = admission; 1 = non admission) influenced the willingness of bystanders to report the IPV episode and to support the victims indirectly through the moral evaluation of the victim and through the attribution of responsibility to them. Internalized homophobia was inserted as covariate in the model ( $b = -0.26, CI: [-0.5318, 0.0094]$ ). Again, since the above presented analyses showed that the same-sex couple did not influence the variable taken into account, this factor was removed from the model.

As in Study 1, the procedure described by Hayes (2013) was followed to estimate indirect effects. According to the literature and to the rationale described above, the moral evaluation of the victim and the attribution of responsibility for IPV were modeled as sequential mediators (process model number 6), assuming that the admission of infidelity would elicit a negative moral evaluation and that this assessment, in turn, would induce an attribution of responsibility for the IPV to the victim. This order also reflects the sequence in which the two constructs were assessed in the questionnaire.

The overall equation was significant,  $R^2 = 0.09, F(4, 112) = 2.77, p = .03$ . The model is depicted in Figure 2. As the figure illustrates, a victim admitting infidelity received a negative moral evaluation, and this estimation, in turn, led participants to attribute a higher degree of responsibility for the IPV to the victims. This internal attribution of responsibility for IPV made participants less willing to help and to support the victim. Supporting H4, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples showed that the indirect effect of the experimental condition on participants' willingness to help and support the victim *through* the hypothesized causal chain was significant ( $b = -0.10, CI: [-0.28, -0.02]$ ). The direct effect was not significant ( $b = 0.38, CI: [-0.09, 0.86]$ ).



**Figure 2.** Study 2.

Note. Mediation model in which the effects of admitting (vs. not admitting) infidelity on participants' willingness to help and support the victim are mediated by the moral evaluation of the victim and attribution of responsibility to them. Internalized homophobia was covaried out in the model. CI = confidence interval.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Moderation analyses: The role of RWA on bystanders' willingness to intervene.* The same moderation analysis performed in Study 1 was run in Study 2 to understand the boundary conditions under which the admission of infidelity is likely to reduce the willingness of bystanders to intervene in support of the victim in a sample of gay men and lesbian women. Thus, a moderation model was tested in which the admission of infidelity was dummy coded as predictor (0 = admission; 1 = not admission), RWA was considered as a continuous moderator, and willingness to report the IPV episode and support the victim was considered as the dependent variable (process model number 1). Internalized homophobia was inserted as covariate in the model, and it was not significant ( $b = -0.13$ , CI:  $[-0.355, 0.101]$ ). Neither the overall equation,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(4, 112) = 1.25$ ,  $p = .29$ , nor the crucial admission of infidelity by RWA interaction ( $b = -0.01$ , CI:  $[-0.423, 0.396]$ ) was reliable. Thus, in the case of gay and lesbian bystanders, RWA did not moderate the association between the admission of infidelity and the willingness of the bystanders to help the victim.

## Discussion

The literature on IPV has focused mostly on male-against-female IPV cases, leaving other types of relationships such as same-sex affiliations (Hellems et al., 2015) largely unexplored. Nevertheless, despite the limited interest toward IPV in same-sex couples, experts in the field estimate IPV occurrence rates to be comparable to male-against-female IPV cases (e.g., Alexander, 2008; Turell, 2000).

Thus, to elucidate bystanders' reactions to same-sex IPV cases, this article specifically examined the attitudes of heterosexual (Study 1) and homosexual (Study 2) bystanders toward a victim in a hypothetical case of same-sex IPV under two alternative conditions of the admission or denial of infidelity. The results of the investigation evidenced that as with previous evaluations of male-against-female IPV cases (Baldry et al., 2013, 2015; Pagliaro et al., 2018), our participants perceived a gay or a lesbian victim admitting (as opposed to not admitting) infidelity as less moral and more responsible for the violence perpetrated on them. As expected, this research also discovered that participants were less willing to help the victims when they admitted infidelity. Finally, the investigation found that the effect of the admission of infidelity on the reduced willingness to help and to support the victim was mediated by moral evaluations of and attribution of responsibility for the IPV to the victim and that this effect was stronger for those reporting higher levels of belief in RWA. Interestingly, and in accordance with Crittenden and colleagues (2017), the pattern of reactions to same-sex IPV occurred in a similar manner regardless of the individual's sexual orientation, as is evident through the comparison between Study 1 and Study 2. Thus, the outcomes of the present investigation are consistent with the findings obtained from prior studies on male-against-female IPV (Baldry, et al., 2013; Pagliaro et al., 2018). Bystanders perceive the target of IPV as less moral and more responsible for the violence when a partner is found to be unfaithful, even in the case of same-sex IPV. Such an evaluation is, in turn, crucial in affecting the likelihood of the bystanders to support the victim. The current findings also confirm the influential role of RWA (and of conservative ideology in general) in attitudes professed toward gay men and lesbian women by heterosexual people (Baiocco et al., 2013; Pacilli et al., 2011, 2017). RWA influences general attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women; more specifically, it also influences bystanders' evaluations of gay men and lesbian women when they are victims of IPV. In contrast, gay men and lesbian women do not appear to be influenced by RWA in their reactions to same-sex IPV. It is significant that in both studies, participants perceived the victim of the same-sex IPV in the same manner regardless of whether the victim was part of a male–male or female–female couple. As Crittenden and colleagues (2017) have reported, bystanders evaluated gay and lesbian victims of IPV as needing similar protections as victims in male-against-female cases. Nevertheless, future ad hoc research should be directed at in-depth examinations of the moderating role of RWA—and more generally, of conservative ideology—on the willingness of bystanders to intervene in support of the victim, as well as the effect of gender, which has not yet been explored in such research.

As Duke and Davidson (2009) have argued, IPV and sexual assault affects everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, race, or social status. Nevertheless,

same-sex IPV seems particularly difficult to detect and to report because of several factors that hinder a victim's ability to seek help (Parry & O'Neal, 2015). Some of these barriers include homophobic social attitudes, the internalization of sexual stigma, and the fear that reports of domestic violence would cast a negative light on the entire LGBTQ+ community. In addition, many countries have not yet legally recognized same-sex unions (Murray et al., 2006): Thus, victims of IPV occurring within same-sex relationships in such countries cannot rely on health and legal services, unlike heterosexual victims. The illegality of the affiliation would naturally make same-sex IPV less reported to legal authorities. To this end, the present research initiative represents a significant effort to investigate same-sex IPV from the bystanders' perspective. This study is important as it contributes both to a more complete understanding of this phenomenon and to the promotion of a more effective intervention program for same-sex IPV.

A limitation of this study, however, is the less-than-perfect reliability of the RWA measure in both the studies. Although it is reassuring that this measure has been widely and successfully adopted in previous research endeavors on numerous topics, it is something worth noting for the development of future research. Furthermore, most of the participants of Study 1 were female (81%). Nevertheless, in Study 1, preliminary analyses allowed the exclusion of the possibility that the gender of participants influenced the pattern of results, and no gender effect emerged in Study 2. This empirical question could merit a more in-depth investigation in the future. Study 2 was conducted with a slightly smaller sample than planned, and this smaller size corresponds to prior research showing that the sampling of gay and lesbian participants is a complex issue in LGBTQ+ studies (Meyer & Wilson, 2009). Nevertheless, the robustness of the main pattern of results (i.e., the mediation models), as well as the consistency of the outcomes with the previous literature (Pagliaro et al., 2018), indicates that the differences that emerged across the two studies in relation to RWA are not attributable to power issues. A further limitation of the study could be the absence of a direct comparison between the reaction of the bystanders to male-against-female IPV and same-sex IPV. This comparison was beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on heterosexual (Study 1) and gay and lesbian (Study 2) bystanders' reactions to same-sex IPV. Nevertheless, an indirect comparison between the current results and those obtained from previous research initiatives (i.e., Pagliaro et al., 2018) seems to confirm that the reactions of bystanders are quite similar in both cases. The admission of infidelity seems to affect moral evaluation, attribution of responsibility, and support to the victim regardless of male-against-female or same-sex IPV. Future

research may be directed to a more straightforward comparison. Finally, other forms of IPV beyond same-sex IPV cases still deserve attention. For instance, no study has yet focused on transgender survivors of IPV, and further research is required in this area.

Thus, this article poses new and intriguing questions that need to be addressed in the future. However, it generally contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the reactions of bystanders to IPV in instances of same-sex relationships. This understanding is essential if society is to deal with and address the widespread and dangerous phenomenon of domestic violence that, unfortunately, many people have to face daily.

## Appendix

### *The Vignettes Presented to Participants in Both Studies*

*Admission condition.* “Anna G. [Luciano G.] is a 35-year-old woman [man] working at the municipality. Last year she [he] married Chiara B. [Carlo B.], a 36-year-old woman [man], employed at a well-known local business company. On a Tuesday evening, Chiara B. [Carlo B.] returned home in the throes of an obvious agitation, accusing her wife [his husband] of repeated betrayal. Anna G. [Luciano G.], who actually had an affair with another woman [man], admitted to having betrayed her [his] partner, who, in response, struck her [him] repeatedly with slaps and kicks, causing her [him] to scream several times until she [he] lose consciousness. The neighbors could hear all what was going on.”

*Not admission condition.* “Anna G. [Luciano G.] is a 35-year-old woman [man] working at the municipality. Last year she [he] married Chiara B. [Carlo B.], a 36-year-old woman [man], employed at a well-known local business company. On a Tuesday evening, Chiara B. [Carlo B.] returned home in the throes of an obvious agitation, accusing her wife [his husband] of repeated betrayal. Anna G. [Luciano G.], who actually did not have a relationship with another woman [man], was upset and denied such allegations but her [his] partner, in response, struck her [him] repeatedly with slaps and kicks, causing her [him] to scream several times until she [he] lose consciousness. The neighbors could hear all what was going on.”

### Author's Note

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## Author Contributions

All the authors equally contributed to develop the present research and to write the paper. S.P. and D.P. collected and analyzed the data.

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