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# Effects of Alcohol Use and Anti–American Indian Attitudes on Domestic-Violence Culpability Decisions for American Indian and Euro-American Actors

**CYNTHIA WILLIS ESQUEDA, LORI HACK, AND MELISSA TEHEE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence has been recognized as a serious social issue since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> With changes in societal attitudes toward domestic violence, educational and legal policies have been implemented to promote immediate police responses, sheltered living for victims, and adjudication of abusers.<sup>2</sup> Concomitant with this, extensive research has been conducted on the etiology, treatment, and perceptions of domestic-violence actors.<sup>3</sup>

Few studies have focused on the unique issues surrounding American Indian violence. Yet American Indian women are at high risk for domestic abuse, and domestic violence has been identified as the most important issue for American Indians now and in the future by the National Congress of American Indians.<sup>4</sup> American Indian women suffer from domestic abuse at higher rates than other ethnic groups of women, in line with general violence rates against Indians.<sup>5</sup> Unlike other groups of women, American Indian women are more likely to be victimized by someone of another race (that is, non-Indians) rather than by American Indian males.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this research was to examine whether self-rated anti–American Indian attitudes influence domestic-violence culpability perceptions when the domestic-violence actors' race (American Indian or Euro-American) and alcohol use (intoxicated or not) were varied within a fabricated trial transcript.

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## STEREOTYPES

Historically, American Indian women did not suffer from such violence risk. American Indians' social and spiritual lives kept domestic violence at almost nonexistent levels.<sup>7</sup> Our tribal and family histories inform us that America's indigenous women held cultural, social, political, and spiritual power that was greater than other American women. American Indian women's early written accounts confirm this cultural standing.<sup>8</sup> For example, at first contact with Europeans one HoChunk community was led by a woman, Cherokee women took part in nearly all phases of government, Lakota women could be honored as warriors, and Papago women had great control over their lives and spirituality.<sup>9</sup>

Several factors contribute to the proliferation of domestic violence in American Indian country. After colonial introduction of European political, religious, and legal systems, American Indian women's power and status changed.<sup>10</sup> Colonization produced stilted views of American Indian women, particularly for the dominant culture. The slave-like drudge and American Indian princess have been the best-known American Indian women icons.<sup>11</sup> These stereotypic images are rooted in historical myths and are shown in art, literature, and film on a global level. These images do not acquaint people with real American Indian women and their current social and political interests. The limited record of legal treatment of American Indian women shows a consistent denial of civil rights and social power from earliest contact.<sup>12</sup> Thus, stereotypic notions and the devalued status of American Indian women may result in biased perceptions of domestic-violence incidents, with lower ratings of incident seriousness and higher ratings for the victim's culpability when an American Indian woman is involved, compared to when a Euro-American woman is involved.

American Indian men are not immune from negative, stereotypic characterizations. American Indian sport team mascots are always men and depicted as warriors or savages with menacing, aggressive tendencies.<sup>13</sup> One romance novel series uses the term *savage* in book titles (see Cassie Edwards's novels), and stereotypic portrayals of American Indian men involved with white women are presented. This follows an historical precedent with the "captive narratives" that hinged on the fear of American Indian men's violence toward white women.<sup>14</sup> Thus, domestic-violence incidents in which the man is an American Indian may result in biased perceptions, with higher culpability attributed to the American Indian man—particularly when he is involved with a Euro-American woman, as compared to when a Euro-American man is involved.

## ALCOHOL USE

Alcohol plays a significant role in domestic violence in American Indian country, as in other crimes involving American Indian people.<sup>15</sup> Part of the enduring American Indian stereotype is a drunkard.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Euro-Americans have successfully used alcohol as a mitigating factor for guilt,

but as part of the Indian stereotype, alcohol does not serve to mitigate guilt attributions for Indians.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, we were interested in biases against American Indians involved in domestic violence, in comparison to Euro-Americans, particularly when alcohol had been used. Alcohol may not serve as a mitigating factor for American Indian men, due to the alcohol-abuse stereotype. Conversely, Euro-American men may have lowered culpability ratings for domestic violence with alcohol use because it serves as a mitigating factor.

### ANTI-AMERICAN INDIAN BIAS

Although stereotypes against American Indian men and women exist, these may be indices of a more generalized anti-American Indian bias. We examined biases by those with anti-American Indian attitudes and developed a scale to measure such bias. Although no formal scale has been developed to measure biased attitudes toward American Indians, that there are historical and contemporary incidents that signal racial bias against American Indians is a concern.<sup>18</sup> Based on past and current stereotypes of American Indians and on empirical measurement of stereotypic traits of American Indians, we devised fourteen items to measure stereotypic beliefs about and perceived unfair advantages for American Indians explicitly.<sup>19</sup> We hypothesized that Euro-Americans with higher anti-American Indian attitudes would show bias against American Indians involved in domestic violence, particularly when alcohol had been used, by assigning higher culpability ratings. We focused on a Euro-American sample because Euro-Americans are overrepresented as police, prosecutors, and judges.<sup>20</sup> Also, based on historical and current stereotypes and regardless of anti-American Indian bias, we predicted that higher culpability ratings would occur when American Indians were involved in interracial relationships, compared to same-race relationships, given the historical biases concerning interracial relations between American Indians and whites.<sup>21</sup>

### METHOD

#### **Participants**

Three hundred and four (152 males and 152 females, *M* age = 20 years) participants volunteered in exchange for partial credit in psychology courses. The university is located in Nebraska, which has a visible American Indian population. Five reservations are located either within the state (Winnebago and Omaha) or partially within the state (Pine Ridge, Santee, and Ioway/Sauk/Fox). A citywide Indian center and Indian health services office are located near campus. Participants' majors could come from any academic unit within the university. The sample was composed of mostly Euro-Americans (*N* = 272), although African Americans (*N* = 11), a Hispanic (*N* = 1), Asian Americans (*N* = 17), an American Indian (*N* = 1), and those self-identified as Other (*N* = 2) participated as well.

### Procedures and Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to read a bogus trial transcript from a hearing that included an officer's testimony. Experimental conditions were contained in the different versions of the transcript. In the transcript, an officer arrives at the apartment of the couple and questions the man and woman separately concerning a domestic-abuse incident that occurred after a party. The man and woman had (or had not) been drinking alcohol, and they began to fight over the perceived flirtation of the wife with a male guest whom she had known in high school. After the party ended and the guests had left, the man began to yell at the woman and call her obscenities; she yelled back, and eventually, as the fighting escalated, he punched her. She fell to the floor and had a bloody nose and sore jaw. During the officer's testimony the race of the man and woman (either American Indian or Euro-American) was mentioned as part of a description of the actors. In addition, the level of alcohol use by the man and woman was described (appeared to be drunk or appeared to be sober). After reading the transcript, participants completed a culpability ratings questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of items that measured culpability, as shown in table 1. All items were rated on a seven-point rating scale (from "not at all" = 1 to "very much so" = 7). A series of open-ended questions designed to ascertain if participants comprehended the race of the man and woman, alcohol presence, and actors' behavior were provided as well. No errors in reporting were found.

**Table 1**  
**Culpability Measures**

- 
1. Guilt measure (guilty or not)
  2. Sentence in years
  3. Perceived seriousness
  4. Woman's blame
  5. Man's blame
  6. Woman's responsibility
  7. Man's responsibility
  8. Would other men respond this way with this woman? (other men)
  9. In future, would the man respond the same way with this woman? (same way)
  10. Would the man's response have occurred only with this woman and not others? (only this woman)
  11. Likelihood to call police
- 

The fourteen items from the anti-American Indian Bias Scale (AIBS) are shown in table 2. The items were rated with seven-point rating scales (from "strongly disagree" = 1 to "strongly agree" = 7). Scores on the scale could range from fourteen to ninety-eight. For the present sample the scores ranged from nineteen to seventy-nine, and the Cronbach's alpha = .78. The AIBS

was embedded into a scale with fifty-three filler items on a variety of social issues (for example, abortion issues, legalization of marijuana for medical purposes, and smoking). A symbolic racism scale was also embedded in the scale in order to provide an indication of concurrent validity.<sup>22</sup> The symbolic racism scale was developed with bias against African Americans as the focus. However, bias against American Indians carries unique issues. The AIBS correlated at .70 with the symbolic racism measure ( $p = .01$ ), indicating a degree of concurrent validity.

**Table 2**  
**Sample Items from the Anti-American Indian Attitudes Scale**

- 
1. I believe American Indians receive benefits from the US government or public funds that are unfair.
  2. I do not think American Indians should receive welfare or public assistance.
  3. American Indians should not receive special scholarships, financial aid, or free educations.
  4. I believe American Indians should have free tutors or assistance in school. R
  5. American Indians should be able to have reservations or free areas of land to live on. R
  6. It is unfair that American Indians are allowed to operate casinos and keep the profits.
  7. I support affirmative action programs that help American Indians get jobs. R
  8. I think American Indians are discriminated against. R
  9. I think American Indians are often seen as being alcoholics. R
  10. American Indians have lost their land or had it stolen from them. R
  11. American Indians have been forced to live on reservations. R
  12. The culture or religious beliefs of American Indians are made fun of by others. R
  13. I think it is unfair that American Indians have special laws that allow their religions.
  14. American Indians should stop complaining and protesting their treatment.
- 

*Note:* R indicates a reversed item.

## FINDINGS

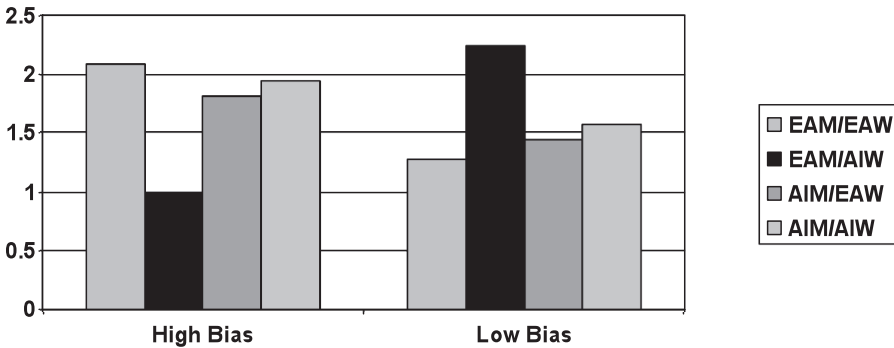
In order to account for regression toward the mean on the AIBS, only those scoring in the high and low 25 percent ranges were included in the analyses ( $N = 161$ ). Those scoring high ( $M = 62.06$ ) differed significantly from those scoring low ( $M = 32.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ) on the scale.

The trial transcript held enough mundane realism to engender guilty verdicts, and there was a general guilt bias, such that only five participants voted not guilty. This reduced the  $N$  to 156. No significant effects were found for the woman's or the man's blame and responsibility, as would be expected, with general guilt bias. However, several interactions indicated that bias still occurred on other culpability measures, indicating a more modern and subtle form of bias (for example, race effects combined with other factors) rather than a blatant form of bias (for example, blatant racial bias).

**Sentencing**

As shown in table 3, a marginally significant three-way interaction among the man’s race, woman’s race, and AIBS measure occurred for the sentencing decision— $F(1, 140) = 3.45, p = .06$ . A *post hoc* comparison for those low in bias indicated no significant differences between the means ( $p = .34$ ), although those low in bias gave the highest mean sentence to the Euro-American man involved with an American Indian woman ( $M = 2.25$  years). A *post hoc* comparison for those high in bias indicated no significant differences ( $p = .33$ ). However, the lowest mean sentence was given to the Euro-American man involved with the American Indian woman ( $M = 1.00$  years). A simple comparison of these two means indicated a marginally significant difference— $F(1, 37) = 2.74, p = .10, \eta^2 = .07$ —with a medium effect size.<sup>23</sup>

**Table 3**  
**Means for Sentence as a Function of Anti-American Indian Bias and the Woman’s and Man’s Race**

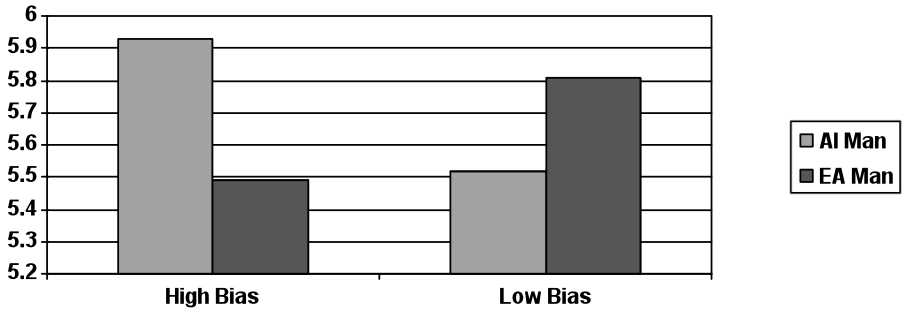


Note: EAM = Euro-American man, AIM = American Indian man, EAW = Euro-American woman, AIW = American Indian woman.

**Seriousness**

A significant interaction between the man’s race and the AIBS for the perceived seriousness of the incident ( $p = .01$ ) existed. An examination of the ratings indicated that only four participants rated the incident as below the neutral rating of four on the one-to-seven rating scale. Consequently, an analysis with only those rating the incident as a four or higher on seriousness was conducted. The two-way interaction between the man’s race and AIBS was still significant— $F(1, 148) = 6.74, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . As shown in table 4, simple-effects tests indicated that when the man was American Indian, those high in bias believed the incident was more serious ( $M = 5.93$ ), compared to those low in bias—( $M = 5.52$ ),  $p = .05, \eta^2 = .05$ . When the man was Euro-American, those high in bias believed the incident was less serious ( $M = 5.49$ ), compared to those low in bias—( $M = 5.81$ ),  $p = .10, \eta^2 = .04$ .

**Table 4**  
**Mean Perceived Seriousness as a Function of Anti-American Indian Bias and the Man's Race**

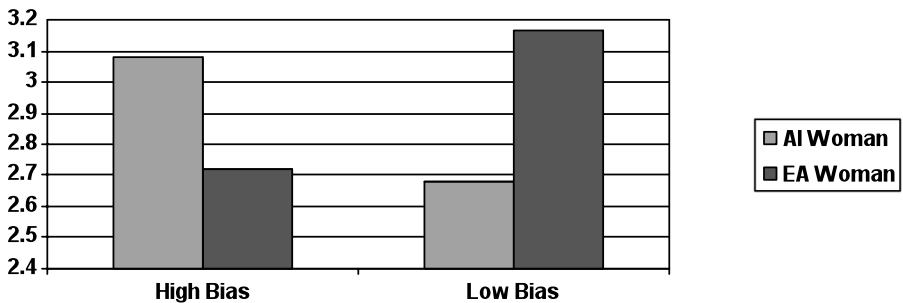


Note: AI = American Indian, EA = Euro-American

#### Other Men Would Respond This Way with This Woman

As shown in table 5, there was a significant interaction between the woman's race and the AIBS— $F(1, 152) = 4.16, p < .04, \eta^2 = .03$ —for the item “Other men would respond this way with this woman.” This item focused on the woman and other men's behavior with her. Simple effects indicated those low in bias believed it less likely that other men would respond this way if the woman was American Indian ( $M = 2.68$ ), compared to when the woman was Euro-American—( $M = 3.17$ ),  $F(1, 80) = 3.64, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$ . The woman's race made no difference to those high in bias—( $M_s = 3.08$  versus  $2.72$ ),  $p = .25$ .

**Table 5**  
**Means for “Other men would respond this way with this woman?” (woman-centered) as a Function of Anti-American Indian Bias and the Woman's Race**



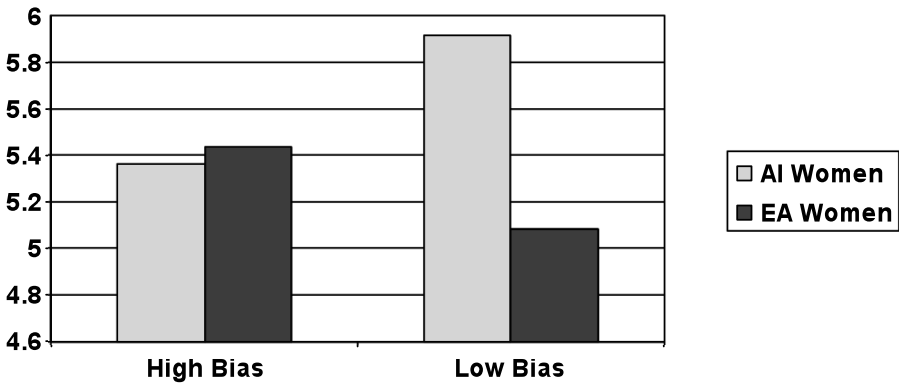
Note: AI = American Indian, EA = Euro-American



**In the Future, Would the Man Respond the Same Way with This Woman?**

The results in table 6 indicate a significant interaction between anti-American Indian bias and the woman’s race— $F(1, 152) = 4.16, p < .04, \eta^2 = .03$ . Although those high in bias did not differ in their perception of whether the man would respond the same way in future ( $M_s = 5.36$  versus  $5.43$ ), a simple-effects test indicated that those low in bias rated the likelihood as higher when the woman was American Indian ( $M = 5.92$ ), compared to when she was Euro-American—( $M = 5.08$ ),  $p < .01$ .

**Table 6**  
Means for “In the future, would the man respond the same way with this woman?”

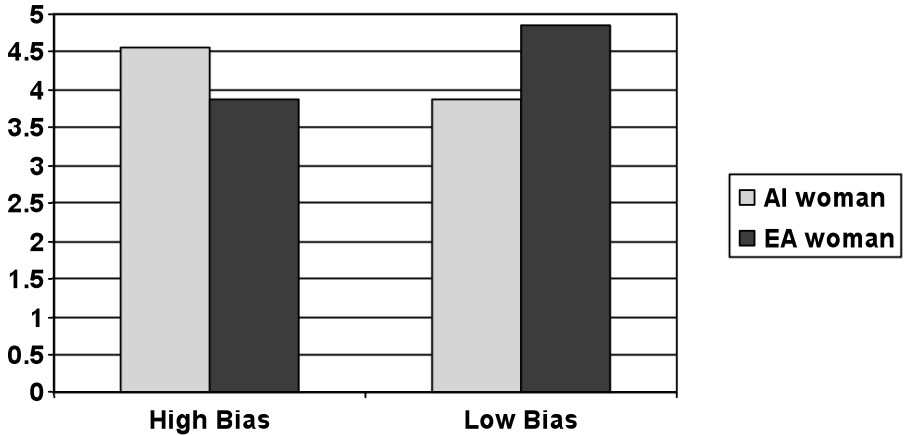


Note: AI = American Indian, EA = Euro-American

**Would the Man’s Response Have Occurred Only with This Woman and Not Others?**

The results in table 7 indicate a significant interaction between anti-American Indian bias and the woman’s race— $F(1, 152) = 5.59, p < .02, \eta^2 = .05$ —for the item “Would the man’s response have occurred only with this woman and not others?” This item focused on the woman and the man’s behavior with her and not others. Using a *post hoc* examination of means, those low in bias believed it less likely that the man’s response would only occur with this woman and not others when the woman was American Indian ( $M = 3.87$ ), while those high in bias believed this when the woman was Euro-American ( $M = 3.87$ ). When the woman was American Indian, those high in bias believed it more likely that abuse would only have occurred with this woman ( $M = 4.55$ ), but those low in bias believed this when the woman was Euro-American ( $M = 4.83$ ); the latter two means did not differ ( $p = .56$ ).

**Table 7**  
**Means for “Only with this woman and not others?” (woman-centered) as a Function of Anti-American Indian Bias and the Woman’s Race**

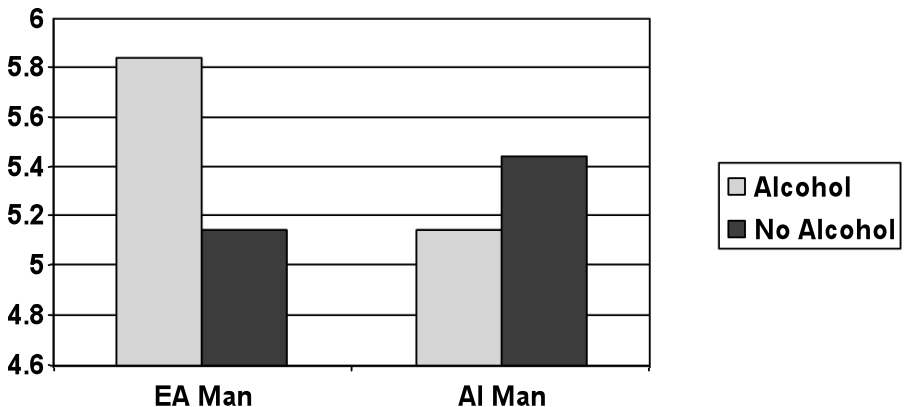


Note: AI = American Indian, EA = Euro-American

**Likelihood to Call Police**

A significant interaction occurred between the man’s race and alcohol use for likelihood to call police— $F(1, 152) = 3.85, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ —as shown in table 8. When alcohol had been used, a simple-effects test indicated a

**Table 8**  
**Means for Likelihood to Call Police as a Function of the Use of Alcohol and the Man’s Race**



Note: AI = American Indian, EA = Euro-American

significant difference between likelihood to call police for the Euro-American man ( $M = 5.84$ ) and American Indian man—( $M = 5.14$ ),  $p < .03$ . Regardless of anti-American Indian bias, participants were less likely to call the police if a drunk Indian man was involved compared to a Euro-American man. When no alcohol was present, there was no difference in likelihood to call police based on the man's race—(Euro-American man:  $M = 5.14$ ; American Indian man:  $M = 5.44$ ),  $p = .47$ .

## DISCUSSION

The findings here demonstrated that biases exist in interpretations of domestic violence for American Indian and Euro-American actors. Confirming our hypotheses, in part, there appears to be a culpability bias against American Indian women by those high in bias, and a bias in favor of American Indian woman by those who are low in bias. For example, those high in bias believed it more likely that the man's response would only occur with the American Indian woman and not others, compared to when she was Euro-American, while those low in bias believed the opposite. Thus, those high in bias may not be inclined to intervene in any significant way when the woman is American Indian because the chance of future occurrence is lessened.

If the woman was American Indian, those low in bias believed it less likely other men would respond this way, and it was more likely this man would respond the same way in the future, compared to when the woman was Euro-American. When the woman was American Indian, those low in bias interpreted the current situation as less a function of the woman's relations with other men and more a function of the man's behavior. Those high in bias did not differ in their ratings.

Regardless of anti-American Indian biases, participants were less likely to report that they would call the police if a drunken American Indian man was involved in the violence, compared to when a drunken Euro-American man was involved. No differences existed when no alcohol was involved. In light of the stereotype of the drunken American Indian, this effect makes sense. The drunken American Indian stereotype is predicated on the notion that American Indians' alcohol consumption is a persistent and pervasive condition.<sup>24</sup> Notions of Euro-Americans' drunkenness are not tied to such a pervasive and consistent state; hence the use of alcohol as a mitigating factor in culpability assignment is more acceptable, particularly in domestic-abuse situations.<sup>25</sup>

Limitations to the present study exist. American Indian nations are diverse, and tribal histories, experiences, and current social contexts promote diverse causes for and responses to domestic violence. Our sample was limited to mostly Euro-Americans from the northern plains. Future research should examine differences between various ethnic populations, if any, (for example, African Americans and Asian Americans) in their anti-American Indian attitudes, domestic-violence culpability assessment, and stereotypes of alcohol use when it involves American Indians. In addition, although the high prevalence of American Indian domestic violence occurs nationally, geographic locations

may influence attitudes and perceptions about such violence, and this should be examined.<sup>26</sup> Those in rural settings (where most reservations are located) may hold different views of domestic violence, compared to urban settings.<sup>27</sup> Those who live in the northern plains may not share the same biases against American Indians as those who live in the Northeast, Southwest, or Alaska, although research findings indicate that similar biases against American Indians emanate from diverse regions within the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Although we would advocate for a multi-method approach to understanding biases against American Indians involved in violence (for example, participant interviews, violence statistics, and longitudinal studies), we believe that the findings have ramifications for a variety of responses to domestic violence involving American Indians, including intervention, arrest, prosecution, and treatment—on and off reservations, given that the majority of legal system actors are Euro-American. For example, based on these findings, police intervention in domestic violence may be compromised when the couple has been drinking and the man is American Indian. Those overhearing the incident may be less likely to intervene and notify authorities. The connection between drinking and decreased intervention is not new, but there is a dearth of research on perceptions of Indian drinking and the social consequences, in comparison to research on American Indian drinking rates and morbidity.<sup>29</sup> The current findings on perceptions of drinking and American Indian men should be expanded to examine perceptions of and responses to other social behaviors, particularly situations involving violence.<sup>30</sup>

Although the current incident scenario generated a guilt bias, our findings indicated that other subtle forms of bias might hinder participation in legal processes by American Indians. Biases against American Indians involved in domestic-violence incidents, particularly by those with anti-American Indian attitudes, may compromise legal and medical responses to domestic-violence situations. To address domestic violence in indigenous nations, legal and medical approaches are important for a variety of functions, such as the enforcement of peace, prosecution and sentencing of offenders, passage of new laws to protect abuse victims, the implementation of social policies, and a community understanding of women's social status.

Fortunately, various tribes have organized to promote and implement counseling and shelters for victims of domestic abuse, as American Indians may best serve their own communities.<sup>31</sup> This trend may eliminate the possibility of biases against American Indian women victims, and it is the preferred approach from tribal entities. The US government has begun to promote this strategy in health care and funding, because American Indian communities can promote effective tribal legal and cultural practices to address interpersonal violence.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to increased numbers of tribally controlled shelters and programs, various congressional bills have been proposed or passed that address domestic violence in Indian country.<sup>33</sup> Given the importance of the issue and the need for comprehensive strategies to eliminate it, changes in legal procedures involving federal and tribal governments appear imperative. The enhancement of tribal criminal jurisdiction has become a significant

issue for effective management of domestic violence in Indian country. Although various congressional bills and government agencies have advocated increased funding for tribal law enforcement, the ability of tribal legal systems to arrest and adjudicate abusers remains ineffectual.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the ability of tribal law enforcement to arrest and prosecute for federal courts Indians and non-Indians who commit domestic abuse can serve to protect abuse victims and reinvigorate the model of community support for healthy family relations. The 2010 Tribal Law and Order Act may allow this possibility. By honoring our past and protecting our present, we ensure our future.

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