Racial Composition of Couples in Battered Women Syndrome Cases: A Look at Juror Attitudes and Decisions

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Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS)

- Battered woman claims to have murdered her abuser in response to his aggression or threat
  - Defence – often as an extension of self-defense
    (Regehr & Glancy, 1995; Russell & Melillo, 2006)

- Battered woman who has killed her husband must convince the jury of the ‘reasonableness’ of her lethal action
  (Schuller, Wells, Rzepa, & Klippenstine, 2004)
Typical BWS Characterizations

Couple Race & Domestic Violence

Locke & Richman, 1999; Maeder, Mossière, & Cheung, 2013
Current Study

BWS

Couple’s Race

Juror Gender

Juror Attitudes

Guilty vs. Self-Defense
Participants
244 jury-eligible Americans

- 124 women
- 120 men

Recruited through Mechanical Turk

Mean age 33.0 (SD = 11.33)

78.3% Caucasian
9% Black

Conducted online
Using Qualtrics
Participants read a trial transcript of a murder case in which defendant claimed self-defense using evidence of BWS (Adapted from Schuller & Hastings, 1996 Modelled after the Lavallee v. R [1990] case)

Race of defendant and victim manipulated using names & pictures
Materials & Procedure

Verdict:
- Guilty of second-degree murder
- Manslaughter
- Not guilty by reason of self-defense

Questionnaire to assess:
- Perception of scenario
- Attitudes towards women
- Beliefs about wife beating
- Sexism
- Racism
Hypotheses

Effect of juror gender on verdicts

• Females more lenient overall \((\text{Schuller et al., 1994})\)

Effect of defendant race on verdicts

• Black defendants treated more harshly \((\text{Johnson & Betsinger, 2009; Ruttenberg, 1994})\)

Effect of defendant race influenced by racial composition of the couple

• Defendant in same race couple treated more harshly \((\text{Locke & Richman, 1999; Maeder et al., 2013})\)
Results

Effect of juror gender on verdicts

$X^2 (2) = 13.17, p = .001$, Cramer’s $V = .23$
Results

Effect of defendant race on verdicts

\[ X^2 (2) = 9.06, \ p = .011, \ \text{Cramer’s V} = .19 \]

- Black defendants treated less harshly
  - 52% found Not Guilty (vs. only 38% for White defendant)

Effect of defendant race influenced by racial composition of the couple

\[ X^2 (2) = 1.01, \ p = .60, \ \text{Cramer’s V} = .06 \]

- Lack of effect due to overall effect of defendant race
Discussion

- Overall low symbolic racism against Blacks (
  $M=20.26, \ SD=3.98$)

- Participant perceptions about the wife’s circumstances
  - Black defendant did not have other options available
    $[t(241) = 2.45, \ p = .015]$
Discussion & Conclusion

- Typical BWS characterization may not serve as a disadvantage to Black women
  - Marginalization leaves Black women with fewer options

- Race inequality in US still deemed a significant issue

- Domestic violence and BWS still perceived differently across gender
Questions/Comments?

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