Domestic violence is oftentimes synonymous with spousal abuse and more specifically, battered women, but a broader definition also includes violence between parents and children, intimate partners, and siblings (Dutton & McGregor, 1992). Even when limited to violence between intimate partners, domestic violence continues to be an important social problem, with solutions offered by the mental health system, the criminal justice system, policymakers, and women’s advocates. Cross-culturally, wife-assault is the most common type of family violence (Reichert, 1991). In 1998, 72% of intimate violence murder victims were female and domestic violence murders accounted for 11% of murders nationwide (Rennison & Welchans, 2000).

Many people have their own perceptions about the circumstances within which domestic violence occurs, undoubtedly influenced by the news, movies, television, and even personal experience. Smith and Studebaker (1996) found that memory intrusions, which may be relevant during jury deliberation, are susceptible to prior knowledge (erroneous or deliberate) of crime categories and possibly stereotypical or misleading information. For example, a man may be more likely to be convicted of domestic assault than a woman simply because jurors have a preexisting conception of a domestic violence perpetrator, which is generally a male. Assessing individual attitudes about interpersonal violence is notoriously difficult, especially because of the complex, private, and value-laden nature of domestic violence (Rybarik, Dosch, Gilmore, & Krajewski, 1995). This study examined college students’ perceptions of domestic violence as moderated by perpetrator gender (man or woman), weapon type (traditional or nontraditional) and socioeconomic status (affluent or impoverished). Further examination of whether attitudes about domestic violence reflect common myths about battered women and a discussion of how these assumptions might affect juror decision-making will follow.

Can Gender, Weapons, and Wealth Influence Our Views About Domestic Violence?

Attitudes about domestic violence are complex and difficult to assess. The present study attempted to assess societal attitudes by asking participants to read 3 domestic violence case summaries and respond to examine the influence of perpetrator gender, weapon type, and socioeconomic status. Results indicated that participants generally responded to differences between cases rather than to manipulated variables. Therefore, analyses were conducted using case difference as a fixed factor. Implications for domestically violent situations and limitations on external validity also are discussed.

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Perpetrator Gender

There are a number of studies in the domestic violence literature that indicate the prevalence rate of husband-to-wife aggression is equal to that of wife-to-husband aggression (see George, 2003 for review). Although some might argue that the rates are unequal (Yllo, 1993), there is at least adequate evidence to suggest that female-perpetrated violence is a frequent occurrence. However, some research suggests that resultant injury is usually more severe for female victims than for male victims (Feldbau-Kohn, O’Leary, & Schumacher, 2000; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998), whereas other reports claim women are more likely to use weapons rather than their fists, when assaulting men (George, 2003). In addition, gender is thought to be extremely relevant in public perceptions of domestic violence. For instance, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Shliem, and Kramer (2004) showed a videotaped, male-perpetrated domestic violence incident and found that not only did the preexisting perpetrator-victim relationship (i.e., married vs. acquaintance) matter towards attributions of perpetrators, but the gender of the perceiver also mattered. They found that female participants viewed the male victim in the video as more responsible for his actions and the female victim in the video less at fault, whereas male participants seemed less critical of the portrayed violence. Feather (1996) found that domestic violence perpetrated by men was seen as more serious and the perpetrators more responsible and deserving of greater penalty. Furthermore, Hester and Smith (as cited in Bornstein & Nemeth, 1999) found a defendant’s actions were described as being motivated by perverse joy when the victim was a young woman, but motivated by revenge when the victim was an adult man. Consequently, a female perpetrator may be viewed as being a “battered woman” and thus motivated by revenge from being continuously beaten, whereas a male perpetrator is seen to derive personal pleasure and exhibit self-satisfying domination by killing a female partner (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). Thus, there may be a widely held belief that women are the only victims of domestic violence and that men may be desensitized to some interpersonal violence.

Weapon Type

Dienstbier, Roesch, Mizumoto, Hemenover, Lott, and Carlo (1998) found that exposure to weapons (guns) led to harsher criminal sentencing in a mock jury study. They also found a weapon-saliency effect in the criminal verdict and sentencing. Literature has revealed that a male defendant’s actions are perceived to be more unusual (for instance, with unusual weapons or involving unusual situations; Melton & Belknap, 2003), whereas women might be more likely to actually use weapons rather than body parts to cause injury (George, 2003). Therefore, familiar objects taken out of context and used as weapons may potentially lead to greater culpability. Although there is little empirical research on the type of weapons used in domestic violence, traditional weapons were operationalized as weapons commonly used in domestic violence disputes, including guns, knives, boiling water, bricks, fireplace pokers, and baseball bats (Sacks, 2003). Nontraditional weapons were defined as fairly innocuous, everyday objects used inappropriately as assault weapons, for example: space heaters, work boots, glass bottles, skillets, and drugs (prescribed or psychoactive). Because nontraditional weapons are objects used outside of their ordinarily innocuous state, they may convey a certain amount of premeditation or a degree of the heinousness. Bornstein and Nemeth (1999) argue that the heinousness of the crime and the introduction of graphic evidence may affect juror decisions, both of which can be strongly affected by the type of weapon used. For example, the type of weapon used (e.g., gun, bat, words) may logically affect the type of injury incurred (e.g., blood wound, internal injury, psychological abuse) and thus perceptions of heinousness and sensationalism. Sentencing based on heinousness may be differentially applied to, among other things, perpetrator gender (Bornstein & Nemeth, 1999). If criminal heinousness really is an influential factor, it is expected that differences in the type of weapon used will affect perceptions of violence and assignments of sentence length.

Socioeconomic Status

Research has shown that a low socioeconomic status (SES) is a significant predictor of violence (Swanson, 1994), and an important factor in the continuation of violence (Johnson, 2003). Cunradi, Caetano, and Schafer (2002) found that income level is a better predictor of domestic violence than race, because income level transcends racial categories and is ultimately a better indicator of the availability of resources. With confirming findings, especially for female victims, Rennison and Planty (2003) argued that SES (as represented by income level) is a better predictor of domestic violence than race, and Reichert (1991) found that cross-culturally, wife beating is generally perceived to be more prevalent in low-income families. For several reasons, such as a deficiency of resources, money, education, and occupational opportunities, the lower echelon may often resort to violence, perpetuating the stereotype that the lower class use violence more than the upper class (Smith, 2002). In reality, a low SES may be a risk factor for violent behav-
ior, however the affluent are not immune from violence. Research has shown that domestic violence occurs among high socioeconomic families, and that upper SES families are underrepresented in violence reports due to the population samples used (e.g., women in shelters) and the stigma that might result (McKendy, 1997). People in the United States (i.e., potential jurors) should recognize that domestic violence is not just a low SES activity, but a social epidemic affecting families of any income level.

The previously identified variables are relevant to incidents of domestic violence because of their interrelationship to one another. Weapon type may be a reflection of the motivation of the violence and the resources/access (i.e., SES) available to the particular perpetrator (i.e., gender). To assess attitudes about domestic violence, measures were taken in the form of a juror response survey (based on hypothetical cases) on perceptions of violence, guilt, and sentencing length to the above-mentioned independent variables. In general, it is hypothesized that cases with male perpetrators (men as innately aggressive), nontraditional weapons (as they are taken out of their original, innocuous context), and low SES perpetrators (violence as the weapon of the lower class) will be perceived as more violent, found guilty more often, and sentenced to longer periods of incarceration than female perpetrators, traditional weapons, and high SES perpetrators. These findings are expected to have some implications for jury decision-making, domestic violence education, and the efficiency of social institutions in addressing the issue of domestic violence.

Method

Participants

Participants were 53 psychology students from a small Midwestern university who received scholastic credit for their participation. Participants were predominantly women (79%), White (77%), freshman (72%), and studying in the arts and sciences (62%) or nursing (25%). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 40, with a modal (47%) age of 18. Fifteen percent reported they had personally experienced some form of domestic violence, 34% reported knowing somebody who had experienced domestic violence, 45% reported studying about domestic violence, and one person (2%) was not familiar with the term domestic violence.

Materials

Materials included a demographic questionnaire covering the following: age, year in school, race, average family income, hometown size, and previous domestic violence experience. Three different half-page scenarios (Case 1, 2, or 3) depicting domestic violence situations resulting in victim death were used, each of which had eight versions, altered by the variables of gender (man or woman), weapon type (traditional or nontraditional), and SES (affluent or impoverished—as indicated by size of residence and financial worries). In addition, changing names and pronouns in reference to perpetrator and victim gender, weapon name, and living conditions and/or occupations, the vignettes of the particular case were designed to be identical in all other ways. Each vignette was accompanied by a juror response survey to measure guilt or innocence, sentencing length, and overall ratings of violence. Response sets were designed on a 7-point Likert scale, with the exception of verdict (guilty or not), and sentence length (response format in years and months).

Design and Procedure

Participants were briefed in accordance with Institutional Review Board protocol. Once consent was obtained, participants were administered a demographic questionnaire and three vignettes, randomly selected from each of the three scenarios (i.e., Case 1, 2, and 3). After reading each vignette, participants were asked to complete a juror response survey for each vignette. Participants were given 45 min to read the vignettes and complete the accompanying surveys. Data were analyzed by grouping responses by case and independent variable manipulation (e.g., surveys from Case 1 with a male perpetrator from a higher SES who used a traditional weapon were analyzed together).

Results

In order to determine the effects of gender, weapon choice, and SES on violence perception, several different statistical analyses were performed. Case number also was included as an independent variable, giving us a total of four independent variables.

First, a logistical regression was run to determine whether an effect was present between gender, weapon type, SES, and case number on guilt verdict (guilty or not guilty); $\chi^2(5, 152) = 47.85, p < .01$. Results of this analysis indicated that both gender effects, odds ratio $= 4.365, p = .015$; and case effects, odds ratio $= 18.191, p < .01$ were present. Of 157 verdicts, participants responded with a guilty verdict 87% of the time. Female perpetrators, however, were found not guilty significantly more than male perpetrators (67% versus 33%), even though both genders were represented as perpetrators in an equal number of vignettes. The effects of case on guilty verdicts were significant only for Case 1. Of the 21 not guilty verdicts given, 19 were in Case
Case 2 yielded zero not guilty verdicts and Case 3 yielded two.

A factorial analysis of variance was conducted in order to establish any effects of gender, SES, weapon type, and case number on sentencing length. The results of this ANOVA revealed a significant main effect on case number, \( F(2, 155) = 5.66, p < .01 \) (see Figure 1). Upon further examination, it was revealed that participants gave perpetrators in Case 2 a significantly longer sentencing (in years; \( M = 34.39, SD = 32.88 \)) than Case 3 (\( M = 17.84, SD = 21.26 \)) and Case 1 (\( M = 19.00, SD = 26.27 \)). No significant differences were found between Case 1 and Case 3.

A second ANOVA also was used to examine the effects of the four independent variables (gender, SES, weapon type, and case number) upon overall violence ratings. Results of the factorial ANOVA indicated main effects for both gender, \( F(1, 159) = 5.35, p < .05 \), and case number, \( F(2, 159) = 12.61, p < .01 \). Descriptive statistics indicated that domestic violence situations involving male perpetrators (\( M = 5.90, SD = .89 \)) were rated as significantly more violent than those with female perpetrators (\( M = 5.56, SD = 1.20 \)) (see Figure 2). A main effect with case also was found, suggesting that participants rated Case 3 (\( M = 5.23, SD = 1.15 \)) as significantly less violent than both Case 2 (\( M = 5.87, SD = .92 \)) and Case 1 (\( M = 6.11, SD = .91 \)).

In addition to the main effects yielded by the ANOVA regarding violence ratings, an interaction between case, weapon type, and SES also proved to be significant, \( F(2, 159) = 3.16, p < .05 \). LSD post hoc tests were conducted and it was found that affluent perpetrators in Case 1 using traditional weapons were rated as significantly more violent (\( M = 6.54, SD = .66 \)) than perpetrators in Case 2 (\( M = 5.87, SD = .92 \)) and perpetrators in Case 3 (\( M = 5.23, SD = 1.15 \)). In addition, perpetrators in Case 3 were viewed as significantly less violent than others, regardless of weapon choice or SES.

In addition, utilizing demographic data provided by participants in a questionnaire, two moderational analyses were conducted according to the Baron-Kenny (1986) criterion model. Participant gender was not a significant moderator between perpetrator gender and violence ratings, \( F(1, 155) = 1.67, p > .20 \). Furthermore, participant family income did not prove to be a significant moderator between perpetrator SES and violence ratings, \( F(1, 143) = 1.31, p > .26 \). Participants also were asked about their experience with domestic violence in a demographic questionnaire. An ANOVA revealed that the amount of domestic violence experience reflected in participant responses had a significant effect on overall violence ratings, \( F(4, 154) = 3.00, p < .05 \). Participants who reported personally experiencing domestic violence gave significantly higher violence ratings to vignettes (\( M = 6.25, SD = .99 \)) than those who had read about or studied domestic violence (\( M = 5.56, SD = .94 \)), and those participants who knew someone who experienced domestic violence (\( M = 5.51, SD = 1.19 \)). No other significant differences were found.

**Discussion**

Many different factors contribute to the degree of culpability people perceive in domestic violence situations. In this study, gender, weapon type, and SES were hypothesized to affect people’s overall perceptions of domestic violence situations. Overall violence
ratings, perpetrator guilt, and sentence length were all dependent variables used to establish participants’ perceptions. Specifically, it was predicted that poor, male perpetrators using a nontraditional weapon would be rated as more violent than women, affluent perpetrators, or those using traditional weapons in domestic abuse due to the common perceptions that men are the more aggressive gender and that violence is cyclical and rooted in poverty. We also assumed that those factors contributing to a greater perception of violence would warrant harsher punishment in terms of longer sentence length from participants. Although no significant main effects were found with SES or weapon type, perpetrator gender differences were present, and differences among the three domestic violence cases used in the vignettes were significant as well.

Guilt Verdict

According to verdicts reported by participants, nearly all perpetrators were found guilty of committing a serious crime. Of 157 total participant ratings of guilt, 136 were found guilty and only 21 were found not guilty. These results may not seem surprising giving the gravity of domestic violence; however, female perpetrators received an uneven proportion (67%) of the not guilty verdicts. This effect may potentially reflect the common thought that women are victims of domestic violence, not perpetrators. Similarly, participants may have thought that the women who were perpetrators were pushed to do so, possibly after putting up with previous domestic abuse (i.e., battered woman’s syndrome; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). Male perpetrators were viewed as guilty more often than women across all cases in one study (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, et al., 2004), and conversely women were seen as not guilty more often in this study, potentially indicating that participants may have focused on perpetrator gender while overlooking other specific case factors when determining a verdict.

However, effects involving case specifics were discovered as well, demonstrating the importance of aggregate case facts in determining violence ratings and other variables. In Case 1, participants responded with 19 not guilty verdicts and 33 guilty verdicts. There were two not guilty verdicts in Case 3 and zero in Case 2. Because Case 1 explicitly defines the perpetrator as being intoxicated, the participants may have attributed some of the blame and violence to the influence of alcohol, thus making the perpetrator less personally culpable. Also in Case 1, the perpetrator returns to the crime scene and calls the police to confess his/her story. This case difference may have suggested remorse, causing participants to rate the perpetrator based on sympathy or compassion. Thus, alcohol saliency and immediate action taken by the perpetrator may affect participant guilt verdicts, aside from any known criminal intent.

Sentence Length

Sentencing length was a variable of interest that participants responded to in the juror response survey. Surprisingly, case number was the only variable that had a significant effect on sentencing length; however, weapon type may be among the factors that contributed to the extra sentencing lengths. Although weapon type was originally separated into traditional and nontraditional weapons used in the cases, people may actually distinguish between weapons based on the severity of (potential) injuries. Perpetrators in Case 2 received a significantly longer sentence than perpetrators in other cases. Case 2 differs on the basis that both the traditional and nontraditional weapons referred to in the vignette (a space heater vs. boiling water) inflicted fatal burns on the victim. On the other hand, weapons in Case 3 (a baseball bat vs. desk lamp) caused death by bludgeoning, and Case 1 weapons (a knife vs. broken glass) were used to stab a victim to death. Perhaps the amount of time that the victim suffered before dying also added to greater sentencing length because victims in Case 2 died after four days due to burn complications, while the other victims died shortly after the incident. In addition, the type of injury inflicted may reveal differences in the cruelty or heinousness of the perpetrator/crime, thus causing participants to assign longer sentencing lengths.

Overall Violence

The effects of case number and gender on the overall violence rating for each case also were of prime interest in this study. Both variables had significant main effects on the violence ratings that participants gave to each case. The LSD Post hoc analysis suggests that Case 3 was viewed as significantly less violent than the other two cases. A variety of factors may have contributed to this effect. First, the mention that the couple had legal custody of their eleven-year-old nephew may have indicated to respondents that their household is (or should be) generally less violent. Also, following the incident, the perpetrator asks the boy to dial 911. In both other cases, the perpetrator leaves the victim immediately after the incident.

A main effect of gender on violence rating also was found. Results indicated that male perpetrators were seen as more violent than women across all three cases presented. This effect may be understood in the common perception that men are naturally more aggressive and violent than women (Feather, 1996).
Another reason participants rated men as more violent may be a limitation of the study sample, which consisted of mostly women, although gender did not prove to be a significant moderator between gender and a guilty verdict. Also, participants may not be familiar with crime statistics and current research on domestic violence that questions the original notion that men are the more violent sex (George, 2003; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998).

Gender, weapon type, SES, and case number interactions also were examined on overall violence ratings. The interaction between case number, SES, and weapon type was significant. Interaction effects on violence ratings showed that affluent perpetrators in Case 1 using traditional weapons were perceived as the most violent. This effect may be due to a reference in Case 1 stating that the perpetrator was intoxicated at the time of the killing. Also, an explicit shouting match ensued between the couple in Case 1 which may have caused participants to view the whole scene as more violent (interestingly, Case 1 perpetrators also received the most not guilty verdicts).

Domestic Violence Experience

Study participant characteristics, such as gender and family income, were not significant moderators between perpetrator gender and perpetrator SES on violence ratings in this study. This finding may demonstrate that participants did not make biased ratings based on their own individual characteristics as was found in previous research (Feather, 1996). In addition, although demographic questionnaire responses represented a wide income range, most participants were women, limiting the possibility of participant gender as a moderator. Domestic violence experience, however, did affect overall violence ratings. Participants who had personally experienced domestic violence rated vignettes as more violent than those participants who had only read about or studied domestic violence, and those who knew someone who had experienced it, potentially inflating violence ratings. These findings may suggest that people who view domestic violence as a personal topic may have responded with greater emotional drive to events from a particularly salient situation as opposed to the case facts presented in the vignettes. Participants’ responses also may reflect the amount of violence they felt had been committed towards them. In addition, the few participants with little or no experience with domestic violence may not grasp the full intensity of the issue and the extreme gravity of the violence described in the vignettes, therefore lowering the average violence ratings. Although domestic violence experience was not originally an independent variable of interest, the implications of experience in jury deliberations on domestic violence issues should be studied in future research.

Limitations and Conclusions

Research by Yllo (1993) on domestic violence has primarily focused on the feminist perspective that women are the victims and never the instigators of domestic abuse. Results from this study seem to indicate that most participants’ views are consistent with the feminist model, as more female perpetrators received not guilty verdicts, and men were viewed as significantly more violent. In addition, the phenomenon that women received more not guilty verdicts than men even when the outcome was the same (i.e., death), may be consistent with views held by Bornstein and Nemeth (1998) that a woman who has been convicted of murdering her husband has likely endured a long history of abuse.

Furthermore, the results of this study demonstrate that participants’ perceptions of violence do not depend upon the SES of the perpetrator. Because some research supports the belief that women from low SES backgrounds are much more likely to be victims of domestic violence (McKendy, 1997), it would not have been surprising for participants to rate the counterpart perpetrators (i.e., male perpetrators from low SES backgrounds) as more violent or guilty more often. This finding was not supported, however, indicating that the stereotypical association between poverty and violence may not be as generalized or widespread as is commonly thought. In fact, participants may be more attuned to research comments on the fact that women from higher SES households may endure domestic violence without reporting it due to negative stigmas (McKendy, 1997).

Finally, this study may have yielded significant results because of external factors or problems with internal validity. First, the differences in the design of the three cases were more significant than the three originally manipulated independent variables of gender, SES, and weapon type, though these differences actually increase external validity. Because factors reflecting the independent variables were in written form, they may not have been salient enough to render the participants’ attention. Furthermore, the vignettes utilized in this study were fictionalized cases—also a limitation on validity. The practice effect may have influenced some participants, because after reading each of three vignettes the participants had to complete an identical juror response survey. They may have been prone to answer the same way for all questions regardless of actual case differences. Question wording ambiguity on the juror response survey also could have caused error in the results. In addition to
these threats of internal validity, another major problem is that this study lacks the ability to be generalized to different populations, as the sample consisted of mostly White women below the age of 22. In addition to gender biases that may have been caused by the sample based on age, the participants may lack the life experience necessary to answer some of the survey questions accurately and honestly.

Results of this study have numerous implications for society regarding people’s perceptions of domestic violence scenarios. The common result that men are perceived as more violent or rather guiltier of violence than women is important to note, especially in criminal law, where a man and woman may receive different sentencing lengths for the same crime. Also, the fact that women received a not guilty verdict more often than men may reflect a common perception that women who do commit such extreme acts of violence against their partners unless driven by a history of abuse. This thought, however, is only a speculation, and further research is necessary to determine the real cause of verdict discrepancies between sexes.

The main conclusion of this study is when people give overall ratings of violence, judgment, and punishment, they look at each case individually, with perpetrator gender apparently being the most salient factor. Aside from gender, participants did not make dispositional inferences about perpetrators as often as situational ones, which demonstrate that people may be able to filter out certain stereotypes when asked to make important decisions on violent cases. Although significance was not attained with respect to socioeconomic status or weapon type, people may still hold inaccurate views regarding these factors and their relationships to domestic violence. Educating the public, especially at-risk individuals, about domestic violence should continue to be a societal goal. Further research should be conducted to establish whether respondent gender serves as a moderator between perpetrator gender and violence ratings. Also, the effect of weapon type on perceptions of domestic violence is still a question of interest, but should be defined in terms of the injuries the weapons inflict, rather than traditional versus nontraditional weapons as operationalized in this study.

References


