



# Racial Differences in Men's Perceptions of Interracial Domestic Abuse Cases

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## Introduction

Despite gains in race relations since the civil rights movement, racial bias in juror decision making still exists in this post-civil-rights era. Mock jury studies continue to show that both Black and White jurors often make decisions in interracial cases that are more lenient towards defendants of their own race and more punitive of defendants of a different race. A social identity (Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000) and social-cognitive explanation (Hunt, 1999) have been put forth to address racially biased juror decisions. A social identity explanation for mock jurors' racial bias suggests that a same-race leniency tendency occurs because mock jurors are *consciously* favoring members of their ingroups. A social-cognitive explanation suggests that Black and White mock jurors have different experiences with and beliefs about racism in this country. Consequently, Black and White mock jurors may *unconsciously* interpret interracial conflicts differently, due to their different experiences with race in this country, and subsequently rely on these different interpretations as they decide cases. In comparison to the social identity explanation, the social cognitive explanation for racial bias in jurors' decisions has received very little empirical attention.

The purpose of the present study is to empirically examine whether racial differences in interpretations of evidence occur as a function of juror's race and defendant's race in an interracial dispute. Black and White mock jurors read one of four versions of a trial summary that described an interracial domestic abuse case. They responded to several open-ended questions that measured their interpretations of the evidence. On the basis of past social and legal research, which show that Blacks and Whites interpret evidence in interracial cases differently, it was hypothesized that racial differences in interpretations of evidence would occur as a function of the defendant's race and mock juror's race.

## Method

### Participants

- 48 men recruited from introductory psychology and sociology courses
  - 22 Black men from Howard University
  - 26 White men from the University of Kansas.
- Average age was 19.60 years

### Procedure

A female experimenter always conducted the experiments; however she was a Black at Howard University and a White at the University of Kansas. Participants were told that we were interested in their impressions of legal trials. They read and evaluated a trial summary and responded to several open-ended questions, manipulation checks, and demographic measures. Once participants finished responding to these items, the experiment concluded and participants were debriefed.

### Materials

Participants were given the following trial summary of the domestic abuse case, which included arguments made by the prosecution and defense.

**TRIAL SUMMARY**

**Prosecution's Argument:**  
The prosecution alleged that Mr. Smith (the defendant) and a group of coworkers were at a bar celebrating his recent promotion when his girlfriend, Ms. Simmons (the plaintiff) stood up and started to "toast" him, poking fun at his physique and making jokes about his sexual performance. According to the prosecution, Mr. Smith then yelled at Ms. Simmons, forced her into her chair, and slapped her across the face. This slap knocked Ms. Simmons to the ground and she injured her ankle in the fall.

**Defense's Argument:**  
The defense conceded that Mr. Smith slapped his girlfriend but argued that she had been drinking and making a fool of out of herself, leading Mr. Smith to try to "talk some sense into her." The defense claimed that Ms. Simmons fell down because she was drunk, and the defendant expressed remorse for playing any role in her injury.

### Manipulated Variables

**Defendant's race.** The defendant's race was manipulated in the claimant profile sheets that were given to participants. Participants who were randomly assigned to the *Black defendant* condition received the following profile information:

Defendant: Kevin Smith, 34-year-old Black male, 6'1", 190 lbs., computer analyst.  
Victim: Lisa Simmons, 26-year-old White female, 5'5", 125 lbs., day care worker.

Participants who were randomly assigned to the *White defendant* condition received the following profile information:

Defendant: Kevin Smith, 34-year-old White male, 6'1", 190 lbs., computer analyst.  
Victim: Lisa Simmons, 26-year-old Black female, 5'5", 125 lbs., day care worker.

**Racial conflict salience.** The victim's testimony contained the manipulation of racial conflict salience. Following Sommers and Ellsworth (2000), we manipulated racial conflict salience by varying the information in the trial summary that describes what the defendant said to the alleged victim before he slapped her.

Participants who were randomly assigned to the *racial conflict salient* condition read: "Ms. Simmons testified that before Mr. Smith slapped her, the defendant yelled, 'You know better than to talk that way about a *White* (or *Black*) man in front of his friends.'"

Participants who were randomly assigned to the *control* condition read: "Ms. Simmons testified that before Mr. Smith slapped her, the defendant yelled, 'You know better than to talk that way about a man in front of his friends.'"

### Dependent Measures

**Perceptions of racial conflict salience.** To measure mock jurors' perceptions of racial conflict salience, we asked them to respond to the following question: "To what extent do you believe that the incident was a result of a racial conflict?" Participants' responses were measured on a 10-point scale, with response options ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 9 (*a great deal*).

**Perceptions of situational factors that played a role in the incident.** Participants were asked to indicate what role they believed race, institutional racism, gender, socioeconomic status, and trial unfairness played in the incident. Furthermore, we asked them to indicate what other factors they believed played a role in the incident. Responses to these open-ended questions were coded in terms of whether participants mentioned explicitly each of the following: race, gender, socioeconomic status, and trial unfairness.

**Perceptions of the defendant's and victim's personality.** Participants were asked to indicate what role they believed the defendant's and victim's personality played in the incident. Traits that were explicitly mentioned by participants in response to the question were recorded. Defendant traits were coded according to whether they fell into each of the following categories: aggressive, sexist, overly sensitive, a drunk, racist, egotistical, frustrated, proud, and remorseful. Victim traits were coded according to whether they fell into each of the following categories: instigator, a drunk, social/outgoing, immature, victimized/submissive, egotistical, and proud.

## Results

### Racial Differences in Perceptions of Situational Factors that Played a Role in the Incident

We found that White and Black mock jurors differed in their perceptions of the roles of institutional racism and alcohol. Figure 1 shows that Black mock jurors were more likely to perceive that institutional racism played a role; whereas White mock jurors were more likely to perceive that it did *not* play a role,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.49, p < .05$ . This difference was only significant in the black defendant condition.

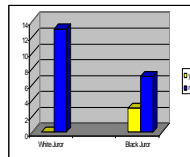


Figure 1. Racial Differences in Men's Perceptions of Institutional Racism-Black Defendant Condition

Furthermore, we found that White mock jurors were more likely to perceive that alcohol played a role; where Black mock jurors were more likely to perceive that it did not play a role. This difference was marginally significant in both the black,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.93, p < .10$  and white defendant condition,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.20, p < .10$ , as shown in Figures 2 and 3, respectively.

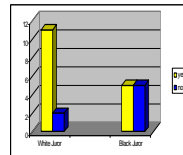


Figure 2. Racial Differences in Perceptions of the Role of Alcohol-Black Defendant Condition

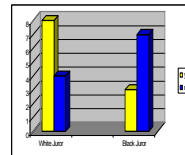


Figure 3. Racial Differences in Perceptions of the Role of Alcohol-White Defendant Condition

### Racial Differences in Perceptions of the Defendant's and Victim's Personality

We also found marginally significant racial differences in jurors' perceptions of the defendant's and victim's personality. In comparison to Black mock jurors, White mock jurors were more likely to perceive a Black defendant as aggressive,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.24, p < .10$ , and a White defendant as a drunk,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.90, p < .10$ , as shown in Figures 4 and 5, respectively. However, in comparison to White mock jurors, Black mock jurors were more likely to *not* perceive the Black defendant as aggressive or the White defendant as a drunk (Figures 4 and 5, respectively).

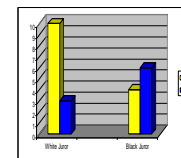


Figure 4. Racial Differences in Perceptions of Defendant as Aggressive - Black Defendant Condition

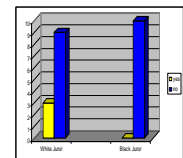


Figure 5. Racial Differences in Perceptions of Defendant as a Drunkard-White Defendant Condition

Furthermore, Figure 6 shows that in comparison to Black mock jurors, White mock jurors were more likely to perceive the victim as social,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.65, p = .10$ . This race difference was not significant in the black defendant condition.

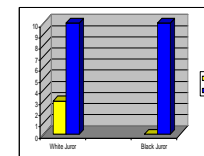


Figure 6. Racial Differences in Perceptions of the Victim as Social-White Defendant (Black Victim)

## Conclusions

Our hypothesis was supported; jurors' interpretations of evidence do differ significantly as a function of both mock juror's and defendant's race. Black and White male jurors' interpretations of the situational factors leading up to the incident and the dispositions they attributed to the defendant and victim differed significantly, and these racial differences depended on the defendant's race. Our findings do suggest that a social-cognitive explanation for racially-biased juror decision making is a viable one. Further empirical research needs to be conducted in order to test the social-cognitive explanation against other explanations for racially-biased decision making.

## References

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