No Need For The Blindfold: The Influence of Perpetrator Attractiveness on Legal Decision-Making

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Background

- While legal judgment among peers is a cornerstone of our legal system, the affective influences on legal decisions are poorly understood.
- A number of studies have reported inconsistent effects of attractiveness on legal judgment, often looking at only one specific type of crime.
- The present study investigated the role that perpetrator attractiveness plays in legal decision-making through the use of facial images. Participants made punishment ratings while viewing vignettes paired with female images varying on attractiveness.

Procedure

- 34 participants (12 male) read vignettes paired with a facial image and rated punishment for a female perpetrator on a 0-9 scale (see Figure 1). Scenarios and images were matched together on a pseudo-random basis. Orders were different for each participant
- Participants returned one week later and rated attractiveness for each image alone, also on a scale of 0-9 (see Figure 2).

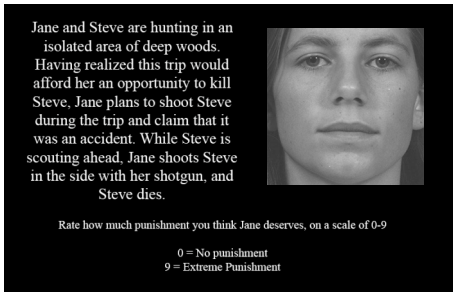

Figure 1. Example of stimuli presentation for punishment ratings. Written vignettes were presented on left of screen, female facial images were presented on the right. A description of the scale was presented below, anchored at 0 = No punishment, 9 = Extreme punishment.

Figure 2. Example of stimuli presentation for attractiveness ratings. Facial images were presented alone, with a description of the scale below, anchored at 0 = Not at all attractive, 9 = Extremely attractive.

Method

- 90 written scenarios were modified from current and published studies. Each scenario depicted the actions of a female perpetrator and the harming of a victim, with a varying level of crime severity and intentionality of the part of the protagonist (see Table 1).
- 277 images were taken from the FERET database. 18 separate participants (4 male) rated attractiveness of each of the images (same procedure as experimental study, see Figure 2).
- The 30 scenarios with the highest average ratings comprised the Attractive group (mean: 5.37), the 30 scenarios with the lowest average ratings comprised the Unattractive group (mean: 2.21), and the 30 images with the most average attractiveness comprised the Average group (mean: 3.73)

Breakdown of Intent, Crime Severity and Victim Gender Conditions Across Scenarios

	R Condition		DR Condition		
Crime Type	*Male Victim*	*Female Victim*	*Male Victim*	*Female Victim*	**Total**
Murder	6	6	6	5	**23**
Maim	3	3	3	3	**12**
Assault	4	5	5	5	**19**
Property Damage	4	4	4	4	**16**
Theft	5	5	5	5	**20**
Total	**22**	**23**	**23**	**22**	**90**

Table 1. Depicts the breakdown of scenarios across intent, crime severity and victim gender conditions. Scenarios were divided into 2 intent conditions, 5 crime type conditions and 2 victim gender conditions.

Results

- First, we analysed the effect of intent and crime type on punishment ratings, finding a main effect of intent and crime type, as well as an interaction between the two (see Figure 3).
- We also analysed the effect of attractiveness group on attractiveness rating, finding a significant main effect, providing evidence for the successfulness of the images in manipulating attractiveness (see Figure 4).
- Examining the main effect of attractiveness on punishment, we did not find a significant main effect (see Figure 5).
- There was also no significant interaction between attractiveness and any other combination of variables, including intent, crime type or victim gender.

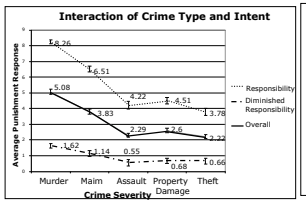

Figure 3. Interaction between crime type and intent on punishment responses (F [4,132] = 128.47, p < .001). Depicts average punishment response across crime type and intent conditions. Means are shown for each crime type, in both intent conditions and across intent conditions. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

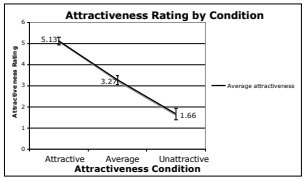

Figure 4. Average attractiveness rating for each attractiveness condition. Error bars indicate standard error of the mean. Using a repeated measures ANOVA, differences between conditions were found to be significant (F [2,66] = 202.98, p < .001).

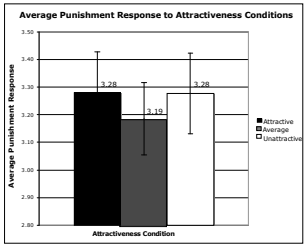

Figure 5. Average punishment response across subjects to attractiveness conditions. Error bars indicate standard error of the mean. A repeated measures ANOVA using attractiveness as a factor yielded no significant difference between conditions (F [2,64] = .726, p = .488).

Results

- Finally, we found an unexpected main effect of victim gender on punishment ratings, such that perpetrators who harmed male victims received greater punishment (mean: 3.31) than for female victims (meal: 3.19) (F [1,33] = 29.13, p < .001).
- Further examination of the effect of victim gender revealed an interaction between victim gender, intent and crime type (see Figure 6).

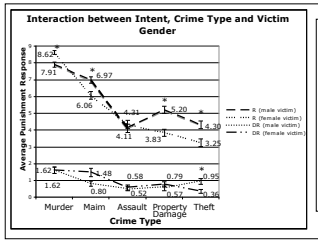

Figure 6. Interaction of intent, crime type and victim gender on punishment responses (F [4,132] = 24.28, p < .001). Means depicted, error bars indicate standard error of the mean. Significant differences between responses to victim gender after Bonferroni correction as indicated (p < .003)

Discussion

- No main effect of attractiveness, or interaction with any other variable, was found, despite the fact that attractiveness was successfully manipulated and that the scenarios were successful in differentially affecting punishment.
- Taken together, these results provide good evidence against an effect of perpetrator attractiveness on punishment across multiple crime types and levels of perpetrator intentionality.
- Additionally, an unexpected main effect of victim gender was found, which requires further examination and replication.

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