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# The Effects of Personal Attitudes on the Criminal Justice System

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# The Effects of Personal Attitudes on the Criminal Justice System

## **Abstract**

It is obvious that there remains a difference in punishments for the same crime in our criminal justice system. However, it is less obvious as to why there lies such a difference. Is it racism? Or is there a difference in opinion based on social dominance and authoritarian ideologies? The participants in the current study are 252 Psychology students attending Eastern Michigan University in the 2017/2018 school year. It is hypothesized that those who rank higher in SDO and RWA will endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals. It is also hypothesized that participants will endorse harsher punishments for African American defendants than for Caucasian defendants. Various Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were run to test the hypotheses, analyzing the effects of race of the defendant as well as the effects of SDO and RWA measure averages among participants. The findings of this study do not indicate a statistical significance for the first hypothesis, meaning that those who rank higher in RWA and SDO do not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals. However, there are statistically significant results supporting a racial divide that is contrary to the hypothesis, meaning that participants did not endorse harsher punishments for African American defendants than Caucasian defendants. This project aims to inform further studies involving jury decision making and possible reform of the criminal justice system.

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**THE EFFECTS OF PERSONAL ATTITUDES ON THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

**By**

**Samantha Ayers**

**A Senior Thesis Submitted to the**

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**in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Honors in Psychology**

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**The Effects of Personal Attitudes on the Criminal Justice System**

**Samantha R Ayers**

**Eastern Michigan University**

### Abstract

It is obvious that there remains a difference in punishments for the same crime in our criminal justice system. However, it is less obvious as to why there lies such a difference. Is it racism? Or is there a difference in opinion based on social dominance and authoritarian ideologies? The participants in the current study are 252 Psychology students attending Eastern Michigan University in the 2017/2018 school year. It is hypothesized that those who rank higher in SDO and RWA will endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals. It is also hypothesized that participants will endorse harsher punishments for African American defendants than for Caucasian defendants. Various Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were run to test the hypotheses, analyzing the effects of race of the defendant as well as the effects of SDO and RWA measure averages among participants. The findings of this study do not indicate a statistical significance for the first hypothesis, meaning that those who rank higher in RWA and SDO do not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals. However, there are statistically significant results supporting a racial divide that is contrary to the hypothesis, meaning that participants did not endorse harsher punishments for African American defendants than Caucasian defendants. This project aims to inform further studies involving jury decision making and possible reform of the criminal justice system.

## Introduction

False convictions in the United States can lead to harsh prison sentencing, possibly a seat on death row. What causes jurors to convict alleged criminals to such harsh punishment? What crimes constitute such consequences? We know that there are times when people face these harsh punishments for crimes that they are later found falsely convicted of. Sometimes these cases are overturned; other times we are not as lucky. This leaves one to wonder what can be done to change this statistic and allow for less wrongful convictions.

Why is it that not everyone receives the same punishment for the same crime? Stereotypes lead people to believe that there are crimes that people of a certain race must have committed simply because they are of that race. It is necessary to note that bias can be considered a large factor in convictions and sentencing in the criminal justice system. However, it is also important to consider if this bias is simply racial bias or if there is an underlying component that allows for harsher punishments to be delivered regardless of racial prejudices.

It is portrayed in the media that there is a clear distinction between the ways people of different races are punished for the same crimes. Various social media and news outlets shine negative light on tragedies such as homicide or rape, but they seem to do it in a way that allows for viewers of the stories to produce a negative stereotype toward minorities, and allow for assumptions that if the perpetrator of a crime is white, they are less likely to be arrested or punished for their crime than if they were black. In a study produced by Gross, Possley & Stephens, 2017 there is support for this idea. Their study finds that, "African Americans imprisoned for murder are more likely to be innocent if they were convicted of killing white victims. Only about 15% of murders by African Americans have white victims, but 31% of innocent African-American murder exonerees were convicted of killing white people" (Gross,

Possley & Stephens, 2017). These statistics tend to support the idea that there is a clear bias in convictions and sentencing, even if there are reasons to believe that the alleged criminals are innocent. African Americans tend to be more harshly treated in matters of the criminal justice system according to this study, just as the media portrays.

In a study conducted by Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005, there is discussion of a racial divide in the criminal justice system. The study suggests that black persons who are arrested or have confrontations with the police are more likely to have a negative attitude than white persons, and white persons who have an anti-black stereotype are more likely to side with the police when it comes to negative confrontations with black persons. This study also claims that, "...the results for African Americans are consistent with the perceived discrimination hypothesis. At the same time, however, the impact of stereotypes among whites clearly conforms to the in-group favoritism hypothesis" (Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005). This study explains that there is a clear distaste for the criminal justice system, particularly the police, among the African American community. It is obvious from the results of the experiment that there are two different types of bias that are present when it comes to the criminal justice system. This particular study shows more support for perceived discrimination, stating that, "Blacks do not habitually favor civilians of their own race; rather, they tend to be more sympathetic toward black civilians only if they believe the CJS to be chronically unfair—the response predicted by the perceived discrimination hypothesis" (Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005). However, it also claims support for the in-group and out-group bias ideas as well.

Interestingly, a study conducted by Abwender & Hough, 2001, found that when comparing the race of the defendant with the race of a juror, it was found to be statistically significant that if a juror were black, they were more likely to give higher guilt ratings to white

defendants than black defendants. The same study also found that white jurors typically seemed to give the same guilt ratings regardless of race of the defendant. This can speak for an obvious in-group bias, meaning that there is more likelihood that a person will support a person that is more like them than unlike them. Although there is no proof in this particular study to support the notion that there is an in-group bias in the group of white jurors, it doesn't mean one does not exist.

A study conducted by Townsend, 1996, also poses a possible answer to this bias in the system. Her research explains that there is a difference in the way interracial and intraracial crimes are perceived. Interestingly, she finds evidence to support the idea of in-group and out-group bias, finding that, "Generally, interracial crimes are evaluated more negatively, particularly when the victim is the same race as the juror," and, "white jurors thought cases with black defendants and white victims were the most intentional, and cases with white defendants and black victims were the least intentional. This finding completely supports the hypothesis. Also in support of the hypothesis, black jurors thought cases with black defendants and white victims were the least intentional" (Townsend, 1996). Clearly, there is an issue surrounding race and criminal convictions and sentencing. However, the question to be answered is why? Is it simply because of racism? Is it due to the in-group and out-group phenomena? Or is it the result of something entirely different?

Previous research introduces the ideas of Social Dominance Orientation as well as Right-Wing Authoritarianism as possible reasons for bias in the criminal justice system. These two measures provide insight into an individual's attitudes and beliefs. In comparing these statistics among participants, the project aims to discover if there is an underlying prejudice in sentencing different persons for the same crime. The goal of the study is to give evidence to support the



possibility of prejudice regarding race and gender among sentences for various types of criminal activity.

According to previous research, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), “reflects an individual’s tendency to classify social groups along a superiority-inferiority dimension and to favor policies that maintain social inequality” (Van Heil and Mervielde, 2005). In other words, it seems that those who show signs of higher Social Dominance are more in favor of unequal treatment to those who they deem to be part of an inferior group of persons. This means that people who lie within the dominant social category will score higher on SDO than those who are in minority groups. For example, it is likely that men will score higher on this measure than women given societal standards and preconceived stereotypes. Caucasian persons will also likely score higher on this measure than African American persons. Given this, it is to be assumed that there is a correlation between strong SDO beliefs and prejudicial behaviors and biases in convictions as well as sentencing. Therefore, it is likely that those who score high on this measure will be more likely to endorse harsher sentences than those who score lower on the measure. In fact, it is stated that there is a high correlation between those who score high in SDO and general conservative beliefs (Van Hiel and Mervielde, 2005). Van Heil and Mervielde, 2005, also found a correlation between SDO and classical racism.

P.C.L. Heaven and S. Bucci, 2001, explain that SDO is based on the social dominance theory. This theory is one that, “argues that societies are group based with clearly defined social hierarchies, which are usually defined along gender and/or racial lines” (P.C.L Heaven and S. Bucci, 2001). Interestingly, this study also states research that shows that men are likely to rank higher than women, and white persons are more likely than black persons to score high on an SDO measure. Another study done by Sidanius, Mitchell, Haley & Navarrete, 2006, explains

that in areas of the world where there is a heightened state of social hierarchies there is more likelihood that there will be support for harsh criminal sanctions, especially against those not at the top of the hierarchy. Given this, it is appropriate to assume that those who rank higher in SDO are more likely to be harsher on criminals than those who do not. In this same study, it was found that there is a significant correlation between SDO and criminal justice beliefs, specifically general deterrence, specific deterrence and retribution (Sidanius, Mitchell, Haley & Navarrete, 2006). The study also found significant correlation between SDO and criminal justice sanctions, specifically support of the death penalty, general punitiveness, and lethal torture.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), as explained by Altemeyer, is said to be a combination of authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression and conventionalism (Heaven and Bucci, 2001). Other research explains that those who are high in RWA show signs of aggressions toward out-groups when permitted by those in power, and support for traditional values when permitted and endorsed by those in power (Whitley, 1999). This goes to show that those who score higher in this measure are more likely to support the ideas of those who are in power, and are likely to stick to stricter, more conservative ideas when it comes to matters of crime and punishment. This also seems to suggest that those who score high on an RWA measure are likely to be more bias toward the perceived in-group and become more prejudiced toward those in a perceived out-group.

Cohrs and Ibler, 2009, go on to explain in their research that there is a correlation found between authoritarian attitudes and perception of threats. They explain in their study that there are two approaches to explaining this correlation: one being mediation, the other being moderation. Mediation seems to be an approach that explains those who have more of an authoritarian outlook tend to perceive threatening situations more quickly than those who do not,

but everyone is just as likely to have a prejudiced opinion once the threat happens and has been processed. Basically this means that the threat is the mediator between authoritarianism and prejudice. Moderation seems to be an approach that explains the threat that is perceived is one that will interact with authoritarian ideals and then combine to reach a prejudicial outlook.

Given previous research, it has been found that Social Dominance Orientation is positively correlated with Right-Wing Authoritarianism (McKee and Feather, 2008). This same study, along with others, proves through the data collected that there is also a correlation between the two measures and criminal punishment and sentencing attitudes. Specifically, McKee and Feather, 2008, discovered that participants with higher SDO and RWA scores, “tended to be more in favor of capital punishment,” which also proved to be positively correlated with retribution, deterrence and incapacitation. Each of these measures shows a clear correlation with prejudice toward out-groups and a more conservative view on criminal activity and punishments.

Since it has been discussed and proven that there is a correlation with these two measures and clear preference toward members of the majority over the minority, there is also reason to suspect that there will be a bias in convictions and sentencing in the criminal justice system. It has been proven that the perceived in and out groups of a person can affect the severity of a sentence given for a crime. It has been repeatedly proven that there is an obvious racial bias when it comes to the criminal justice system, but it can be argued based on given research that this bias is unrelated to race and ethnicity and more so related to SDO and RWA. Kimmelmeier, 2005, brings forth a claim in his study that there is evidence to suggest that those higher in SDO show a racial bias that is negative for the out-group, whereas those lower in SDO tend to show a bias that is more positive for the out-group when it comes to guilty judgments and sentencing

recommendations. Interestingly, however, there was no support in a study conducted by Townsend, 1996, that proves statistically significant evidence that there is a correlation between the race of a juror and the race of a defendant when it comes to guilty convictions. In her study, it seemed that regardless of race there was a neutral standpoint and a fair sentence handed down to guilty parties.

Given the information that has already been produced regarding these measures, there are still questions that need to be answered: Is there a strong correlation between political conservatives, those higher in social dominance, and harsher sentencing in the criminal justice system? Is there a prejudice among those who are convicted of the same crime and their sentencing based upon race? Although this area has been studied, there is not much information about it. It is not an area that has been researched fully and adequately. There are many different avenues that can be explored to give support to this area of research and it is a topic that is worth exploring fully in order to get a more in depth understanding of the prejudices involved in arrests, conviction and sentencing.

This study aims to answer these questions by observing college students' reactions to criminal scenarios as well as a comparison of their political ideology and social dominance with the sentencing they choose to hand out to alleged criminal offenders. By allowing participants to read evidence of a case and choose a sentence themselves for each alleged criminal, this study brings about a new approach to get answers to these questions by allowing participants to answer the questions on their own, without fear of being watched or judged. Using a simple survey and allowing for written answers rather than questioning gives the participants the ability to answer questions honestly without their names being attached to their answers, which creates more comfort for them and more ability to be open with responses.

The purpose of this study is to discover answers to two questions: is there an in-group racial bias toward criminal activity and guilty convictions? Is there a correlation between guilty convictions and sentencing in the criminal justice system with right wing authoritarian and social dominance orientation scores? Given the research already surrounding these topics, it is likely that there will be some sort of evidence to answer these questions. It is hypothesized that those who lie more toward the conservative end of the political spectrum and who are higher in social dominance will hand out harsher sentences to alleged criminals. It is also hypothesized that African American defendants will be found guilty and sentenced more harshly than Caucasian defendants. The goal of this study is to produce results that can further be used to encourage research on these two topics in a larger scale and possibly lead to reform on the basis of jury selection and overall sentencing in the criminal justice system.

### Methods

The participants in this study were students enrolled in various Psychology courses at Eastern Michigan University. The pool consisted of 252 students; 78, or 31% male, 166 or 65.8% female, 2 or .01% other and 6 or .02% undisclosed, aged 17 to 46. A variety of racial backgrounds were represented in this sample; 172 or 68.3% Caucasian, 48 or 19% African American, 6 or .02% Latino, 20 or .08% other races and 6 or .02% undisclosed. Those who chose to participate in this study were able to do so when given access to the university's SONA system to gain credit in their various classes for supporting research. Participants randomly selected one of four surveys to participate in through the online system.

When participating in the survey, students were asked to answer a variety of questions. In the first section, basic demographic information was collected, including information about each

student's political and ideological views as well as perceptions on diversity. Sample questions include: "In your opinion how diverse was your hometown," and "What is your political ideology," each being answered on a scale of 1 to 7. The second, larger, section of each survey consisted of criminal scenarios in which a criminal act was committed. Participants were asked to read each scenario and answer a series of questions to determine if it was believed that the alleged criminal should in fact be convicted and sentenced for a crime, as well as what they believed an appropriate punishment for the alleged criminal if they were to be sentenced.

Throughout the four surveys produced, the variables of sex, male or female, and race, black or white, were manipulated giving a result of four scenarios to be tested. Each participant read the same set of facts with only the names, races, and sexes of the alleged criminal changed. Sample questions in this portion of the survey include: "To what extent do you agree with (alleged criminal's name)'s arrest" and "To what extent do you agree that (alleged criminal's name)'s should be convicted of homicide," each of these questions were answered on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being not at all and 7 being completely agree. Another set of questions in this section required participants to write in the length of time they believed the alleged criminal should be sentenced to certain types of crime including: jail time, probation and community service. The responses to this portion of the survey were then coded based upon the array of responses collected and separated into the appropriate groups. Jail time was separated by years, the categories being: less than one year, one to three years, four to six years, seven to nine years, and ten years or more. Probation was separated by months, categories being: zero to five months, six to eleven months, twelve to seventeen months, eighteen to twenty-three months and twenty-four months or more. Finally, Community Service was separated by hours, categories being: zero to

thirty hours, thirty-one to sixty-two hours, sixty-three to ninety-four hours, ninety-five to 126 hours and 127 hours or more.

The third portion of the survey consisted of measures to establish social dominance. This portion consisted of 14 statements of which participants were asked to rate how negatively or positively they view each one on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being very negatively and 7 being very positively. Sample statements from this portion of the survey include, "Some groups of people are simply not the equals of others," and, "If people were treated more equally, we would have fewer problems in this country." The answers provided to these questions were added up and then divided by 14 to produce averages among each participant.

The fourth and final portion of the survey consisted of measures to establish right wing authoritarianism. This portion consisted of 15 statements of which participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. Sample statements from this portion of the survey include, "Our society would be better off if we showed tolerance and understanding for untraditional values and opinions," and, "Our forefathers ought to be honored more for the way they have built our society, at the same time we ought to put an end to those forces destroying it." The answers provided to these questions were added up and then divided by 15 to produce averages among each participant.

Measures of which were reverse scored include items: 2,4,6,8, 10, 12 and 14 of the fourth (RWA) portion of the survey and items 1-6 of the third (SDO) portion of the survey. These items were reverse coded in accordance with the instruction provided by the original creators of the scales, Allgeyer (1998) for the fourth portion, Sidanius and Pratto (1994) for the third portion.

## Results

To test the hypotheses; African American defendants will receive harsher sentences than Caucasian defendants and those participants who score higher on SDO and RWA measures will endorse harsher sentences for alleged criminals, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was run using the data collected in the study. The received responses were added to an Excel worksheet and then coded appropriately. Items 1 to 6 in part three of the survey, the SDO measure, were reverse scored as they were intended to be by the creators. Items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14 in part four of the survey, the RWA measure, were reverse scored as they were intended to be by the creators of the measure. No other items were reverse scored. All answers given, including skipped items by participants, were used and included in the analysis. There were no participant responses unused in the analysis. Each of the responses in part 2 of the survey, the criminal activity, were tested against the race and sex of the perpetrator. Then, those results were crossed with the SDO and RWA averages among participants.

### ***Racial Discrimination***

There was not a significant difference in the amount of jail time an alleged criminal should receive and the race of the perpetrator  $F(1, 234) = 3.679, p = .056$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not believe that African American defendants deserved harsher punishments than Caucasian defendants.

There was not a significant difference in the amount of probation time an alleged criminal should receive and the race of the perpetrator  $F(1, 234) = 1.740, p = .188$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not believe that African American defendants deserved harsher punishments than Caucasian defendants.



There was not a significant difference in the amount of community service time an alleged criminal should receive and the race of the perpetrator  $F(1, 236) = .184, p = .668$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not believe that African American defendants deserved harsher punishments than Caucasian defendants.

There was a statistically significant difference in how likely it was that the defendant did commit murder and the race of the perpetrator.  $F(1, 237) = 3.775, p = .053$ . This then prompted a look at the means of the sample, the mean for African American defendants being 2.928 meaning that on average 2.928 of the participants believed that the defendant was likely to have committed murder. The mean for the Caucasian defendants being 3.269 meaning that on average 3.269 of the participants believed that the defendant was likely to have committed murder. In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not believe that African American defendants deserved harsher punishments than Caucasian defendants. However, participants did believe that Caucasian defendants deserved harsher punishments than African American defendants.

There was a statistically significant difference in how fair participants believed the sentence received by the criminal was and the race of the perpetrator.  $F(1, 238) = 4.822, p = .029$ . This then prompted a look at the means of the sample, the mean for African American defendants being 2.684 meaning that on average 2.684 of the participants believed that the sentence the defendant received was fair. The mean for the Caucasian defendants being 3.074 meaning that on average 3.074 of the participants believed that the sentence the defendant received was fair. In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not believe that African American defendants deserved harsher punishments than Caucasian defendants.

However, participants did believe that Caucasian defendants deserved harsher punishments than African American defendants.

There was a statistically significant difference in how eligible a criminal should be for parole and the race of the perpetrator.  $F(1, 237) = 3.848, p = .051$ . This then prompted a look at the means of the sample, the mean for African American defendants being 3.755 meaning that on average 3.755 of the participants believed that the defendant should be eligible for parole. The mean for the Caucasian defendants being 3.418 meaning that on average 3.418 of the participants believed that the defendant should be eligible for parole. In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not believe that African American defendants deserved harsher punishments than Caucasian defendants. However, participants did believe that Caucasian defendants deserved harsher punishments than African American defendants.

#### ***Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)***

There was not a significant difference in the amount of jail time an alleged criminal should receive and the RWA score of the participant,  $F(1,233) = .922, p = .338$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on RWA did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was not a significant difference in the amount of probation time an alleged criminal should receive and the RWA score of the participant,  $F(1,232) = .896, p = .345$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on RWA did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was not a significant difference in the amount of community service time an alleged criminal should receive and the RWA score of the participant,  $F(1, 233) = 3.045, p =$

.082. In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on RWA did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was not a significant difference in the opinion of the participants on the likelihood that the defendant did in fact commit murder and the RWA score of the participant,  $F(1,233) = 2.816, p = .095$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on RWA did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was a statistically significant difference in how fair participants believed the sentence received by the criminal was and the RWA score of the participant,  $F(1,234) = 5.494, p = .020$ . When comparing the significance of this finding with the means, African American being 2.676 and Caucasian being 3.0820. This supports the above findings. However it is then also necessary to compare low versus high scores on the RWA measure. When running an ANOVA test on this interaction, there was no statistical significance found,  $F(1,235) = 3.220, p = .074$ . This means that contrary to the hypothesis, those who score higher in RWA do not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was not a significant difference in the opinion of the participants that the defendant should be eligible for parole and the RWA score of the participant,  $F(1,233) = 3.434, p = .065$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on RWA did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

### ***Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)***

There was not a significant difference in the amount of jail time an alleged criminal should receive and the SDO score of the participant,  $F(1, 232) = 2.831, p = .094$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on SDO did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was not a significant difference in the amount of probation time an alleged criminal should receive and the SDO score of the participant,  $F(1, 231) = 2.650, p = .105$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on SDO did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was not a significant difference in the amount of community service time an alleged criminal should receive and the SDO score of the participant,  $F(1, 232) = .818, p = .367$ . In other words, contrary to the hypothesis, those who scored higher on SDO did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was a statistically significant difference in the opinion of the participants on the likelihood that the defendant did in fact commit murder and SDO score of the participant,  $F(1,232) = 5.562, p = .019$ . When comparing the significance of this finding with the means, African American being 2.897 and Caucasian being 3.323. This supports the above findings. However it is then also necessary to compare low versus high scores on the SDO measure. When running an ANOVA test on this interaction, there was no statistical significance found  $F(1,234) = .798, p = .372$ . This means that contrary to the hypothesis, those who score higher in SDO do not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was a statistically significant difference in how fair participants believed the sentence received by the criminal was and the SDO score of the participant,  $F(1,233) = 6.417, p = .012$ . When comparing the significance of this finding with the means, African American being 2.649 and Caucasian being 3.123. This supports the above findings. However it is then also necessary to compare low versus high scores on the SDO measure. When running an ANOVA test on this interaction, there was no statistical significance found  $F(1,234) = .798, p =$

.372. This means that contrary to the hypothesis, those who score higher in SDO do not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

There was a statistically significant difference in the opinion of the participants that the defendant should be eligible for parole and the SDO score of the participant,  $F(1, 232) = 5.019$ ,  $p = .026$ . When comparing the significance of this finding with the means, African American being 3.795 and Caucasian being 3.384. This supports the above findings. However it is then also necessary to compare low versus high scores on the SDO measure. When running an ANOVA test on this interaction, there was no statistical significance found  $F(1,233) = .008$ ,  $p = .929$ . This means that contrary to the hypothesis, those who score higher in SDO do not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals.

### Discussion

This study was conducted in order to explore the effects of personal attitudes on convictions and sentencing in the criminal justice system. It looked at the effects of race, social dominance orientation and right wing authoritarianism on the guilt and sentence fairness in a homicide case. The goal was accomplished using an online self-report survey. This study showed statistically significant results regarding the race of the alleged criminal and sentencing, however it did not show significant results regarding the SDO or RWA scores of participants and their decisions.

There have been other studies conducted in the past regarding a racial discrimination in the criminal justice system, but this study takes a different approach in the techniques. Although simulated jury trials and interviews are a good source of information, it is possible that participants may feel guilty or uncomfortable honestly answering questions. By providing the participants with the ability to take the survey alone and in their own comfort zone, it is possible

that this study was able to get more honest results due to the fact that participants are not under pressure to behave a certain way.

When it comes to racial bias in this study, results were contrary to the hypothesis. While it is hypothesized that African American defendants would receive harsher punishments than Caucasian defendants for the same crime, the opposite results were collected in this study. It is possible that there was an in-group or out-group bias present as indicated in previous studies. However, it is also possible that we are seeing a different effect due to the portraits painted by society and overcompensating for the known bias in a way that could produce an effect contrary to the hypothesis presented. Another possibility for the presented effect could also be the social movements taking place particularly among college-aged persons.

Contrary to the other hypothesis presented in this study, those who scored higher on measures of Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation did not endorse harsher punishments for alleged criminals. However, there was support in some cases to reflect the findings in racial bias which proves interesting. It is possible that the two measures could implicate a racial bias as well, and support the idea of in-group vs out-group bias.

The results of this study, although not all statistically significant, could prove useful. It is important for our society to see the shift in bias presented in the criminal justice system. This study can be used to pilot larger studies regarding convictions and sentencing, hopefully ultimately aiding in an improved method of jury selection to allow for alleged criminals to be fairly sentenced and reduce the rate of wrongful convictions based on personal bias.

Limitations of this study include the obvious, it was only answered by Psychology students in college. Ideally, if this study were to be reproduced in a larger scale there would be

participants from many different age ranges and professional backgrounds in order to see the bigger picture. Another limitation of this study is the fact that only two racial identities are presented in the variables. If this study were to be conducted again, it would be beneficial to add in more racial categories and observe if there is still a statistical significance found or if the effects balance out. Lastly, this study is limited in so far as it does not allow for an emotional appeal to the participants. Reading about a scenario is far less emotional than hearing or seeing the facts and evidence, leaving it to be a less authentic experience for participants. In order to accurately simulate juror conditions, it would be best to allow for visual and audio presentation of the facts to elicit a stronger emotional response to the content. However, the participants should still be able to give their answers in private without fear of being judged by their peers.

Many questions still remain unanswered in this area of study. Some of them include: does age of the defendant matter? Does the type of crime matter? Does socioeconomic status matter? If this study were to be continued, the next step would be to add in more types of crime as well as allow for more racial categories. This follow up study would allow for further insight into perspective jury selection and possible reform, especially if results proved to be statistically significant. This type of study could prove useful in answering some of the many unexplored topics that relate to juror selection in criminal cases.

This area of study is an extremely important one. One case of wrongful conviction makes too many cases of wrongful conviction. In order to produce the best possible outcome in criminal matters, it is necessary to give best efforts to eliminate personal bias as a factor in convictions and sentencing as much as possible. It is important to discover why not every person is convicted and sentenced the same for the same set of circumstances. What happens to cause the unfairness in the criminal justice system? This question is one that effects the lives of many people in our

nation who are not guilty of a crime but are convicted and sentenced to harsh punishments due to effects of personal bias.



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