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Differential Perceptions of the Seriousness of Male Violence Against Female Intimate Partners Among Jews and Arabs in Israel

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Crime seriousness studies have consistently shown wide consensus regarding the high perceived seriousness of violent offenses. However, socio-cultural models suggest wide variability between social groups with regard to the seriousness of certain types of violent crime. This is particularly true in the case of male violence against female intimate partners. The present study examines these contradictory propositions in Israel focusing on its two main ethnic groups—Jews and Arabs. In an attitudinal survey, respondents were required to evaluate the seriousness of hypothetical crime scenarios representing a number of criminal offenses including male violence against female intimate partners. As expected, the findings revealed significantly more permissive attitudes to male violence against female intimate partners among Arab respondents than among Jews. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: *male violence against women; Israel; ethnic groups; seriousness perceptions*

Ever since the pioneering work of Sellin and Wolfgang (1964), crime seriousness studies have consistently shown that, regardless of social and cultural variation, violent offenses are consensually ranked as the most serious of all crimes. Moreover, because criminal statutes typically call for the most severe punishments for these offenses, this finding is often cited in support of the consensus model of criminal law (for a review, see Roberts, 1992).

However, despite its robustness, this finding has been challenged on theoretical and, in particular, methodological grounds (e.g., O'Connell & Whelan, 1996). For example, it has been argued that seriousness studies have succeeded in showing similar relative rankings of offenses for groups of respondents but not similar numerical ratings for all or some of the offenses. This drawback may be because of differential interpretation of seriousness scales

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by different respondent types and/or, more important, to the existence of socio-cultural differences in the perception of the seriousness of some criminal offenses.

Although clearly constituting a violent offense, wide variability between social groups has been found in public attitudes toward male violence against female intimate partners (henceforth, MVF), mostly a husband injuring his wife (also defined in the literature as woman battering, spousal violence, and wife abuse). This variability ranges from total revulsion to normative ambivalence or even social acceptance (e.g., Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Falchikov, 1996). The focus of the present study is to assess such disagreement in the seriousness perceptions of MVF among Israeli respondents.

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF MVF

Women have been victims of violence perpetrated by men throughout the ages. However, even though victim surveys have consistently indicated that women are most likely to be subjected to interpersonal violence by men within their closest social circle, MVF has been deemed either a private or rare occurrence (Gelles, 2000).

Differences in the actual incidence of MVF tend to be explained in terms of variation in socio-cultural values and norms regarding attitudes toward it (see Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Herzberger & Rueckert, 1997; Straus, Kaufman-Kantor, & Moore, 1997). Research has shown that some social groups of men as well as of women, may well see some of such violence acts as a legitimate and even normal, albeit unfortunate, response in certain situations (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Smith, 1990). According to feminist researchers (e.g., Smith, 1990), permissive views of MVF are largely found in patriarchal settings, which promote traditional gender-specific roles and male dominance over women. Research has reported a positive correlation between traditional sex role perceptions and attitudes endorsing the legitimacy of such violence (for a review, see Falchikov, 1996).

Wide variation in attitudes to MVF is found between Israel's diverse social groups. On one hand, some social groups, mostly Jewish, have traditionally condemned MVF and perceive it to be a serious social rather than private problem. Indeed, they have worked hard to place it on the public agenda as a major issue. The efforts of such groups have resulted in tremendous progress in public awareness of gender topics in Israel in recent decades (see Eisikovits & Griffel, 1998). On the other hand, some social groups in Israeli society have consistently been shown to be tolerant of MVF, in particular, Israel's ethnic Arab minority (18%). On the whole, this group constitutes a

disadvantaged minority in the country. It is a closed, conservative, mainly agricultural society characterized by a rigid patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal family structure, which stresses traditional family values such as father and husband rule of obedience (see Mikulincer, Weller, & Florian, 1993). In recent studies, Haj-Yahia (1998a, 1998b) reported permissive and condoning attitudes to MVF among engaged and married Israeli and Palestinian Arabs. For example, between 28% and 57% of them agreed that husbands have the right to beat their wives under certain circumstances such as a wife's infidelity.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of this study was to examine public perceptions of the seriousness of several criminal offenses including MVF among Israeli Jews and Arabs. Based on the aforementioned review, two hypotheses were posited

Hypothesis 1: Although Jewish and Arab respondents are expected to differ—even significantly—in the seriousness ratings that they assign to some criminal offenses, similar seriousness rankings will be obtained with most violent crimes ranked as the most serious.

Hypothesis 2: Compared to Jews, Arabs will express—both in ranking and rating—substantially more accepting and condoning attitudes to MVF.

On the theoretical level, confirmation of the second hypothesis would weaken support for the consensus model and strengthen support for socio-cultural models. Moreover, in the context of crime prevention, this research supports the notion that the existence of permissiveness toward MVF in a certain social group increases the likelihood that persons from it will appear as offenders and victims (see Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Herzberger & Rueckert, 1997). In Israel, there is virtually no reliable data available regarding at-risk groups mainly because of a lack of social-cultural reference to MVF as a criminal offense and underreporting (see Eisikovits & Griffel, 1998). The present research can be seen as a first attempt to fill this gap.

METHOD

The choice of Israel as the venue for this study is particularly appropriate because important social groups, traditionally underrepresented and even ignored in other samples of Western countries, are well represented in this population: a Jewish majority and an Arab minority. Moreover, its small pop-

ulation facilitates the collection of a national sample accurately representing the various social and cultural groups that form the public. The research data were collected from a random sample of the adult Israeli population ($N = 987$). Recent Israeli telephone directories, covering all geographical regions, provided the sampling framework. Because Arabs constitute a minority in the country, the sampling included a disproportionate, stratified, systematic random-sampling method. Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking interviewers were employed. The distribution of the sample's characteristics shows a close fit with recent official national data (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

Respondents' seriousness perceptions of hypothetical crime scenarios including acts of MVF were collected by personal, anonymous questionnaires administered by means of a telephone survey (response rate = 76%; interview length: 7 to 10 minutes). Data collection took place between December 2000 and February 2001. A content analysis of Israel's major national newspapers revealed no coverage of irregular criminal offenses committed about the time of the survey, which might have affected respondents' attitudes.

Research Variables

Respondents were requested to evaluate the seriousness of 18 crime scenarios representing various criminal offenses including MVF by choosing one value on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *not serious at all* to 11 = *very serious*. This measure constituted the dependent variable of the research.

The criminal offenses represented in the scenarios constituted one of the two independent variables in this study. They were randomly chosen from a larger pretested pool of offenses representing the population of criminal offenses in Israel. All of the offenses represented in the scenarios were committed by adult males, involved criminal intent, and included background information on the offenders and their victims to enhance specificity (see Blum-West, 1985). Among the 18 scenarios, 4 represented interethnic events. However, because of their strong interaction with the respondents' ethnicity, they were excluded from the present analysis, which referred to 14 intraethnic evaluated scenarios. This decision was deemed appropriate because of the intraethnic nature of the large majority of MVF cases (see Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Gelles, 2000). Generally, the chosen offenses described in the scenarios were highly diverse—from very grave (e.g., murder) to very minor (e.g., petty theft)—and included offenses of many kinds—violent, property, economic, judicial, and victimless.

Because MVF may include many forms of physically, sexually, and/or emotionally aggressive acts (see Crowell & Burgess, 1996), three different MVF scenarios were included: a marital murder (a man kills his wife because

TABLE 1: Mean Ratings and Relative Rankings of the Seriousness of 14 Crime Scenarios, Including 3 MVF Scenarios, by Respondents' Ethnic Affiliation (Jewish, Arab) (N = 987)

<i>Compared Groups</i>	<i>Jewish Respondents</i>			<i>Arab Respondents</i>			<i>t Tests</i>
	<i>(n = 635)</i>			<i>(n = 352)</i>			
<i>Crime Scenario</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rank</i>	
Marital murder	10.69	1.04	1	9.81	2.31	1	*
Date rape	10.25	1.40	2	9.23	2.77	2	*
Marital assault	9.40	2.18	3	6.88	3.84	13	*
Shop robbery	9.33	1.77	4	9.14	2.62	4	
Apartment burglary	8.90	2.18	5	8.92	2.48	5	
Threat to witness	8.71	2.18	6	8.84	2.28	6	
False testimony	8.23	2.58	7	7.71	2.83	9	*
Clerk bribe	8.13	2.51	8	7.53	3.03	12	*
Inflated bill	8.10	2.42	9	7.92	2.80	8	
Drug selling	7.99	2.71	10	9.15	2.66	3	*
Watch theft	7.91	2.61	11	7.65	2.75	11	
Sexual relations with a minor	7.35	2.95	12	7.71	3.51	10	
Tax evasion	6.54	2.71	13	5.53	3.30	14	*
Illegal abortion	6.42	3.33	14	8.07	3.01	7	*

NOTE: MVF = male violence against female intimate partners.

* $p < .05$.

he suspects she is cheating on him), a date rape (a man compels a girl forcefully to have sexual relations with him during a meeting), and a marital assault (a husband beats his wife because of suspected infidelity). The choice of infidelity as the motive for marital murder and assault (rather than other possible motives) was based on studies showing that the higher rates for justifying MVF among Arabs were expressed precisely in cases when the wife was perceived as sexually unfaithful to her husband (Haj-Yahia, 1998a; see also Landau & Rolef, 1998).

Respondents' ethnicity (Jew/Arab) served as the second independent variable in this study. The other personal variables analyzed in this study—gender, age, education, income, religiosity, and country of birth—served as control variables. These data were provided by the respondents at the end of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, the relative rankings of the seriousness scores provided by Jewish and Arab respondents to the 14

evaluated scenarios and the statistical comparisons between them (*t* tests). For ease of understanding, the scenarios are ordered by their seriousness ranking in the larger Jewish group.

From Table 1, we see that Jewish respondents assigned the highest seriousness scores (with the smallest standard deviations) to violent offenses: The three MVF scenarios were considered (significantly) more serious than the remaining nonviolent scenarios. Similarly, the Arab respondents also assigned the highest seriousness values (with mostly the smallest standard deviations) to some violent offenses such as marital murder, date rape, and robbery (and also to some nonviolent offenses such as burglary and drug trafficking).

Note that, despite this similarity, significant differences were found between the compared groups in the ratings of eight scenarios representing offenses of varying degrees of seriousness. In six of these eight scenarios (including the three MVF scenarios), Arabs assigned significantly lower seriousness scores than the Jews; this direction was reversed for drug selling and illegal abortion. Across these scenarios, the most significant gap in ranking between Jews and Arabs was found for marital assault: Jewish respondents considered this offense as the third most serious offense evaluated, whereas Arab respondents perceived it as significantly less serious than all of the other violent and nonviolent offenses evaluated, except for tax evasion. This gap in attitudes toward marital assault between the compared groups was also expressed by Spearman's rho coefficients measuring rank order associations: The positive coefficients were stronger and only statistically significant when this offense was excluded from the analysis ($\rho = .692$; $p < .01$) than when it was included ($\rho = .508$; *ns*).

Table 2 presents the standardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients of the respondents' personal details (ethnicity and the other six control variables) for the seriousness of each of the 14 crime scenarios including the 3 MVF scenarios. The control variables were coded as follows: gender (0 = female; 1 = male), age (in years), education (in years), monthly familial income (0 = more than 5,000 New Israeli shekels; 1 = less than 5,000 New Israeli shekels), religiosity (defined as dummy variable), and country of birth (0 = Israel; 1 = other).

From Table 2, we see that the effect of personal characteristics varied considerably across the various crime scenarios. For the 3 MVF acts, two common, significant coefficients were obtained: Arab and/or male respondents assigned significantly lower seriousness scores to these scenarios than did Jewish and/or female respondents. Among the seven personal variables, ethnicity was clearly the most influential for the 3 MVF scenarios. Note that,

TABLE 2: Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Seriousness of 14 Crime Scenarios, Including 3 MVF Scenarios, by Respondents' Personal Details (N = 987)

Independent Variables Crime Scenario	Ethnicity		Religiosity		Gender	Age	Education	Income	Country of Birth	Valid n	R ²
			Traditional	Religious							
Marital murder	-.249*	.028	.001	.001	-.094*	.003	.044	.071*	-.002	932	.075*
Date rape	-.225*	-.015	.064	.064	-.068*	.029	.037	-.031	-.083*	932	.068*
Marital assault	-.327*	-.059	-.104*	-.104*	-.153*	-.034	.121*	.019	-.053	932	.200*
Shop robbery	-.110*	.077*	.070*	.070*	-.061	-.053	-.030	.015	-.041	932	.019*
Apartment burglary	-.034	.087*	.090*	.090*	-.103*	-.020	.000	-.013	-.036	930	.024*
Threat to witness	.027	.061	.016	.016	-.127*	.028	.055	-.030	-.128*	932	.036*
False testimony	-.075	.037	.072*	.072*	-.100*	.012	.006	-.122*	-.047	932	.036*
Clerk bribe	-.118*	.068	.062	.062	.013	.098*	.014	-.032	-.104*	932	.029*
Inflated bill	-.185*	.174*	.144*	.144*	-.059	-.041	-.057	.072*	-.066	932	.060*
Drug selling	.099*	.119*	.095*	.095*	-.094*	-.011	-.089*	.021	-.048	932	.078*
Watch theft	-.103*	.129*	.094*	.094*	-.069*	.042	-.006	-.047	-.105*	931	.035*
Sexual relations with minor	.038	.130*	.106*	.106*	-.087*	.118*	.029	-.032	-.116*	932	.050*
Tax evasion	-.129*	.052	-.019	-.019	-.057	.081*	-.004	-.052	-.053	932	.036*
Illegal abortion	.112*	.176*	.160*	.160*	-.116*	.079*	-.100*	-.011	-.120*	929	.135*

NOTE: MVF = male violence against female intimate partners.

a. Dummy variable; Secular is the reference group (n = 579).

*p < .05.

although ethnicity was significant (mostly negatively) in 10 out of the 14 offenses, the strongest effect was for the 3 MVF offenses.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis of this study was generally supported by the findings. First, similar seriousness rankings of varied criminal offenses were obtained for two different ethnic groups taken from the same national sample: Violent offenses were mostly ranked as the most serious of the offenses among both Jews and Arabs. Moreover, analysis of the standard deviations from the mean seriousness scores revealed increasing disagreement with decreasing perceived seriousness. Second, *t* tests and a regression analysis showed that statistically significant differences were also found between the compared groups in the seriousness scores provided for some offenses. These findings concur with the recent crime seriousness literature: Most studies report similar rankings and different ratings. On the theoretical level, this suggests that it would be premature to speak of absolute consensus regarding public perceptions of crime seriousness (Blum-West, 1985; O'Connell & Whelan, 1996; Roberts, 1992).

The second hypothesis of the study was supported completely for marital assault and partially for marital murder and date rape. First, and as expected, significant differences were found between Jews and Arabs in the rating of MVF: The latter expressed significantly more permissive attitudes compared to the former. Although significant differences in rating were found also for other non-MVF scenarios, the regression analysis showed that the strongest effect of ethnicity was for MVF scenarios. These findings are compatible with patriarchal views of gender roles rooted in Arab culture, which, in certain situations and circumstances (e.g., infidelity), permit male relatives to beat and even kill their female intimate women (Haj-Yahia, 1998a, 1998b). These findings clearly point to the need for further investigation of other motives for MVF and other cultural contexts.

The most substantial rating difference between Jews and Arabs was found for marital assault (mean seriousness scores: 9.40 and 6.88, respectively). Consequently, the Jewish respondents ranked this MVF scenario as a relatively serious offense, and the Arab respondents ranked it as almost the least serious offense. With regard to marital murder and date rape, the significant differences between the ratings of the two groups were not reflected in their ranking: Both groups considered these two crimes to be the most serious of the evaluated scenarios. This finding seems to suggest that, because the effects of homicide and rape are irreversible and absolute, there is a higher

level of revulsion against them compared to other less serious or more justified forms of MVF such as assault. Be that as it may, whether a violent act becomes a murder is often a matter of chance; therefore, the Arab population in Israel should be seen as being at higher risk of becoming involved in marital murder or assault whether as offenders or as victims. This conclusion is in line with a recent study on intimate femicide in Israel showing significantly higher rates among Arabs than among Jews (Landau & Rolef, 1998).

To conclude, the findings of this study indicate that to ignore a subculture and its intertwined relationship with traditional gender-specific role attitudes is to ignore an important part of the explanation for and the solution to MVF (Smith, 1990; Straus et al., 1997). Thus, to achieve a significant decrease in the occurrence of MVF, ways have to be found to modify values and social structures that promote and condone violence as well as values and social structures that emphasize the power of men over women (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Smith, 1990; Straus et al., 1997).

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