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How Do Race and Gender Impact Perceptions of the Wrongfully Convicted?

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Abstract

Official misconduct contributes to many wrongful convictions, disproportionately affecting more black than white individuals. Previous research on perceptions of exonerees has yielded mixed results on race differences and none has investigated gender differences. This study compared perceptions of exonerees, wrongfully convicted due to official misconduct, manipulating race and gender. Participants read a mock news article detailing the double homicide of the exoneree's children. Participants recognized that official misconduct was more likely to occur for black individuals. They were generally supportive of compensation for exonerees but rated the white female as least deserving. Participants also held more favorable attitudes towards black exonerees yet would be less comfortable in social interactions with black than white exonerees.

Introduction

- Official misconduct, such as withholding exculpatory evidence, perjury, or procedural violations during an investigation and arrest, contributed to 54% known of wrongful convictions (Gross et al., 2020).
- As wrongful convictions disproportionately affect black individuals (Gross et al., 2017), it is important to examine how the perceptions of exonerees may differ based on race.
- Exonerees often experience negative stigmas post-conviction that can create difficulties in finding housing, employment, or making social connections (Clow et al., 2011).
- Studies have shown mixed results in perceptions exonerees' deservingness of compensation or assistance based on race, ranging from no race differences (Karaffa et al., 2017) to views favoring white exonerees (Howard, 2019) to views favoring black exonerees (Scherr et al., 2017).
- Faison and Smalarz (2020) suggest that participants may be adjusting their responses in an effort to appear non-prejudiced towards black exonerees and that more research is needed to determine the underlying mechanisms in these judgements. No prior research has examined gender differences in perceptions of exonerees.
- Gender may impact perceptions of exonerees in a similar way that it impacts perceptions of true offenders, such that women are viewed as less aggressive and more nurturing than men (see Faison & Smalarz, 2020), although women may face greater stigma for crimes against their own children.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 248 adults (age 19-79, $M=44.9$ years) via MTurk (Amazon Crowdsourcing Marketplace); 62% were female, 80% were white.

Materials and Procedure

Randomly assigned to read one of four news articles depicting the wrongful conviction of an individual (gender: male or female, race: black or white) due to official misconduct. News articles contained information on the original conviction (homicide of the exoneree's two young children) and exoneration. Articles were accompanied by a photo from the Chicago Faces Database (Mia et al., 2015; see Figure 4). Participants then completed the following measures:

- Overall attitudes
- Perceptions of characteristics:
 - Warmth
 - Competence
 - Aggression
- Comfort in varying social situations
- Deservingness of compensation
- Perceptions of wrongful convictions & official misconduct
- Contributing Factors to Wrongful Convictions Scale adapted from Ricciardelli and Clow (2012)
- Motivation to Respond without Prejudice scale (Plant & Devine, 1998)

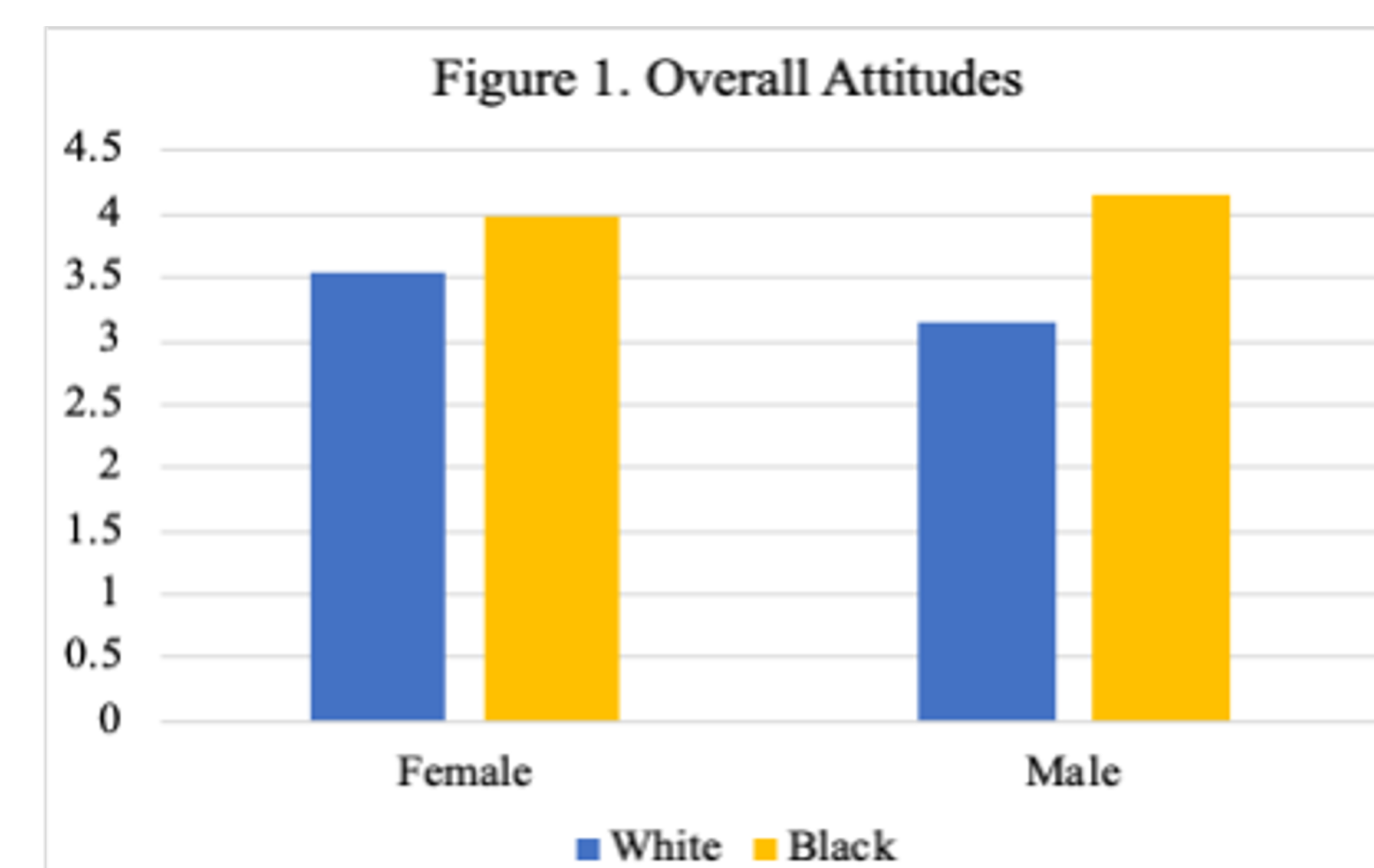
Discussion

Female exonerees were perceived as more competent and less aggressive than males, which mirrors general stereotypes of women (e.g., Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983), yet the white female was viewed as least deserving of compensation. While participants didn't take race into account in determining deservingness of compensation, they recognized that black individuals are more likely to be wrongfully convicted as a result of official misconduct. Additionally, while participants had more favorable overall attitudes towards black exonerees, they would feel more comfortable having social interactions with white exonerees. This disconnect may be due to participants adjusting their responses to appear non prejudiced towards the black exoneree. Further analyses will examine how participants' responses to the Motivation to Respond without Prejudice scale (Plant & Devine, 1998) moderates their perceptions of exonerees. As the public becomes more aware of prosecutorial and police misconduct cases and more wrongful convictions come to light, integrating these exonerees back into society will become increasingly important. Results from the current study are encouraging in that participants were generally supportive of reintegration efforts, regardless of their own race or the race or gender of the exonerees.

Results

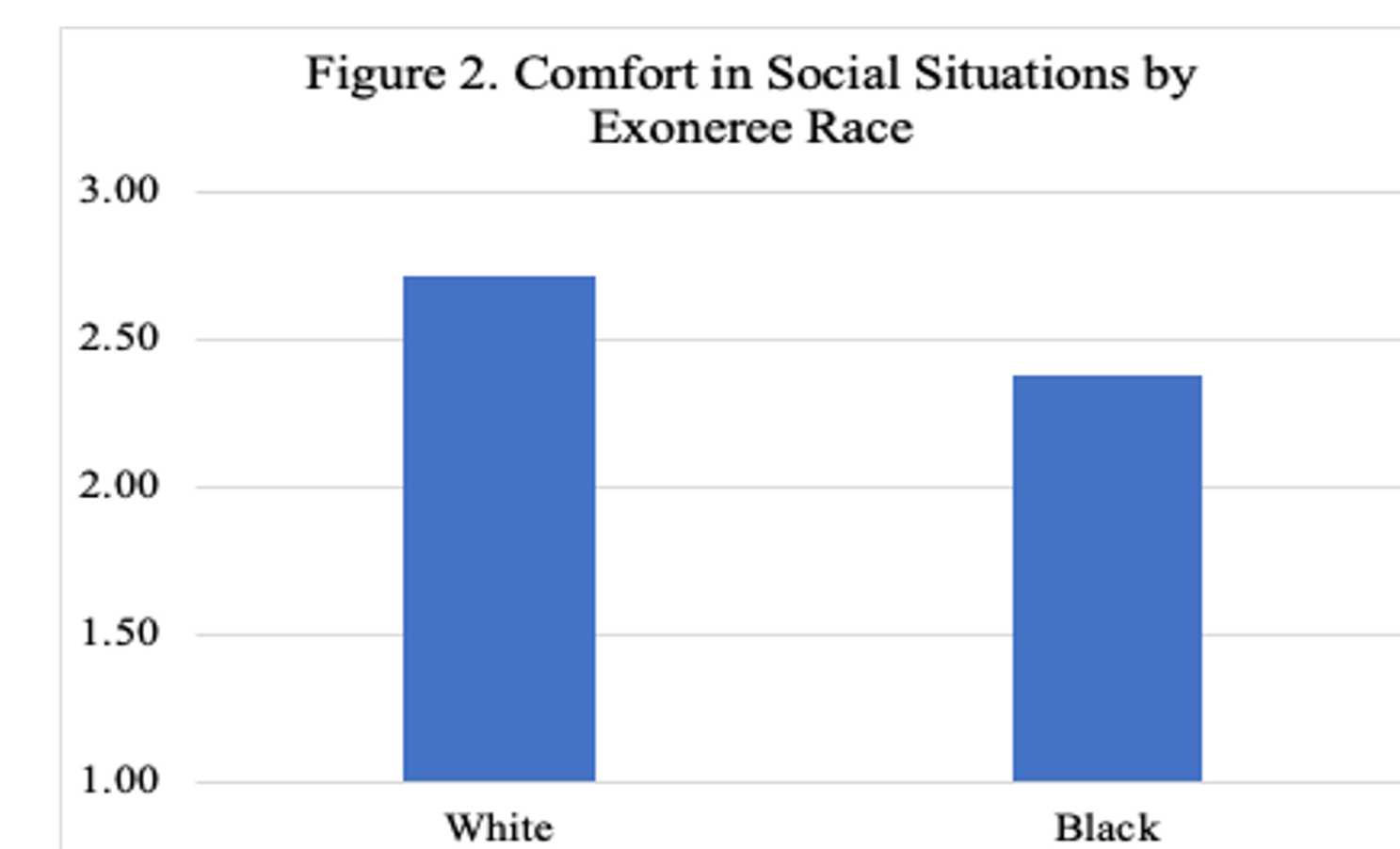
Overall Attitudes

- Significant main effect of race [$F(1, 244)=32.96, p<.01$]:
 - Attitudes were more favorable towards black exonerees than white exonerees.
- Significant race x gender interaction [$F(1, 244)=4.81, p=.01$]:
 - Attitudes were least favorable towards white male exonerees. See Figure 1.



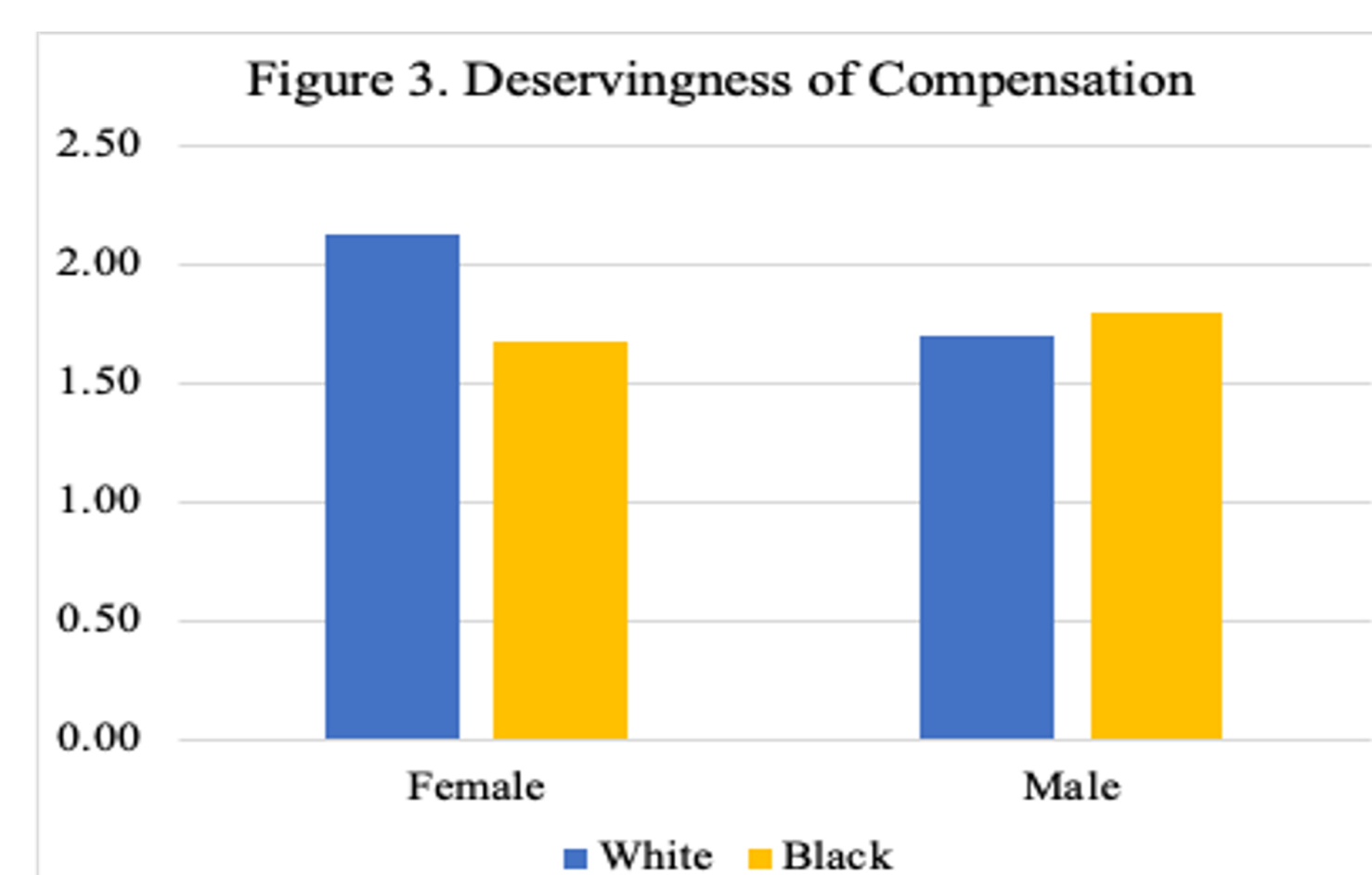
Social Distance

- Significant main effect of race on averaged ratings of social distance [$F(1, 244)=5.84, p=.01$]:
 - Would be more comfortable in social situations with white exonerees than black exonerees. See Figure 2.
- Significant main effect of race [$F(1, 244)=4.66, p<.05$]:
 - White exoneree rated as a better future parent more than the black exoneree.
 - Significantly more comfortable having the white rather than the black exoneree interact with their child/younger sibling in a supervised setting [$F(1,244) =8.13, p<.01$].



Deservingness of Compensation

- Significant race x gender interaction [$F(1, 244)=4.80, p<.05$]:
 - The white female was rated as least deserving of assistance or compensation.
- Overall, participants generally supported the exoneree receiving government-sponsored assistance.



Perceptions of Wrongful Convictions

- 65% thought wrongful convictions occur more to black than white individuals.
- 68% believed black individuals were more likely to be wrongfully convicted based on official misconduct.

Competence, Warmth, & Aggression

- **Female exonerees rated as significantly**
 - more competent [$F(1, 244)=11.11, p<.01$] and
 - less aggressive [$F(1, 244)=50.0, p<.01$] than male exonerees.
- **Black exonerees rated as significantly**
 - more competent [$F(1, 244)=32.0, p<.01$],
 - warmer [$F(1, 244)=18.22, p<.01$], and
 - less aggressive [$F(1, 244)=92.01, p<.01$] than white exonerees.
- **White male exonerees rated as significantly**
 - less competent [$F(1, 244)=46.68, p<.01$] and
 - more aggressive [$F(1, 244)=105.33, p<.01$] compared to the other groups.

Figure 4. Chicago Faces Database (CFD)



(Left to right: Darlene Washington, Jessica Smith, Darnell Washington, John Smith)

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