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MUNCHAUSEN SYNDROME BY PROXY: GENDER, SEXISM, AND JUST  
WORLD BELIEFS AS PREDICTORS OF JUROR DECISIONS<sup>1</sup>

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Psychology in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in General Psychology

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

April, 2005

Unpublished work c Dawn R. Hurst

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<sup>1</sup> An abbreviated version of this paper was presented as a poster at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association in Nashville, TN, April 2005.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to my mentor and friend, Dr. Linda A. Foley. Without your unyielding encouragement and assistance I could not have accomplished so much in such a short amount of time! Your kindness, and the confidence you instilled in me, truly inspires me to be the best I can be.

I would also like to thank Dr. C. Dominik Güss for meticulous and expedient feedback in preparation of this manuscript. Your comments, support, and lighthearted approach were all greatly appreciated and much needed! You made the experience much more enjoyable.

Grandma Rhodes-Montgomery, you provide sanity and stability to an otherwise chaotic and ever-changing world. Thank you for always making me laugh and believing in me even when I did not believe in myself!

To my dad, you give the best advice a grown woman could ever get from her father. I talk, you listen, I talk, you listen, I talk some more. Thanks for always letting me make my own decisions, while listening intently to my struggles towards clarity.

And lastly, I would like to express greatest appreciation for my mother. You lent me your wisdom at birth, taught me compassion during life, and walked beside me on the long, arduous journey to accomplish my goals. Thanks for everything mom! I did it!

Love always!

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## Abstract

Mock jurors ( $N = 200$ ) read descriptions of a mock civil case involving an adult survivor of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy who is suing his/her abuser for monetary/psychological damages. Jurors individually decided perceived percent of responsibility of defendant, award to plaintiff pre- and post-group deliberations, and as a mock jury, in groups of 5 to 10. Jurors and juries assigned greater percent of culpability to female defendants than male defendants. Individual jurors awarded more money to plaintiffs abused by female defendants than male defendants. Low Modern Sexism Scale (MSS) scorers attributed greater percentage of responsibility to defendants and awarded plaintiff more money than high scorers. There was no significant difference in award to male or female plaintiffs; however, greater percent of culpability was assigned to defendants who abused plaintiff longer (i.e., 19 years vs. 10 years). Low Belief in Just World (BJW) scorers individually attributed greater percent of responsibility to defendant and awarded more money to plaintiff than high scorers. Gender of defendant, just world, and sexist attitudes appeared to play important roles in jurors' decisions in cases involving adults who were child victims.

## Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy: Gender of Plaintiff and Defendant and Sexism as Predictors of Juror Decisions

Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSbP) is a relatively rare form of psychopathology in which a primary caregiver (usually a parent) inflicts (e.g., administers excessive amounts of laxatives resulting in diarrhea and dehydration, places fecal matter in a feeding tube causing a severe bacterial infection) or exaggerates (e.g., adds sugar to urine samples to emulate diabetes) illness in another person (usually his/her child). Some experts suggest MSbP describes the pediatric condition of the child being abused; however, others employ the diagnosis in reference to the abuser's psychiatric disorder (Schreier, 2002). The lack of a clear distinction makes legal proceedings in such controversial cases even more challenging for the jurors involved.

One of the most extreme cases of MSbP involved a poster child for former First Lady Hilary Clinton's 1994 healthcare reform campaign, Jennifer Bush (JB). JB endured more than 200 hospitalizations and 40 surgeries (e.g., gall bladder, appendix, partial intestine removal) by the time she was 8 years old. Despite several attempts to investigate made by hospital staff and state child protection service agencies, it took 8 years for JB's mother, Kathy Bush, to be brought to trial (see *State of Florida v. Kathleen Bush*, 1999). During the criminal proceedings, healthcare workers reported previously finding toxic levels of Tegretol (i.e., an anti-seizure medication) in JB's blood even though her physician no longer administered it to her. They also reported several suspicious instances of JB's feeding pump failures that led to extreme overfeeding,



bloating, excessive vomiting, and diarrhea. In 1999, the jury convicted Kathy Bush of aggravated child abuse and organized fraud and sentenced her to 5 years in prison.

Most parental MSbP abuse begins during the victim's infancy and, for many reasons speculated (e.g., growing knowledge on behalf of the child) and unknown (e.g., the mother abuses another younger sibling), rarely continues into adolescence (*M* age at diagnosis = 48.6 months; see Sheridan, 2003 for a complete review). Because of the longevity of the physiological and psychological harm endured, Julie Gregory's (JG) alleged abuse is equally as disturbing as the Bush case (see Auerbach & Schreier, 2004 for a book review; see Gregory, 2003 for complete autobiographical text). Like JB, JG spent most of her childhood in doctor's offices, underwent numerous treatments and procedures (e.g., EKGs, upper GIs) for various illnesses/symptoms (e.g., migraines, nausea, dizziness, fever, sore throat), and was frequently probed for "sharp chest pain" that her mother insisted required corrective open-heart surgery. Conversely, unlike JB, JG's abuse was never pursued through the courts. It was not until JG was 24 years old and listening to an abnormal psychology lecture at the community college she attended that she fully realized what her mother had done to her. JG's shocking revelation prompted her to become an advocate for other victims and educate the public by sharing her story.

First described by Roy Meadows in 1977, MSbP has debatably become one of the most disturbing and complex forms of child abuse to date. Skilled manipulation by the perpetrator makes assessment, diagnosis, and treatment difficult for both parent and child. Induced and/or exaggerated symptoms vary from case to case, ranging from digestive tract problems, seizures, hematuria, and apnea, to cardio respiratory arrest. As a result,

many cases of such abuse go undetected for weeks, months, or years and/or are often mis- and under-diagnosed (Feldman, 2003; Makar & Squier, 1990; Schreier & Libow, 1993).

Exact prevalence is difficult to assess; however, approximately 1200 cases of MSbP are reported annually in the United States, with other countries reporting similar numbers per capita (Feldman, 2003; see Feldman & Brown, 2002 for international review). Historically, birth mothers were the primary perpetrators of this type of abuse (Bryk and Siegel, 1997; Rosenberg, 1987); however, recent research has revealed a growing number of cases actively involving or solely perpetrated by fathers (e.g., Jones, Badgett, Minella, & Schuschke, 1993; McClure, Davis, Meadow, Sibert, 1996; Meadow, 1998; Sheridan, 2003; Single & Henry, 1991). The majority of the perpetrators described in literature have strong interests or a history of professional training in health care (Meadow, 1990; Rosenberg; Sheridan). There is no overall gender predominance of the victim in reported cases of MSbP (Feldman & Brown, 2002; Rosenberg; Sheridan), except to note that fathers involved in MSbP abuse are more likely to abuse their sons than their daughters (Rosenberg; Sheridan). Insufficient measures have been employed in attempts to accurately assess ethnic or socioeconomic status involvement (Rosenberg; Sheridan).

Long-term mortality rates resulting from such abuse range from 6% to 31%, depending on the source and sample (Boros, Ophoven, Anderson, & Brubaker, 1995; Rosenberg, 1987; Sheridan, 2003; Von Burg & Hibbard, 1995) with the most common cause of death being suffocation (Sheridan). One hundred percent of MSbP victims endure some form of medical tests, procedures, treatments, and/or other unhealthy social

consequences. Other forms of morbidity, such as physical scarring and psychological impairment are evident in approximately 8% of victims (Von Burg & Hibbard, 1995).

Official nomenclature for MSbP is not present in the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Instead, the disorder is most often subcategorized under the diagnosis of factitious disorder by proxy (p. 783). It is possible that the lack of universal approach and definitive proof (i.e., admission of guilt by perpetrator, video confirmation, and reliable testimony of the victim) has led to lesser emphasis by the psychological and law enforcement communities. Schreier and Libow (1993) conducted an extensive search of literature on MSbP and revealed only 19 of 178 papers found were published in psychiatric or psychological journals, with the remaining ones were found in medical publications. It is evident there is a need for psychology and law professionals to come to a consensus on implications and diagnoses for victims and perpetrators of MSbP and to further consider the long-term outcomes on both parties involved.

In addition to the lack attention to MSbP by legal psychologists, the majority of previous research involving court cases has been criminal in nature. Criminal cases are typically pursued because the prosecution and defense both believe they have a chance of winning. When the outcome of a criminal case is highly uncertain, or when the victim is a child not being represented by a guardian or protection agency, plaintiffs might instead seek solace for their hardships through civil litigation. That is, plaintiffs may request compensation from individuals who harmed them and violated their legal rights through the civil law system.

Several state jurisdictions permit the use of the “discovery rule” in court proceedings. The discovery rule allows victims an extended statute of limitations for taking civil action against an alleged defendant. That is, time to file begins from the time the victim became consciously aware on the cause of the injury; not from the last date the injury occurred. In many cases, especially those involving child abuse, the fear and anguish associated with the act is often psychologically repressed by the victims and might surface much later in adulthood (e.g., victims might suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder). In addition, the child victim might have been naively unaware that the actions taken against him/her were abusive in nature. The discovery rule is most often employed in cases that involve adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Ferrante, 1995); however, some people believe the statute should optionally be applied to other forms of childhood maltreatment as well (e.g., physical abuse; Harker, 1996; Wilson, 2003). The outcomes of MSbP abuse can be duly severe in nature (i.e., complex long-term psychological and physical impairments as result of the abuse); therefore, the opportunity for redress should be allowed.

The current study involved a mock civil case of an adult survivor of MSbP who was suing his/her abuser for monetary and psychological damages. The objective was to examine whether gender of defendant (mother or father), gender of plaintiff (daughter or son), and longevity of the MSbP (10 years vs. 19 years) abuse would determine the degree of defendant culpability and amount of money awarded to the plaintiff in a mock civil case. The investigator hypothesized participants would individually assign a greater degree of culpability to female defendants than male defendants and that more money would be awarded to plaintiffs in female perpetrated cases. It was also hypothesized that

individual participants would perceive defendants more culpable when the plaintiff was a female, rather than a male; and, greater culpability would be assessed to defendants the longer the MSbP abuse occurred (10 years vs. 19 years). Group decisions made during deliberation processes were also examined. The same hypotheses were posited for group jury decisions.

Previous research has revealed personality that trait assessments can serve as reliable predictors of jurors' decisions in court cases (Couch & Sundre, 2001). Attitudes toward gender equality and beliefs about fair and due justice in the world can play large roles in how jurors perceive defendant and plaintiff testimonies. Accordingly, these pre-existing attitudes affect the percent of responsibility attributed to the defendant and the monetary award given to the plaintiff.

#### Modern Sexism and Juror Decisions

The Modern Sexism Scale (MSS; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995) is designed to measure current sexist attitudes present in men and women, and might have influences of legal decisions of jurors. Sears (1988) classified three subcategories of the MSS: denial of continuous discrimination against women, antagonist attitudes toward women's demands for equality, and resentment about special favors given to women. Jurors' preexisting negative biases towards women can alter fair and impartial treatment towards female defendants in civil court cases.

Despite moderate changes in gender roles in the home and workforce, women still spend more time caring for their child(ren) and supervising domestic activities in the household than their male counterparts (Biernat & Wortman, 1991). The woman's role is most often viewed as primary nurturer, thus she is attributed with having the most

responsibility for her child's safety and care. Individuals have a tendency to perceive acts as more serious if they challenge cultural norms. Child abuse strongly violates the traditional gender roles many people possess; therefore, sexist attitudes may only be confounded and made more severe in the presence of child abuse. It is difficult to imagine that a mother would intentionally harm her child(ren). Adults, especially those who are parents, are expected to protect children from harm; not impose harm upon them.

In a mock criminal case involving filicide, Bohn, Laski, and Foley (2004) revealed participants who scored high on the MSS were more likely to find the female defendant guilty of first-degree murder, to seek the death penalty as punishment, and were less likely to reach a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity than participants who scored low on the MSS. The current investigator hypothesized the same trend for female defendants in a civil case involving child abuse. That is, participants who scored high on the MSS would attribute a greater percentage of responsibility to female defendants than male defendants. Conversely, it was hypothesized participants who scored low on the MSS would assign more responsibility to the defendant and award more money to the plaintiff regardless of gender of victim or defendant, thus displaying less sexist attitudes in general; greater culpability would be assessed to defendants the longer the MSbP abuse occurred (10 years vs. 19 years). It was also postulated that there would be no significant difference between moneys awarded to male or female plaintiffs by levels of modern sexism. This hypothesis was based on the fact that all victims were children at the time the abuse occurred, and in a hope that sexist attitudes would not apply to such a young audience involved in psychological (as well as physical) forms of abuse.

### Belief in a Just World and Juror Decisions

Belief in a Just World (BJW; Lerner, 1965, 1980) theory suggests that, deservedly and inherently, good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people; although this is not always unequivocally true. Some researchers (Lerner & Miller, 1978) suggest BJW serves as a sort of coping mechanism to enable people to have a sense of well-being, thus falsely protecting them from harm. Hence, if a person does not do anything “wrong,” then nothing “bad” will happen to him/her.

Strong evidence for gender differences in BJW has not been reported (see Durm & Stowers, 1998; O'Connor, Morrison, McLeod, & Anderson, 1996); however, females who score high in BJW tend to blame female victims of spouse abuse more so than females who score low on BJW (Kristiansen & Giulletti, 1990). Kristiansen and Giulletti hypothesized that attributing blame to the victim was an attempt on the women's part to gain control over their future and diminish their own chances of being victims of abuse. Thus, they restored balance to their belief in just world views by placing responsibility on someone else (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001). It is also possible women view hardships suffered by their same sex as more personally threatening in nature, than comparing themselves to situations endured by the opposite sex. That is, they see themselves as more likely victims of certain crimes, and pain and suffering.

Conversely, Mohiyeddini and Montada (1998) posited that most people believe innocent victims deserve some form of compensation for their hardship. In civil cases, money awarded to the plaintiff may be viewed as a way to ensure that justice was served, by rewarding the victim. In a mock civil rape case, Foley and Pigott (2000) found that females who scored either low or high on BJW scale attributed the same amounts of

responsibility to the victim; however, female participants who scored high on BJW awarded more damages to the victim than those who scored low on BJW. In contrast, male participants who scored high on the BJW scale awarded much less money than those who scored low on the scale.

The current author hypothesized participants who scored low on BJW would attribute more responsibility to the defendant and award a larger sum of money to the plaintiff regardless of the gender of the victim. Low BJW scorers are already somewhat inclined to think the world is a bit unfair; therefore, the author speculated these attitudes would be stronger when the abuse continued for a longer period of time (i.e., when the plaintiff allegedly endured 19 years of abuse than 10 years of abuse).



## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 200 students at a mid-size, urban university in the southeast, ranging in age from 17 to 51 ( $M = 22.47$ ) years. The majority of the participants were female ( $N = 157$ ; 78.5 %). Participants' ethnicity was predominantly Caucasian ( $n = 139$ ; 69.5 %), with the remaining sample being self-identified as African American ( $n = 22$ ; 11.0 %), Hispanic ( $n = 19$ ; 9.5 %), Asian American ( $n = 8$ ; 4 %), or other ( $n = 12$ ; 6 %). Most of the participants were single ( $n = 157$ ; 78.5 %), although some were married ( $n = 21$ ; 10.5 %), divorced ( $n = 8$ ; 4.0 %), or cohabitating ( $n = 13$ ; 6.5 %). Most of the participants did not have children, although some had children ( $n = 19$ ; 9.5 %). Participants volunteered for the study as one option for obtaining extra class credit.

### *Design*

The design was a 2 (gender of defendant) x 2 (gender of plaintiff) x 2 (10 vs. 19 years of abuse) between-subjects factorial design. Predictive variables were participant's responses to the MSS and the BJW scale. Gender of defendant, gender of plaintiff, and age of plaintiff at end of abuse were the independent variables. Dependent variables were the percent of culpability given to the defendant and amount of money awarded to the plaintiff by individual jurors and group decisions made by juries as a whole.

### *Scenario*

The scenario described a woman/man who was a victim of MSbP abuse during his/her childhood (10 years vs. 19 years). The child's parent repeatedly took him/her to a medical care facility for numerous treatments and surgeries, providing no admission of cause of infection, injury, or illness. The child's medical problems diminished when he/she was no longer under the parent's care. See Appendix A for the full scenario, including brief plaintiff and defendant arguments.

### *Procedure*

Participants entered the lab in groups of 5 to 10. Participants read and signed an informed consent form, then filled out a demographics questionnaire. Next, each participant was asked to fill out the MSS and the BJW. See Appendices B, C, and D respectively, for questionnaires.

Participants were next asked to read a description of a civil case in which an adult survivor of MSbP abuse is suing his/her abuser for punitive and psychological damages (See Appendix A). Each group of participants read one of eight randomly assigned case descriptions. The case descriptions were identical, with the exception of varying the gender of defendant and plaintiff, and varying the length of time of abuse (10 years vs. 19 years). Plaintiff and defendant arguments for the case were included in the case descriptions. Participants were individually asked to indicate the amount of responsibility they attributed to both plaintiff and defendant (totaling 100%), and to assign a deserved monetary award to the plaintiff (with no range or limit).

The investigators then instructed participants to choose a foreperson and to deliberate as a mock jury in a civil trial. After participants reached a consensus, the

foreperson for that group filled out the same form employed individually (i.e., indicating the amount of responsibility attributed to both plaintiff and defendant, and assigning a deserved monetary award to the plaintiff) reporting the group jury verdict. In order to ensure a certain level of consistency among groups and to make the experiment the most economical time wise, group deliberations were capped at 45 minutes ( $M = 18.05$  minutes, ranging from 4 minutes to 48 minutes). If any deliberation exceeded 45 minutes, the investigator informed the participants that they would have 5 additional minutes and instructed them to come to a conclusion. After deliberations, the participants were individually asked to fill out a percentage of culpability form again (totally 100%), and to assign a monetary award to the case.

### *Measures*

*Demographic variables.* Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that measured the following characteristics: age, gender, political attitudes and party affiliation, ethnicity, marital status, number of children (if applicable), and their previous experience/or lack of experience with child abuse. See Appendix B for demographic questionnaire.

*Modern sexism.* All participants completed the MSS (Swim et al., 1995). The MSS consisted of 8 items, with responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scores can range from 8 to 40 with a higher score indicating greater levels of modern sexism. Swim et al. reported internal reliability ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and good construct validity. See Appendix C for questionnaire.

*Belief in a just world.* All participants completed the BJW scale. The BJW scale consisted of 20 items, measured on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly

disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A higher score indicated a greater belief in a just world. Mohiyeddini and Montada (1998) reported adequate internal reliability ( $\alpha = .76$ ). See Appendix D for questionnaire.

*Dependent variables.* The individual dependent variables consisted of two separate measures: percentage of responsibility assigned to plaintiff and defendant, and amount of monetary award assigned to plaintiff. The group dependent variables were the same.

## Results

### *Gender of Defendant*

*Individual decisions pre-group deliberations.* A MANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, and age of victim as independent variables, and defendant's perceived responsibility and monetary award assigned to plaintiff as the dependent variables. A Pillai's Trace test of the model was significant for the main effect of gender of defendant [ $F(2, 192) = 3.17, p = .044$ ]. Follow-up univariate F-tests indicated gender of defendant had a significant effect on perceived responsibility of the defendant [ $F(1, 192) = 5.99, p = .015$ ]. Female defendants ( $M = 79.0%$ ) were perceived as more responsible than male defendants ( $M = 71.6%$ ).

*Individual decisions post-group deliberations.* A MANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, and age of victim as independent variables, and defendant's perceived responsibility and monetary award assigned to plaintiff as the dependent variables. A Pillai's Trace test of the model was significant for the main effect of gender of defendant [ $F(2, 190) = 10.19, p = .0001$ ]. Follow-up univariate F-tests indicated gender of defendant had a significant effect on perceived responsibility of the defendant [ $F(1, 191) = 17.50, p = .0001$ ] and monetary award [ $F(1, 191) = 10.20, p = .002$ ]. Female defendants ( $M = 81.9%$ ) were perceived as more responsible than male

defendants ( $M = 70.4\%$ ) and more money was awarded to victims of female defendants ( $M = \$519,900$ ) than male defendants ( $M = \$252,252$ )<sup>1</sup>.

### *Modern Sexism*

*Individual decisions pre-group deliberations.* MSS scores were divided into quartiles. The highest and lowest quartiles were used as the levels of the independent variable. Jurors in these quartiles were most different in their judgments of defendants; therefore, they could be employed as better predictors of decisions. High scores indicated greater levels of modern sexism.

A MANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, age of victim, and levels of modern sexism (high or low) as the independent variables, and defendant's perceived responsibility and award assigned to plaintiff as the dependent variables. A Pillai's Trace test of the model revealed no significant results for pre-group deliberation decisions.

*Individual decisions post-group deliberations.* A MANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, age of victim, and levels of modern sexism (high or low) as independent variables, and defendant's perceived responsibility and award given to plaintiff as the dependent variables. A Pillai's Trace test of the model was significant for the main effect of gender of defendant [ $F(2, 83) = 5.69, p = .005$ ], main effect for age of the victim [ $F(2, 83) = 3.15, p = .048$ ], interaction of plaintiff's gender and defendant's gender [ $F(2, 83) = 5.36, p = .006$ ], interaction of defendant's gender and victim's age [ $F(2, 83) = 4.76, p = .011$ ], interaction of defendant's gender and levels of modern sexism

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<sup>1</sup> All moneys awarded, both individually and as a group, were truncated two standard deviations above and below the mean to account for extreme outliers.

(high or low) [ $F(2, 83) = 3.09, p = .05$ ], and the interaction of victim's age and levels of modern sexism (high or low) [ $F(2, 83) = 3.40, p = .038$ ].

Follow-up univariate F-tests indicated the defendant's gender had a significant effect on perceived responsibility of defendant [ $F(1, 84) = 7.42, p = .008$ ] and award given to plaintiff [ $F(1, 84) = 7.40, p = .008$ ]. Follow-up univariate F-tests also indicated the age of victim [ $F(1, 84) = 5.78, p = .018$ ], the interaction of plaintiff's gender and defendant's gender [ $F(1, 84) = 4.44, p = .038$ ], the interaction of defendant's gender and victim's age [ $F(1, 84) = 7.22, p = .009$ ], and the interaction of victim's age and levels of modern sexism (high or low) [ $F(1, 84) = 6.83, p = .011$ , see Table 1 for means] had a significant effect on the perceived amount of responsibility assigned to the defendant.

Table 1. Effect of Length of Abuse x MSS on *M* Percent of Responsibility of Defendant

	<u>Level of Modern Sexism</u>	
	Low	High
Abused for 10 years	71.0%*	74.0%*
Abused for 19 years	90.3%*	76.1%*

Note.\*  $p < .05$ .

The interaction of defendant's gender and levels of modern sexism (high or low) [ $F(1, 84) = 6.25, p = .014$ ] had an effect on the award given (see Table 2 for means).

Table 2. Effect of Gender of Defendant x MSS on *M* Money Awarded to Plaintiff

	<u>Level of Modern Sexism</u>	
	Low	High
Male defendant	\$198,750*	\$256,190*
Female defendant	\$713,297*	\$311,375*

Note.\*  $p < .05$ .

Female defendants ( $M = 83.6\%$ ) were perceived as more responsible than male defendants ( $M = 68.7\%$ ) and almost twice as much money was awarded to victims of female defendants ( $M = \$537,912$ ) than male defendants ( $M = \$225,555$ ). Defendants who were alleged to have abused the plaintiff longer (i.e., until the plaintiff was 19 years old;  $M = 77.6\%$ ) were perceived as more responsible for the abuse occurring than defendants who allegedly abused the plaintiff until they were 10 years old ( $M = 75.3\%$ ). Jurors with low levels of modern sexism assigned the defendant with more responsibility ( $M = 78.4\%$ ) and awarded the plaintiff more money (\$488,767) than jurors who scored high in modern sexism ( $M = 75.0\%$ , \$285,622, respectively).

#### *Belief in a Just World*

BJW scores were divided into quartiles. The highest and lowest quartiles were used as the levels of the independent variable. Jurors in these quartiles were most



different in their judgments of defendants; therefore, they can be employed as better predictors of decisions. High scores indicated greater levels of BJW.

*Individual decisions pre-group deliberations.* A MANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, age of victim, and levels of BJW (high or low) as independent variables, and defendant's perceived responsibility and monetary award assigned to the plaintiff as the dependent variables. A Pillai's Trace test of the model was significant for the main effect of gender of plaintiff [ $F(2, 76) = 3.34, p = .041$ ].

Follow-up univariate F-tests indicated gender of plaintiff had a significant effect on perceived responsibility of the defendant [ $F(1, 77) = 5.35, p = .023$ ]. The defendant was perceived as more responsible when the plaintiff was a female ( $M = 77.1\%$ ) than a male ( $M = 74.0\%$ ); however, more money was awarded to male plaintiffs ( $M = \$344,919$ ) than female plaintiffs ( $M = \$268,351$ ).

*Individual decisions post-group deliberations.* A MANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, age of victim, and levels of BJW (high or low) as independent variables, and defendant's perceived responsibility and monetary award assigned to the plaintiff as the dependent variables. A Pillai's Trace test of the model was significant for levels of BJW [ $F(2, 76) = 3.68, p = .030$ ] and gender of plaintiff [ $F(2, 76) = 3.70, p = .029$ ].

Follow-up univariate F-tests indicated levels of BJW had a significant effect on perceived responsibility assigned to the defendant [ $F(1, 77) = 4.64, p = .034$ ] and amount of award assigned to plaintiff [ $F(1, 77) = 5.44, p = .022$ ]. Low BJW scorers assigned more responsibility to the defendant ( $M = 82.5\%$ ) than high BJW scorers ( $M = 71.4\%$ ).

Participants who scored low on BJW awarded a greater amount of money ( $M = \$472,868$ ) than those who scored high on BJW ( $M = \$215,917$ ).

Follow-up univariate F-tests indicated gender of the plaintiff also had a significant effect on the percent of perceived responsibility assigned to the defendant [ $F(1, 77) = 5.18, p = .026$ ]. Participants who scored high or low on BJW perceived the defendant as more responsible when the plaintiff was female ( $M = 81.9\%$ ) than when the plaintiff was male ( $M = 72.7\%$ ).

#### *Group (Mock Jury) Decisions*

There were a total of 23 juries. An ANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, and age of victim as independent variables, and juries' perceived amount of responsibility of the defendant (as reported by the foreperson on jury verdict form) as the dependent variable. F-tests revealed a significant effect for gender of defendant [ $F(1, 24) = 4.26, p = .05$ ]. Juries found female defendants more responsible for the abuse occurring ( $M = 82.6\%$ ) than male defendants ( $M = 68.3\%$ ). A second ANOVA was run with gender of plaintiff, gender of defendant, and age of victim as independent variables, and juries' award given to the plaintiff as the dependent variable. F-test revealed no significant results for award amount.

## Discussion

Jurors in civil cases are more likely to find the defendant more culpable and award the plaintiff greater damages when the injury(ies) suffered are perceived as more severe in nature (Greene & Bornstein, 2003). The current case description did not provide gruesome details of the physical abuse often involved in MSbP; however many jurors still viewed the scenario as “unimaginable” and “troubling.”<sup>4</sup> The plaintiff pursued damages for economic hardships suffered because of the need for extended periods of psychotherapy and physical handicaps manifested as a result of the abuse (i.e., costs accrued through years of doctor’s visits) and it was the juries’ responsibility to make decisions based on the information provided. Credibility of the plaintiff’s arguments never appeared to be verbally questioned by jurors.

As hypothesized, participants individually assigned a greater perceived percent of culpability for female defendants than male defendants, and awarded a larger sum of money to plaintiffs (regardless of gender) who were abused by female defendants than male defendants. The fact that most MSbP cases occur at the hands of a mother did not appear to diminish the negative feelings most people held against women who abused their offspring. Perhaps if the case description had been more physical (e.g., beating, choking) in nature participants would have found male defendants more liable, since male abusers are often viewed as more violent in nature. Concurrent with individual juror

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by the experimenter during deliberation processes.

decisions, jury group verdicts found female defendants more responsible for the alleged abuse than male defendants. Interestingly, no effects were found for group monetary award given.

There were no significant effects for levels of modern sexism pre-deliberation; however, levels of modern sexism had a significant effect on individual juror decisions post-deliberations. High and low MSS scorers attributed more responsibility to the defendant when the plaintiff's alleged abuse ended when he/she was 19 years old rather than 10 years old. Participants who scored low on the MSS attributed the greatest overall percentage of perceived responsibility to defendants of plaintiffs who were abused for 19 years. High and low MSS scorers also awarded the plaintiff more money when the defendant was a female. Interestingly, participants who scored low on the MSS attributed the greatest overall amount of money to plaintiffs who were abused by female defendants. There was no significant difference between moneys awarded by sex of the plaintiff (i.e., male or female) and levels of modern sexism, as both plaintiffs were reportedly children at the time of the alleged abuse. It appears that group deliberations diminished sexist attitudes, thus provoking a group polarization effect towards pro-plaintiff bias.

As with low modern sexism scorers, participants who scored low on BJW individually attributed a greater percent of responsibility to the defendant and awarded more money to the plaintiff. The defendant was perceived as more responsible when the plaintiff was a female than a male. Interestingly, more money was awarded to male plaintiffs than female plaintiffs when analyses included BJW scores. Low BJW scorers seemed to assign less responsibility to the plaintiff by awarding him or her more money.

Conversely, high BJW scorers appeared to denigrate the victim by assigning him or her more perceived responsibility for the abuse occurring and, in turn, awarded the victims less money as well. That is, they seemed to place blame on the victim in an attempt to restore their just world beliefs. The hypothesis for an interaction of level of BJW and length of abuse was not supported.

The ecological validity of mock jury studies has been scrutinized by researchers and legal professionals since conception. Bornstein (1999) examined differences in decisions of college and non-college mock jurors and the medium employed to test them (e.g., written scenario, video tape, taped voice recording). In his review of 20 years of jury simulation literature, Bornstein found very little difference based on what type of mock jurors or presentation were used. He concludes sufficient experiments have not been conducted (i.e., manipulating both the medium employed and sample used) to assess possible interactions; therefore, more research is needed in order to discredit the use of mock jurors as predictors of real jurors' decisions.

Despite lack of definitive support or criticism of the effectiveness of mock trials, there are several limitations in the current study that should be noted. The most obvious is that all participants were college students. The institution where the data was collected might be considered a somewhat non-traditional university (i.e., the mean age of the student population is 24.97 years) and several participants were probably even jury qualified; however, the sample at large was still relatively young and childless. Future directions should include a better distribution of married with children, and single with no children mock jurors. Although the majority of participants were female, the current author posits that a sample of older adults who had a child (children) might express even

stronger attitudes towards the defendant and display support for the plaintiff (e.g., larger monetary award); thus, displaying a female juror, female defendant effect.

Interestingly, the vast majority of participants displayed no evident understanding of civil litigation<sup>4</sup>. “Procedural justice” (Golding, 1979) standards should include neutrality (i.e., no bias or personal interest in judging parties involved), persuasive conflict (i.e., fair and equal arguments presented by and for each party), and settlement (i.e., terms of accountability and award set and supported by arguments and evidence; Goldstein, 1994). Although the scenario included expert testimony, and defendant and plaintiff arguments, jurors understandably appeared to allow emotional and personal beliefs to overcome their individual judgments<sup>4</sup>. Jurors were continuously contemplating an appropriate sentence for the defendant. Very specific and thorough instructions were provided by the experimenter (who served simply as moderator, not fellow juror or judge); however, mock jurors had to be repeatedly reminded that the case was civil in nature, not criminal. It appears the majority of jurors were assigning the amount of responsibility assigned to the defendant and the award given to the plaintiff as forms of punishment for the defendant, rather than compensation to the plaintiff for medical and psychiatric costs.

Unfortunately, many professionals who deal with children (e.g., doctors, nurses, teachers) do not receive adequate training in all the cues often linked to MSbP abuse. Teachers, who presumably spend the most time daily with school-aged children, might be able to notice discrepancies in behavior and parental interaction. Interestingly, they receive less training in methods of detecting and reporting child abuse, and report child

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by the experimenter during deliberation processes.

abuse less frequently, than physicians (Kenny, 2001). We cannot make a clear determination whether MSbP is physical or psychological abuse (i.e., it is both). Therefore, the current author suggests an integrated approach of medical, clinical psychology staff, and educators to formulate a broad, all encompassing training program to enact early detection and prevention of such a confusing form of abuse.

Like other forms of child abuse, training programs to help professionals recognize symptoms of MSbP should also combine training for legal responsibilities and appropriate protocol for reporting suspicious and/or malicious activity. Many healthcare workers hesitate to report suspected abuse because of fears of false allegations and legal actions being pursued as a result. In fact, almost every state in the United States holds some form of legislation that requires professionals to report physical and sexual child abuse (i.e., the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Act Amendments of 1996, P.L. 104-235; CAPTA; visit the United States Department of Health and Human Services for state by state mandates). Specifically in cases of MSbP, hospital and doctors' office staff members often develop close bonds with the abusing parent, making reporting suspicious activity even more challenging. Because of their unyielding persistence with staff, MSbP parents are often seen as "Super" parents (i.e., always attending to the need of their sick child); however, failure to report suspected abuse can lead to civil and criminal proceedings against the professional, punishable by fine and/or jail sentence. Accordingly, CAPTA ensures criminal and civil liability immunity to physicians who report maltreatment in an honest, "good faith" manner. That is, suspected abuse should be reported without hesitation to ensure protection of the child's physical health and rights. MSbP requires new judiciary strategies and psychological nomenclature to ensure early

prevention of the abuse, safety of the child, adequate treatment and rehabilitation for the parent, and a fair and just decision of the courts accordingly.



## Appendix A

### *Scenarios, Defense, and Prosecution Arguments*

#### **Uncontested Testimony:**

Debbie (*John*) Zupar spent most of her (*his*) childhood in doctor's offices and hospital rooms. Beginning in infancy, and continuing until she (*he*) was about 10 (*19*) years old, Debbie (*John*) never felt well. Her (*his*) mother (*father*), Pat, was constantly taking her (*him*) to new physicians to deal with what seemed to be a constant growing number of health problems.

By the time Debbie (*John*) was 10 (*19*) years old, she (*he*) had 7 surgeries, 14 invasion procedures (such as a heart catheterization, iodine injections, etc.), and had been hospitalized 29 times for various ailments. With every new doctor's visit came new medications and explanations for Debbie's (*John's*) failing health.

Pat (Debbie's [*John's*] mother [*father*]) was always very attentive to her (*his*) child's needs, often noticing symptoms of an oncoming illness long before anyone else. Pat had completed 2 semesters of nursing (*medical assistant*) school several years earlier and often expressed how very glad she (*he*) was having done so, since most of the doctors they visited seemed incompetent in recognizing what was really wrong with Debbie (*John*). Despite the alleged misgivings of the medical profession, Pat always seemed to like the attention she received from the staff at the doctor's office and hospital. The staff commended Pat and voiced their admiration for the unwavering care she (*he*) gave her (*his*) child. Pat spent a lot of time in their offices, and over time she (*he*) developed close friendships with more than one member of the medical faculty.

Debbie (*John*) was always underweight and below average height for her (*his*) age. She (*he*) never had much of an appetite and frequently felt tired and weak. Debbie (*John*) often had difficulty breathing, and her (*his*) mother (*father*) persisted in her (*his*) belief that an undetected heart condition was the cause.

Despite all of her (*his*) *current* health problems (*as a child*), Debbie (*John*) applied for Community College and began attending the fall after High School graduation. During a lecture in an Introduction to Abnormal Psychology class, Debbie (*John*) learned of a pathology called Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSbP). MSbP is a disorder in which a person (typically a parent) exaggerates or inflicts illness on another person (typically their children) in order to gain attention for themselves. The parents often have experience or a strong interest in the medical community and are seen as attentive and nurturing caregivers.

When she (*he*) came home from school that day, Debbie (*John*) hesitantly confronted her (*his*) mother (*father*) with the possibility that her (*his*) continuous health problems could be (*have been*) falsified. After all, it seemed odd to Debbie (*John*) that the two times she (*he*) remembered feeling well was during a visit to her (*his*) grandmother's house during summer break. Pat angrily and adamantly denied the accusation. She (*he*) insisted to Debbie (*John*) that she (*he*) had "always been nothing but a good parent." She (*he*) "wanted what was best for her (*him*)."

Debbie (*John*) Zupar is now 26 years old and has been healthy ever since she (*he*) moved away from her (*his*) mother (*father*) soon after learning about MSbP. She (*he*) has not spoken to Pat in the 8 years since. Debbie (*John*) is currently suing her (*his*) mother

(*father*), Pat, in a civil case for monetary damages, including continued minor health problems and 6 years of psychotherapy she has endured.

**Plaintiff Argument:**

The plaintiff (Debbie [*John*] Zupar) insists that Pat Zupar knew exactly what she (*he*) was doing when she (*he*) was taking Debbie (*John*) to all of the doctor's offices and hospitals. Pat purposely gave Debbie (*John*) unneeded medications that would make her (*him*) sick. Not only did Pat mismebrate, she (*he*) also made up symptoms that Debbie (*John*) experienced in order to get the doctors to administer more treatments. If Debbie (*John*) refused to agree with Pats' assertions, she (*he*) would get sent to bed without dinner for a week.

The plaintiff states that Pat always seemed to be happiest when getting the attention of the doctors they visited. The plaintiff states that, on more than one occasion, she (*he*) witnessed Pat using sexual flirtation with doctors and nurses in order to get the treatments for Debbie (*John*) that she (*he*) wanted. If a doctor or nurse didn't do what Pat wanted, she (*he*) would take Debbie (*John*) to another office or hospital in a nearby town.

The plaintiff has obtained hospital documents that she (*he*) states reveal many of her (*his*) reasons for visiting doctors were unfounded. She (*he*) insists that the documents provide proof of misdiagnoses and unnecessary procedures. Debbie (*John*) states that it has taken her (*him*) years of psychotherapy to have the confidence to trust people in her (*his*) life. She (*he*) has recently begun having relationships and interactions with other people. Debbie (*John*) also contends that she (*he*) has lingering health problems (i.e., heart palpitations) as a result of years of maltreatment by her (*his*) mother (*father*), Pat.

Pat knew exactly what she (*he*) was doing to Debbie (*John*) and must be held responsible for her (*his*) actions. Pat's treatment of Debbie (*John*) was clearly abuse and she (*he*) deserves to pay for what she (*he*) intentionally did. Remember, the abuse was not a one-time occurrence, but rather went on for many years.

**Defense Argument:**

The attorney for the defense tells the jury that Pat (Debbie's [*John's*] mother [*father*]) is not liable for any physiological or psychological harm Debbie (*John*) endured. He states that "doctors would not have treated Debbie (*John*) for so many years if there was nothing wrong with her (*him*)." Besides, "Debbie (*John*) was old enough then to tell someone if her (*his*) mother (*father*) was hurting her (*him*)." She (*he*) never made any indications that she (*he*) did not want treatment.

Pat testifies that she was always a good parent and insists that Debbie (*John*) was a sick, but well-loved child. Pat insists she would never do anything to harm her (*his*) child and that she (*he*) always provided Debbie (*John*) with the best care she (*he*) could. Pat testifies that she (*he*) herself (*himself*) was responsible for saving Debbie's (*John's*) life on more than one occasion when the doctors failed at doing their jobs properly. Pat has no idea why Debbie (*John*) would "make such a horrible thing up." Pat suggests that maybe Debbie (*John*) is now suffering from mental illness, just to add to the list of sicknesses she (*he*) has had.

Dr. Jack Perez, a local psychiatrist, testifies that Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSbP) is very rare. He asserts that only about 1200 cases of MSbP are reported annually in the United States. Dr. Perez explains that MSbP cases typically end in very early

childhood. He also states that suffocation is the main means employed by perpetrators in MSbP cases, and there is no proof of such treatment in this case (*fathers rarely, if ever, are actively involved in such type of abuse*). Dr. Perez maintains that Debbie's (*John's*) alleged abuse is highly unlikely the result of MSbP and attests there is no evidence to convince him otherwise.

## Appendix B

*Demographics*

Please answer the following questions by circling the numbers that correspond to you answer or filling in the blanks:

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender  
(1) – Female                      (2) – Male
3. How would describe your political attitudes?  
(1) – Liberal                                      (2) – Slightly liberal  
(3) – Slightly conservative                      (4) – Conservative
4. What is your political party affiliation?  
(1) – Republican      (2) – Independent      (3) - Democrat  
(4) – Undecided                      (5) – Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Ethnic background  
(1) – African American                      (2) – Asian American  
(3) – Caucasian, non-Hispanic                      (4) - Hispanic  
(5) – Other \_\_\_\_\_
6. Marital status  
(1) – Married                      (2) – Divorced                      (3) - Single  
(4) – Widowed                      (5) – Cohabiting
7. Number of children \_\_\_\_\_
8. Have you, or any member of your family or a close friend, been a victim of child abuse?  
(1) – Yes                      (2) – No                      (3) – Don't know

## Appendix C

*Modern Sexism Scale* (Swim, J. K., Aikin, K. J., Hall, W. S., & Hunter, B. A., 1995)

- 1= Strongly Disagree
- 2= Disagree
- 3= Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- 4= Agree
- 5= Strongly Agree

- \_\_\_ 1. Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the United States.
- \_\_\_ 2. Women often miss out on good jobs due to sexual discrimination.
- \_\_\_ 3. It is rare to see women treated in a sexist manner on television.
- \_\_\_ 4. On average, people in our society treat husbands and wives equally.
- \_\_\_ 5. Society has reached the point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement.
- \_\_\_ 6. It is easy to understand the anger of women=s groups in America.
- \_\_\_ 7. It is easy to understand why women=s groups are still concerned about societal limitations of women=s opportunities.
- \_\_\_ 8. Over the past few years, the government and news media have been showing more concern about the treatment of women than is warranted by women=s actual experiences.

## Appendix D

*Belief in a Just World Scale* (Rubin , Z., & Peplau, A., 1975)

Please answer the following questions using this numbering system:

- 5 = Strongly agree  
 4 = Moderately agree  
 3 = Slightly agree  
 2 = Slightly disagree  
 1 = Moderately disagree  
 0 = Strongly disagree

- \_\_\_ 1. I've found that a person rarely deserves the reputation he has.  
 \_\_\_ 2. Basically, the world is a just place.  
 \_\_\_ 3. People who get "lucky breaks" have usually earned their good fortune.  
 \_\_\_ 4. Careful drivers are just as likely to get hurt in traffic accidents as careless ones.  
 \_\_\_ 5. It is a common occurrence for a guilty person to get off free in American courts.  
 \_\_\_ 6. Students almost always deserve the grades they receive in school.  
 \_\_\_ 7. Men who keep in shape have little chance of suffering a heart attack.  
 \_\_\_ 8. The political candidate who sticks up for his principles rarely gets elected.  
 \_\_\_ 9. It is rare for an innocent man to be wrongly sent to jail.  
 \_\_\_ 10. In professional sports, many fouls and infractions never get called by the referee.  
 \_\_\_ 11. By and large, people deserve what they get.  
 \_\_\_ 12. When parents punish their children, it is almost always for good reasons.  
 \_\_\_ 13. Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded.  
 \_\_\_ 14. Although evil men may hold political power for a while, in the general course of history good wins out.  
 \_\_\_ 15. In almost any business or profession, people who do their job well rise to the top.  
 \_\_\_ 16. American parents tend to overlook the things most to be admired in their children.  
 \_\_\_ 17. It is often impossible for a person to receive a fair trial in the USA.  
 \_\_\_ 18. People who meet with misfortune have often brought it on themselves.  
 \_\_\_ 19. Crime doesn't pay.  
 \_\_\_ 20. Many people suffer through absolutely no fault of their own.

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## Curriculum Vita

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## PUBLICATIONS &amp; CONFERENCES

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Hurst, D. R., Bohn, M., & Foley, L. A. (2005). Legal authoritarianism: Pre- and post-deliberation decisions of mock jurors in a criminal case. *Manuscript submitted for publication.*

Hurst, D. R., Makowski, C. L. Gabe, J. L., & Foley, L. A. (2005, April). *Effects of plaintiff and defendant: Sexism and jurors' decisions.* Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Nashville, TN.

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#### AWARDS & POSITIONS RECEIVED

Outstanding Psychology Graduate Student of the Year - UNF – 2004/2005

Graduate Assistantship for Academic Excellence – UNF – Spring 2005

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Student Mentor – Academic Center for Excellence – UNF – Spring 2005

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Co-founder & Program Officer – UTD Chapter of Psychology Coalition

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