How the Age of Black Defendants and Victims Affects Mock Jurors' Decisions: A Look Into the Methodology
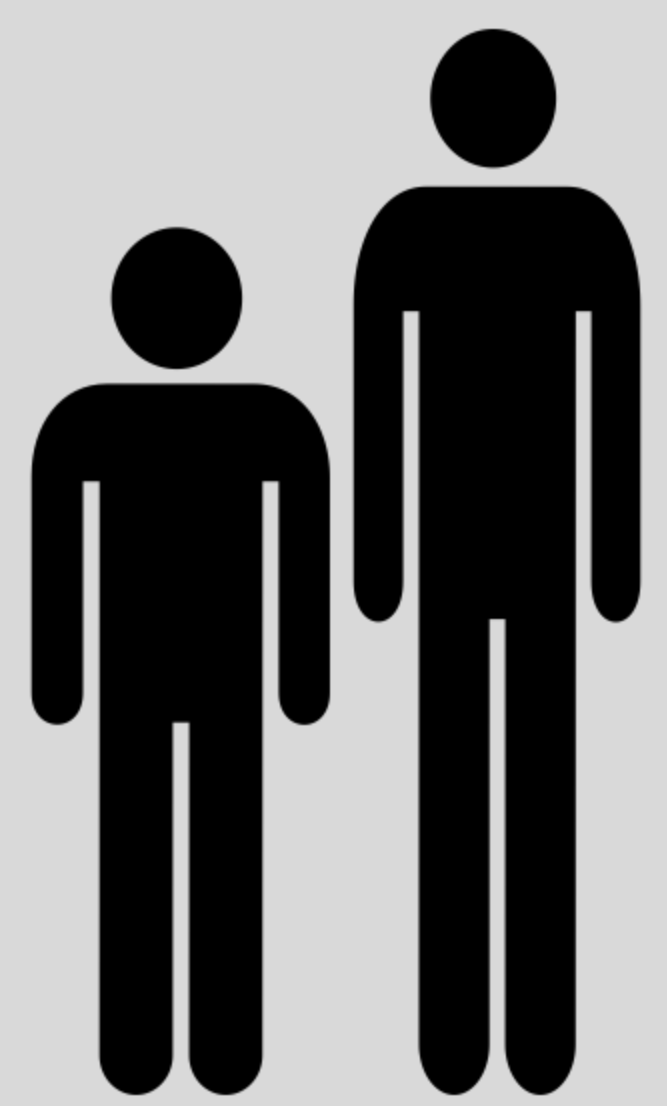
Miriam Mami and Abigail Heffner

- **Purpose**: Investigates the impact of defendant age (25 vs 72) and victim age (26 vs 70) on juror decision-making, specifically involving Black male defendants and victims.

- Prior studies have predominantly focused on older White defendants; this study addresses the gap by focusing on age in Black defendants and victims. (Ruva et al. 2023; Sheahan et al., 2021).

- According to the stereotype content model, older adults are perceived as warm but incompetent, leading to juror leniency toward older defendants (Fiske et al., 2002).

- Just world theory suggests that people may devalue older victims to maintain a sense of justice, given the diminished societal status of older adults (Lerner, 1980).

- Research shows that crimes against older victims are perceived as less compared to crimes against younger victims (Callan et al., 2012; Goodwin & Landy, 2014).

Hypotheses:

H1: Younger defendants (25) will receive more guilty verdicts, higher guilt ratings, and lower credibility ratings than older defendants (72).

H2: Younger victims (26) will lead to more guilty verdicts, higher guilt ratings, and lower defendant credibility ratings compared to older victims (70).
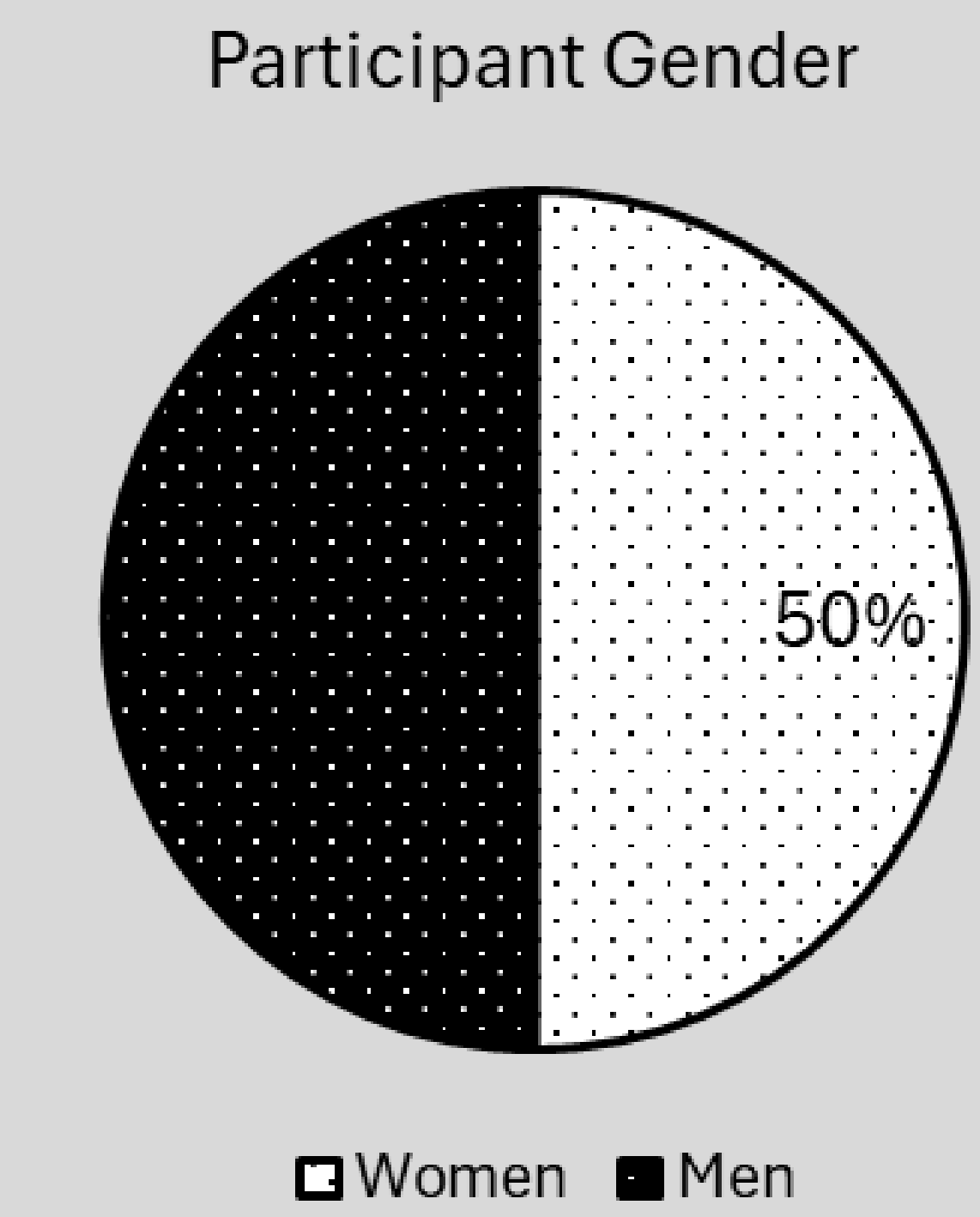
H3: Defendant credibility will mediate the relationship between defendant age and guilt ratings/verdicts. Older defendants will receive higher credibility, resulting in fewer guilty verdicts.
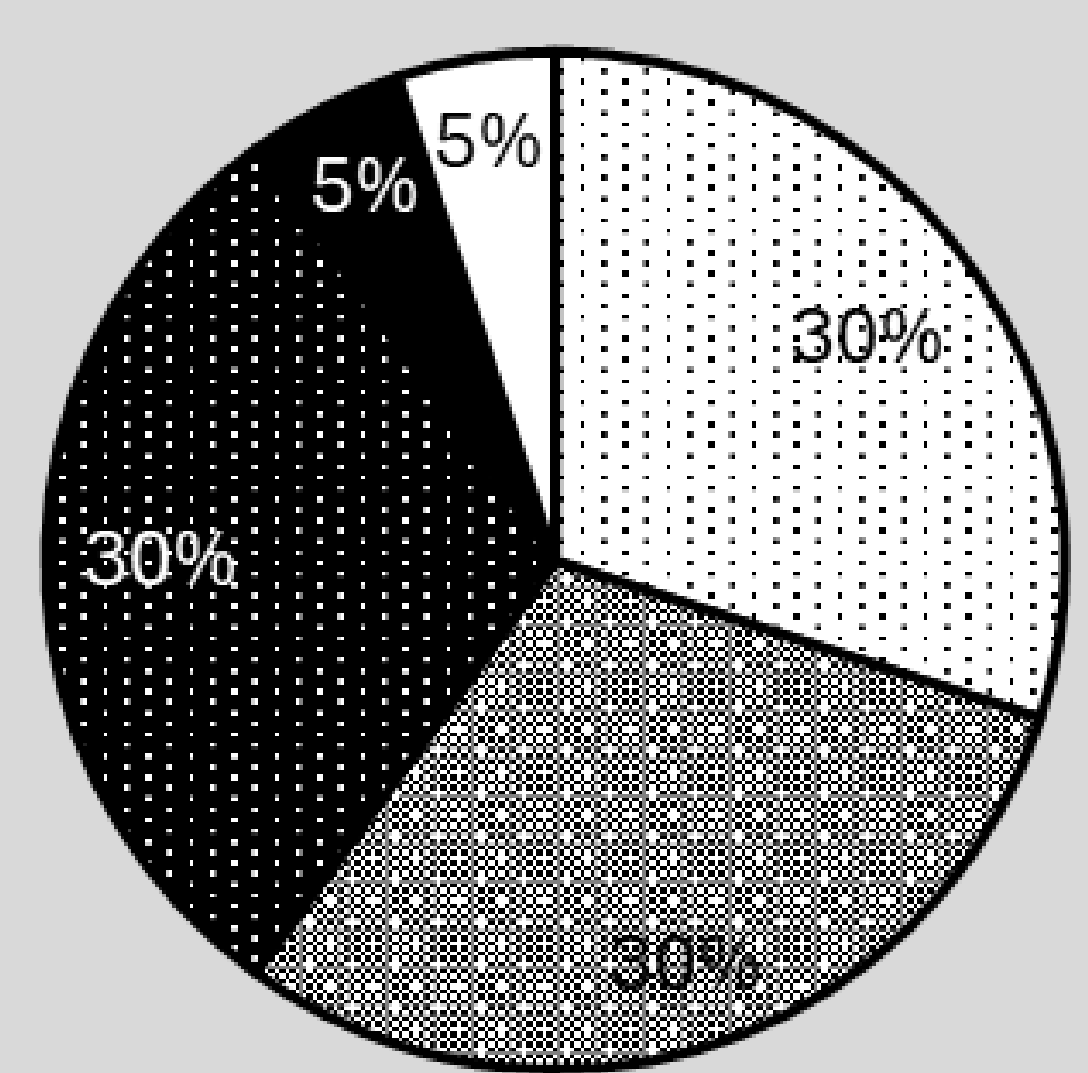
Methods:

Participants: Jury eligible participants (*N*=370) age 18-70 were recruited from Prolific Academic.

Quotas:

Participant Gender

□ Women ■ Men

Participant Political Orientation

□ Liberal ▨ Moderate ▨ Conservative ■ Other □ N/A

Procedure:

During **Phase 1**, participants were asked demographic questions, including political orientation and age and completed the BJW scale.

Five days later, participants read a transcript (**Phase 2**) involving a Black male defendant accused of murder and carjacking a Black male victim, with photos.

Trial Transcript: Murder trial adapted from a past study (Leippe et al. 2022). Defendant and victim age manipulated in photos and written descriptions within the transcript.

Measures:

- Belief in a Just World (BJW)
- Verdict
- Defendant Credibility
- Victim Blaming/Derogation:
- Stereotype Content
- Attention Checks

Limitations

- As this is an online study, results may be difficult to generalize to a real-world circumstance.
- Only explored age bias in a criminal case involving a Black defendant and victim.

Implications

- Study investigates how extra-legal variables (such as race and age) may impact juror decision-making in a court of law.
- Study could aid in the creation of future training and guidance for prospective jurors.
- Increases understanding about age bias in the judicial system.

Results

- This study is still in progress, with results forthcoming.

Link to References

UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

Graduate Student Mentor: Elizabeth Sykes
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Christine Ruva