Perceptions of Animal Abuse

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Introduction

In the past fifteen years, there has been increased societal interest in animal abuse, prompting new legislation and prosecution of animal cruelty cases. Yet, there is little scientific research to help attorneys prepare such cases for a jury trial. Experimental studies of jurors' reactions to child abuse can be used as a model for studying jurors' reactions to animal abuse, especially because both types of victims are often considered innocent and blameless (Bottoms et al., 2014; Satz, 2009).

As part of a larger study, I examined whether juror gender and self-identified femininity affect levels of emotional reactivity (i.e., how "upset" jurors feel) in response to an abuse scenario involving a dog. Upset is a broad term associated with a variety of negatively associated emotions, such as anger, sadness, and outrage (Altarriba, Bauer, & Benvenuto, 1999).

I hypothesized that **compared to men, women would be more upset after reading a brutal case of dog abuse**. This follows from literature illustrating that women have different levels of emotional and physiological reactivity than men concerning animals, and especially toward dogs (Angantyr, Eklund, & Hansen, 2015; Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991; Herzog, 2007; Topolski, Weaver, Martin, & McCoy, 2013; Vitulli, 2006),and from the child sexual abuse literature, which illustrates the pervasive tendency for women to react more negatively to child sexual abuse than men do.

I also examined the effect of self-reported femininity, a more sensitive independent measure of the gender construct than simple sex identification. Consistent with Bailey, Sims, and Chin's (2016) finding that participant femininity, more so than participant sex, was predictive of reactions to animal cruelty scenarios, I predicted that **compared to those low in femininity, people who are high in femininity would be more upset by a dog abuse scenario.**

Methods

Participant Description
- 89 undergraduate students: 34% men, 66% women
- M_{age} = 19.2 years, SD = 1.26, Range = 18-25 years
- Race/ethnicity (non-mutually exclusive categories): 33% Hispanic, 32% Asian, 25% White, 9% Other, 8% African American, and 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Procedure and Measures
- In groups of 3 or more and anonymously, participants completed an experimental packet including the instruction to read, think hard about, and respond to several questions about this brief scenario: *"John walks into his house and starts beating his dog. The dog sustained serious internal injuries but did not die."*

Methods, cont'd.
- Participants responded to this dependent measure on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all upset*) to 7 (*extremely upset*): *"How upset are you about what John did to the dog?"* .
- Next, respondents completed the 8-item Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) as a measure of femininity (responses ranging from 0 to 4). A mean split was performed to classify participants as high or low on this construct.
- Finally, participants completed measures of the demographics listed previously.

Results and Discussion

A preliminary correlational analysis revealed that gender and femininity were not significantly correlated in this sample, $r = .124$, $p = .25$, confirming the independence of the two constructs. Next, a 2 (Gender: Men vs. Women) X 2 (Femininity: Low vs. High) between-subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) examined how upset participants were. The ANOVA revealed the following significant effects (see *Figure 1*):

- Significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 86) = 6.16$, $p = .02$, *partial eta squared* = .07: **Women** (*M* = 6.58, *SD* = .73**) were significantly more upset than men** (*M* = 6.00, *SD* = 1.41**)** about the dog abuse.
- There was no significant main effect of femininity, $F(1, 86) = 2.25$, $p = .14$, *partial eta squared* = .03.
- Main effects were subsumed by a significant interaction between gender and femininity, $F(1, 86) = 4.16$, $p = .05$, *partial eta squared* = .05. Simple effects analyses indicated that women who were high in femininity were just as upset as women who were low in femininity. Men, however, differed significantly in how upset they were as a function of femininity, $F(1,83) = 4.83$, $p = .03$, *partial eta squared* = .05. Specifically, **men who were high in femininity were significantly more upset than men who were low in femininity** about the dog abuse – as upset as were women.
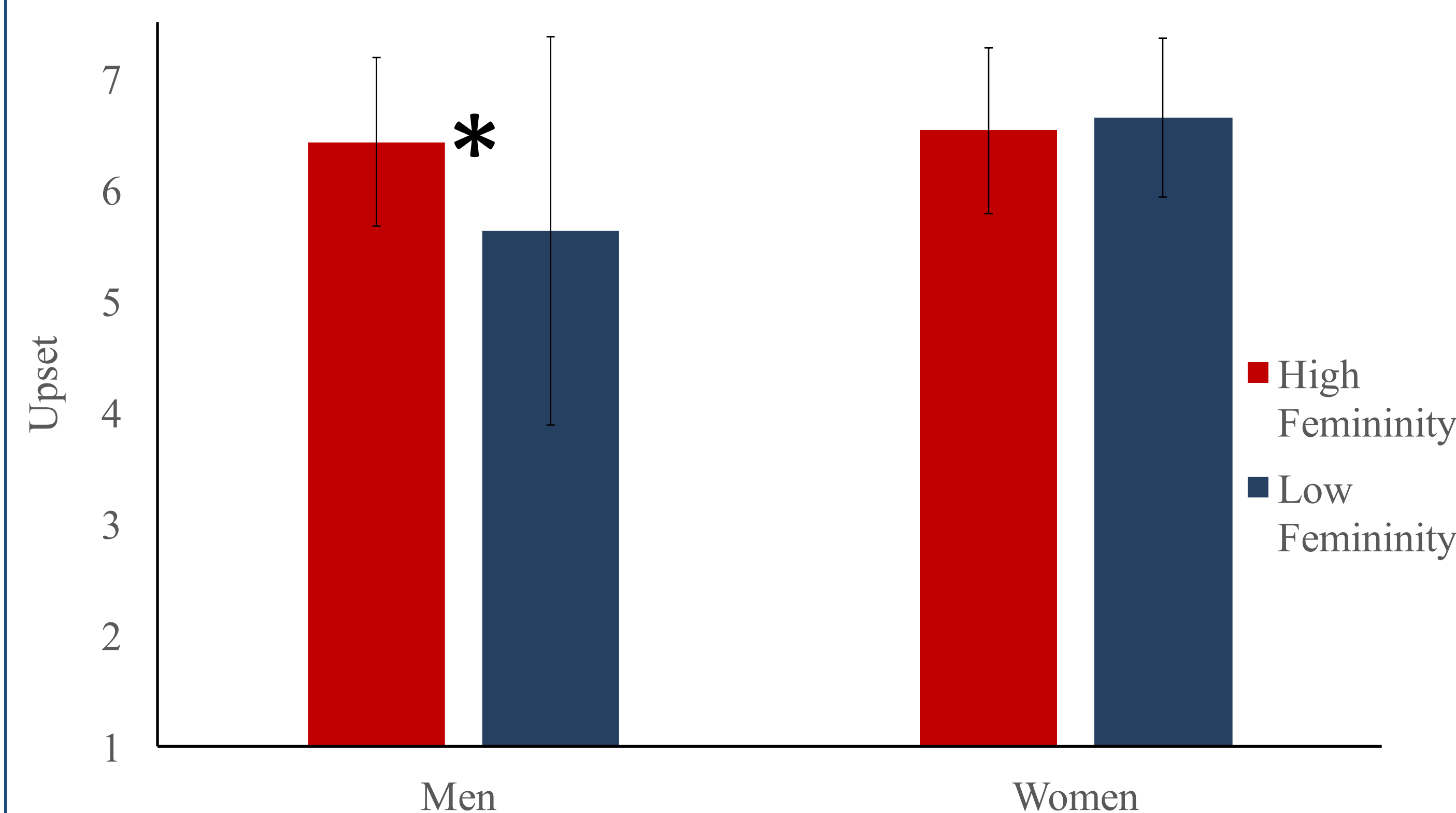

Figure 1. Individuals' reported levels of feeling upset as a function of gender and femininity.

Conclusion

This study makes both practical and theoretical contributions to the fields of psychology and law. The results of the study supported the hypothesis that women would feel more upset than men in reaction to a scenario describing the crime of dog abuse. Furthermore, although women's level of femininity did not affect their case judgments, men who were high in femininity were significantly more upset than men who were low in femininity. Femininity was therefore a more sensitive indicator of emotional reactivity among men. This supported Bailey, Sims, and Chin's (2016) findings that self-identified femininity plays an important role in reactions to dog abuse cases.

These results will be informative in planning future research to further explore jurors' emotional reactions to animal abuse cases, and the relation between emotions and trial verdicts. Future work to extend the present findings might include the use of harsher language, a more violent scenario, or visual stimuli (Bandes & Salerno, 2014; Salerno & Bottoms, 2009) in place of the current stimuli, or as a comparison condition.

Finally, although empathy was not explored in this project, the role of individual and gender differences in empathy toward dog abuse could also be explored in future studies.

References

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