

Reflections on Racial Differences in Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence: Black Women Have to be Strong*

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ABSTRACT

Blacks and whites often have clashing perspectives on many issues that are puzzling to both races. One of these clashing perspectives is in respect to differing perceptions of intimate partner violence, including even murder and rape. Arguably, this as well as other clashing perspectives flow not only from stark present-day demographic realities existing between different ethnicities and races, but also from historical differences between the races, especially including contrasts in the societally-sanctioned roles of women. This essay sets forth some reasons for race-related cosmological differences, explaining, for example, why many African Americans greeted O.J. Simpson's not-guilty verdict with ecstatic cheers, while European Americans sat in stunned disbelief. The influence of pre-existing discriminatory cognitive schemas is considered to be of comparatively minimal importance in explaining these differences.

KEY WORDS: domestic violence, role of women, racial differences, discordant cosmologies

INTRODUCTION

Race-related perceptions and opinions on many issues, including domestic violence, often are divided sharply in this country. Sometimes this cultural chasm becomes well known to the general public, as was the case with the violent murder of Nicole Simpson, allegedly at the hands of O.J. Simpson. Many whites were stunned and amazed at the reactions of many African Americans who cheered ecstatically when Simpson's trial ended with a not guilty verdict, even though a Gallup Poll at the time reported that 73 percent of blacks agreed with the verdict, compared to only 36 percent of whites. More often though, European Americans have little idea of the depth of the divide separating opinions held by many black and white Americans. Most whites, we suspect, would find it absolutely incredulous to know that, after the trial, the general sentiment among many African Americans regarding Mike Tyson's conviction for raping Desiree Washington was that Tyson was not guilty. As exclaimed, even to this day, by many European Americans, how could a notorious brute such as Tyson, a man who later bit off part of opponent Evander Holyfield's ear during a prizefight, and who had been accused of domestic violence by his first wife, actress Robin Givens, years before the alleged rape of Washington, not be guilty?

Many blacks have a standard retort. The retort is straightforward. They proclaim: "What can any woman expect who goes to a man's hotel room at 2 or 3 a.m.?" Put differently, Ms. Washington must have known and agreed to sexual contact before going to the room, because otherwise why would she have gone to his room at that time of night in the first place? Others, knowledgeable of some of the circumstances of Tyson's trial

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Tyson's trial, point to reports that Tyson's chauffeur, Rudy Gonzalez, who reportedly was not allowed to testify at the trial, had indicated that Tyson and Ms. Washington were "going at it hot and heavy" in the back seat of Tyson's limousine before they arrived at Tyson's hotel. Indeed, he witnessed many sexual back-seat limousine encounters involving Tyson's admirers, including frequent trysts between Tyson and super model Naomi Campbell (Gonzalez & Feigenbaum, 1995). Also recounted are stories of the many women who sent their underwear to Tyson via mailings to his fan club. An additional argument, thus, is why would Tyson need to rape Desiree Washington when so many women, including movie and modeling stars, were either at Tyson's beck and call, or at least accessible to him?

European Americans tend to reply by emphasizing the following: (a) A man must respect a woman's right to say "no" at any point during an encounter; (b) rape is not about sex, it is about power; and (c) Washington was in over her head when she unwisely consented to consort with Tyson, and was incapable of avoiding her own victimization at the hands of a larger, stronger, controlling, and more powerful male. They may also assert that any other view amounts to blaming the victim. Usually, these point-counterpoint arguments, meant to be illustrative of differing views by race, play out without probing reflection. Ultimately, both whites and blacks end up maintaining their contrasting views, thinking of the substance and logic of their arguments while ignoring possible sources, such as very different historical circumstances, from which those arguments may derive.

The authors of this essay assert that the landscapes of each group's arguments may be grounded in discordant cosmologies that neither group consciously recognizes. In other words, blacks and whites may tend to have differing ways of looking at the world of intimate partner violence (IPV). Indeed, this essay's senior author saw the fruit of those differing cosmologies in 1987 when he published, with co-author Gloria Robinson-Simpson, an article declaring that males were no more likely than females to perpetrate domestic violence (McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987). Reactions by whites often were not just disbelieving, but vitriolic (McNeely, Cook, & Torres, 2001). And, today, this essay's senior author observes those cosmologies often, especially in courtroom settings. Particularly in IPV cases, but also in divorce matters, it has become clear to him, during years of observation as an attorney, that many judges, especially many elderly judges, district attorneys, and members of juries, simply cannot contemplate the possibility that women may be equal with males in their aggression against mates, and this has been clearly so in respect to black men as perpetrators.

COGNITIVE SCHEMATA

We do not think this is exclusively due to pre-conceived notions that black males are inherently aggressive, although this certainly plays a role. Large black men, in particular, walk into courtrooms with a foot in the grave (cf: Teixeira, 2006). As noted by prominent Milwaukee defense attorney, John McNally:

In Milwaukee County, the complexion of a jury often determines the outcome of a case. Out of 12 jurors, seven or eight will be women, and five of the women will be white. The majority will be over 50 years of age. If you are a black male charged with domestic assault, rape or sexual assault of children, what do you think your chances are? Black males start out with a foot in the bucket to begin

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with. And juries in Milwaukee County are more racially mixed than most juries elsewhere. (McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987)

That perceptions of the social environment and of criminality differ sharply by race has been shown unequivocally. Allport and Postman's (1965) seminal work, for example, involved pictures being displayed to black and white subjects of a white man holding a razor while arguing with a black man. White subjects to whom these pictures were described tended to recall the black man as brandishing the razor. In another study, Secord, Beven, and Katz (1956) showed pictures of 15 adult faces to white subjects whose attitudes about blacks were known. Ten of the faces were of blacks with widely varied physiognomic features. Other faces were of whites. Once subjects characterized faces as those of blacks, they proceeded to ascribe behaviors that were consistent with their stereotypical conceptions of blacks, often paying no further attention whatsoever to differences among the individual faces portrayed in the pictures. These findings were consistent for those less prejudiced against blacks as well as those more strongly prejudiced against blacks (Secord et al., 1956). Additionally, jurors are more likely to convict alleged rape assailants based on racial similarities/ dissimilarities between jurors and defendants (Ugwuegbu, 1976). Miller and Hewitt (1978), for example, showed subjects a videotape depicting the onset of an actual rape case involving a black male defendant. Both black and white simulated jurors were significantly more likely to vote for conviction when there was juror/victim similarity. Even children are not immune. Eight-to ten-year-old children, when asked to select from a bi-racial set of photographs those individuals they believed to be murderers, were found to evidence a strong bias toward perceived black male violence. Black males were perceived primarily as murderers while white males were not, suggesting the possibility of cognitive schemas that predispose individuals to attribute criminality based on race-related stereotypes rather than observable truth (Mayas, 1977). Consider the implications of these perceptual differences for black men accused of non-stranger rape, or murder in domestic disputes (cf: McNeely & Pope, 1981).

DISCREPANT HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES, AUTONOMY AND CHIVALRY

But could there be more at work than pre-existing cognitive schemata in the way domestic violence is perceived across the races? These authors believe that more is involved, and that the difference, in large measure, flows from societal differences in the historical treatment and present-day circumstances of black women. Unlike the reactions of generations of white men to their women as being docile, subservient, and weak, and in need of chivalrous protection by men, most black men have had to take the prowess of their women seriously. This is because the reality of black women's lives, from slavery to the present day, has been so acutely distinct from that of white women. As noted by Angela Davis (1971):

She was not sheltered or protected; she would not remain oblivious to the desperate struggle for existence unfolding outside the home...She did not have the stunted awareness of a woman confined to a home...The alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not accrue to her...She was there in the fields, toiling under the lash from sun-up to sun-down...When mothers who had sucking children

could not keep up in the fields with other slaves, they would be whipped with raw hide so that the blood and the milk flew mingled from their breasts...And when she did do housework, cooking and cleaning in her own cabin, she was performing the only labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor....And this helped to lay a foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and her men...These survival-oriented autonomous activities were, themselves, a form of resistance...She was, therefore, essential to the survival of the community. (pp. 7-8)

But the words of ex-slave, Sojourner Truth, delivering her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech in 1851, perhaps are more pungent:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

The history of black women is replete with images both of their independent self-reliance and strength, as well as their psychological equality with their men. Underground Railroad conductor, and later Civil War spy and nurse, Harriet Tubman made 19 trips into the pre-Civil War south, leading over 300 slaves to freedom (Clinton, 2004). Tubman never lost a passenger, in part because she backed up, with the barrel of a gun, her warning to exhausted fleeing slaves, including males: "You'll be free or die ... a dead runaway slave can tell no secrets." Among other achievements, Tubman, who had been whipped even as a small slave child was responsible for guiding black Civil War soldiers while stationed in South Carolina. Or what of Mary Fields, also known as Stagecoach Mary, Black Mary, or Shotgun Mary? An ex-slave, Mary made her way to Montana in 1885, where she toted two guns (one under her apron) and a shotgun at all times. She had a standing bet that she could knock out any man with just one punch, and she never lost a bet. As noted by one observer: She broke more noses than any other person in central Montana (Ravage, 2002).

PRESENT-DAY CIRCUMSTANCES, SELF-RELIANCE, AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

So what about today? Are there remnants of this tradition of self-reliant independence and strength that still distinguish black women from white women? One possible indicator has to do with the fact that, whereas white women tend to receive "slap the cad" instructions from their mothers as appropriate responses to male aggression, black women, especially lower-class black women, are more likely to receive specific instructions from their mothers in the use of disfiguring lye or the use of hot water, hot cooking oil, boiling grits, etc., for scalding (McNeely et al., 2001). One apparent manifestation of this training occurred in 1974, when popular singer Al Green was

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scalded with boiling grits by his girlfriend, Mary Woodson, who had broken into Green's Memphis home while he was bathing (Green & Seay, 2000). Reports following the incident denied prior aggression by Green, asserting, instead, that Woodson was obsessive and had been upset about their relationship. When a study was performed involving female homicide perpetrators, many of whom were black, the investigator found that 40 percent had past arrest records for committing violence against people other than their spouses or male intimates (Mann, 1996). Mann also found that, whereas 38.9 percent claimed self-defense, only 3.1 percent of the homicides were justifiable acts of self-defense. She concluded that many of these women were simply "tough" women. Sarantakos' (2004) comments also are pertinent on this point.

None of this means that strong European American women do not exist, or have not existed, historically. But there are very different cosmologies at play between diverse ethnicities and races. Both previously discussed historical factors, as well as present-day circumstances, influence how African Americans and European Americans perceive social reality. One current reality has to do with the fact that in 2004, marriage rates among black women in particular remained low (Roberts, 2007). Specifically, only 29.4 percent of black women, aged fifteen years or older, were married (64 percent had been married in 1970), compared with 49.6 percent of Hispanic/Latino women, 55.1 percent of non-Hispanic/Latino white women, and 62.4 percent of Asian women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). Prospects for black women to secure eligible mates with stable employment are far less optimistic than is the case for white women. For one thing, black males born today have a one in three chance of going to prison during their lifetimes (Mauer, 2006), which is up from one in five in 1987 (Sampson, 1987), whereas only one in seventeen white males will likely go to prison. In fact, in some cities the black male population in prime childbearing and childrearing ages would have to increase by 40 percent or more to be comparable to the number of black females of equivalent age (McNeely & Kinlow, 1987). Nationally, seven out of ten (68%) black children are born to single mothers (De Parle, 2004), but in some large cities the figure is closer to 85 percent (Bureau of Health Information and Policy, 2006). These are stark realities. One consequence of these stark realities, as well as of historical factors, is that black women are more likely to attribute to themselves feelings of independent self-reliance and strength.

NUBIAN QUEENS AND SOUTHERN BELLES: CONTRASTS IN COSMOLOGIES

One of the ways in which this can be observed is in the belief held by many white women that women should go out of the home in order to pursue careers, or at least in order to secure employment, with the idea that it is a bit demeaning and disempowering to be just a housewife. Black women, however, have a different take on this. Black women are more inclined to subscribe to the view that one pursues a career or outside-the-home employment in order to avoid dependence on a man, because it might not be possible to find a stable and employed man, or that a stable and employed man might not always be around. At the same time, it is the fondest view of many black women that they be taken care of by a spouse. Simply put, many black women would be only too happy to have a situation where they are being financially so well taken care of by a black man that they would not need to go out and earn a living. Also, many black women would be enthralled

to be put on a pedestal, but more in the spirit of a Nubian Queen or Princess (royalty without demeaning attributions of defenseless) rather than a Southern Belle. Black women are not starting out having to overcome the woman-on-a-pedestal idea, which causes many white women to feel a need to prove their autonomy and independence to their men and to themselves. Not surprisingly, many feminists have attacked the chivalry notion. These are very different cosmologies at work.

The woman-on-a-pedestal idea is still, despite political incorrectness, very much alive, not just in many courtrooms and in the general public, but, ironically, in feminist circles as well. Some feminists, for example, attribute in *sine qua non* fashion, power and control to men in marital or intimate relationships. Thus it is the brutish male who is exclusively responsible for aggression directed against essentially weak and defenseless women in need of protection, like Desiree Washington. Many black women, by contrast, rejecting the docility required either by a chivalrous outlook or by an arguably demeaning view of women as defenseless victims, are either likely to assume that they have more control over their own circumstances, or to assume responsibility for a greater role in their own victimization. Hence, "What did Desiree Washington expect when she went to Mike Tyson's hotel room at 2 or 3 a.m.?"

Attributing power and control to men while also being devoid of pre-conceived defensive or attacking tactics involving weapons such as hot cooking oil or grits, ironically lodges power in the hands of men. Thus: "But she didn't deserve to be raped just because she went to his hotel room." Of course, Washington did not deserve to be raped, if that is what occurred. But this latter mindset appears spawned by deeply-rooted chivalrous cultural beliefs among whites, of women being essentially defenseless, non self-reliant, in need of being taken care of by males, and in need of male protection, as well as needing help from males when required to cross mud puddles. These deeply internalized views of women as defenseless victims make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to imagine that women can be just as violent as men in domestic situations, perhaps explaining some of the vitriolic reactions referred to previously. This tradition of chivalry, rooted as it is in the notion of women's inherent weakness and defenselessness, is likely to unfairly protect, or afford comparatively benign treatment to younger women who have inflicted violence on physically weaker, frail, or infirm older spouses or intimates (McNeely & Cook, 2007).

Black women and men, on the other hand, as noted more than a century ago by Sojourner Truth, have not had the luxury of benefiting from societally-prescribed chivalrous beliefs. As a consequence of having to form their characters in what historically has been, and often continues to be a hostile environment (Chestang, 1972), many have had to forge very different ways of looking at the world, such as eco-system distrust, in order to ensure their own survival. This same eco-system distrust explains why blacks, more than whites, were more likely to believe that L.A. police officers framed O.J. Simpson. Unlike many whites, who tend to view women as victimized by helplessness, whether learned or otherwise, blacks have taken the capabilities of their women seriously, and have generally admired and respected their women's strength. Thus, women are not as likely to be regarded by blacks as being philosophically non-violent, physically weak, defenseless, or predisposed to passivity. In the end, and for the variety of reasons discussed herein, many blacks and whites are likely to view instances of domestic

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homicide, non-stranger rape, and other forms of aggression among intimates quite differently, as the Gallup figures reported previously substantiate.

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