



## The gender gap in death penalty support: An exploratory study

John K. Cochran<sup>\*</sup>, Beth A. Sanders

Department of Criminology, University of South Florida, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, SOC 107, Tampa, FL 33620-8100, United States

Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Thomas More College, 333 Thomas More Parkway, Crestview Hills, KY 41017, United States

### A B S T R A C T

One of the more enduring observations in the study of death penalty support within the United States is the strong divide between males and females. Men have consistently shown significantly higher levels of support for capital punishment than women. This divide between males and females has appeared in nearly every survey, over time, and across a variety of methodological designs. Using data from the cumulative (1972–2002) data file for the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Social Surveys, this study attempted to understand the basis for this gender gap. It examined gender differences in socioeconomic status, gender inequality, gender socialization, religion/religiosity, political ideology, positions on right-to-life and other social issues, fear of crime and victimization experience, experience with the criminal justice system, philosophies of punishment, and attribution styles. The findings revealed that the effect of gender on capital punishment support continued to be robust despite controlling for the effects of all of these explanations.

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### Introduction

Among the various known correlates of death penalty support, one of the strongest and most persistent predictors has been respondent's gender (Bohm, 1991, 1999, 2003). Men have been observed to be significantly more supportive of capital punishment than women. Bohm (1991) reported that the male-female difference in death penalty support (a mean difference of approximately twelve percentage points across the numerous Gallup polls) was greater than that observed for any other socio-demographic characteristic other than race. This finding has been so robust that it has been observed in nearly every public opinion and social scientific survey undertaken in this country over the past fifty years. Specifically, Lester (1998) reviewed over forty studies on gender and death penalty support and found that in the vast majority of these studies, especially those published since 1985, the mean level of support for capital punishment was significantly higher among males than females. Moreover, the gap between males and females with regard to capital punishment has been enduring. That is, male and female levels of death penalty support have almost always increased and decreased over time in the same direction, revealing nearly identical/parallel trends (Bohm, 1991). Finally, while there has been occasional evidence of a slight narrowing or widening of this gap, such variation was either idiosyncratic, or if systematic, has eluded empirical attempts at explanation (Applegate, Cullen, & Fisher, 2002; Gault & Sabini, 2000; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; Leiber, 2000; Robbers, 2006; Stack, 2000).

This is not to imply that the scholarly community has completely neglected to examine the gender-death penalty relationship. In fact, the authors found a small body of research that has begun to delineate the various factors which account for why people support/oppose capital punishment. These studies had observed both common and gender-specific correlates of support for men and women. None of these studies, however, was able to fully account for the persistent gender gap on this issue. While some of these studies identified unique bases for male and female support/opposition (Applegate et al., 2002; Gault & Sabini, 2000; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; Leiber, 2000; Robbers, 2006; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000), more typically, research on this topic found that women who supported capital punishment were characterized by a similar profile as men who supported it (Stack, 2000). That is, female proponents of capital punishment tended to be White, married, political conservatives, had high incomes, came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, and perceived that the courts were too lenient with criminals (Bohm, 1999). When the influences of these common and gender-specific correlates of death penalty support were controlled, the gender effect remained robust and statistically significant.

For the authors, this fact (i.e., the strong, persistent, and apparently undiminishable gap between men and women with regard to their levels of death penalty support) posed such an interesting problem that it served as the basis for this exploratory study. In fact, Cullen, Fisher, and Applegate (2000, p. 264) indicated that gender differences in public opinion about punishment was a topic that warranted "detailed investigation." Similarly, Kelly and Braithwaite (1990, p. 547) opined that "something about being a woman makes one less willing to take a life in punishment for crime" and that "[t]his is an interesting puzzle for future research." To address this problem, researchers need longitudinal

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 813 974 9589; fax: +1 813 974 2803.  
E-mail address: cochran@cas.usf.edu (J.K. Cochran).

trend data in which attitudes toward capital punishment were measured over time; moreover, these data must also systematically include measures of the key explanatory variables. Ideally, these data would also be derived from nationally representative samples. Most public opinion data on the death penalty have been cross-sectional surveys of state or local populations. Whenever trend data from nationally representative samples were available (e.g., Gallup or Harris Polls) rarely were measures of the key explanatory variables systematically included.

This exploratory study drew on opinion data from the 1972–2002 cumulative data set of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Social Surveys (GSS). These surveys were based on multiple, independent, nationally representative samples of the U.S. population and included a host of measures of those factors argued by some to be the basis for this gender gap. As is often the case with secondary data, however, the GSS suffered from less than ideal measures on some of these factors. Thus, this study could not be offered as the final word on this issue; instead, it should be viewed as an initial and exploratory venture. This exploration, however, was guided by the various theoretical explanations which have been tendered by the scholarly community for this gender gap. In the text which follows, some of the more prominent theoretical accounts available in the literature have been identified. Then, tests of these accounts were undertaken with data from the GSS. The analytic approach to these tests involved simply examining the degree to which the gender–death penalty support relationship was attenuated once controls for these explanatory factors were introduced. That is, this study employed a theoretically informed exploration to discover which gender differences, if any, best accounted for the observed gender gap in death penalty support. The study was concluded with a discussion of its key findings and their implications.

### Accounts for the gender gap

The basic premise of this study was simply that men and women tend to differ in their death penalty attitudes because they differ on some other factors. That is, some other gender differences account for the gender gap in death penalty support. The question for this study was what are these other gender differences that account for this particular gender difference? A brief review of the literature suggests there may be many possible overlapping and intermingling types of explanations for the gender gap in support for capital punishment. Attempts to clarify, consolidate, and categorize these multiple accounts have been undertaken by a number of scholars (e.g., Carroll, 1988; Howell & Day, 2000; Manza & Brooks, 1998; Schlesinger & Heldman, 2001). Each of these attempts has consolidated the multiple accounts for the gender gap into one of five frameworks: (1) value differences between males and females due to traditional gender socialization practices; (2) traditional gender norms and gender roles which have been associated with these traditional socialization practices as they become institutionalized over time; (3) status differences between males and females and the resultant gender inequalities all of which have been derivative of the further institutionalization of traditional gender norms, gender roles, and socialization practices; (4) differences between males and females in their life-styles, life experiences, and life chances; and (5) the emergent feminist consciousness and women's autonomy which may have developed as a reaction against gender inequalities and the institutionalization of traditional gender norms, roles, and socialization practices. Below each of these five frameworks has been briefly described.

#### *Value differences and traditional gender socialization practices*

One reasonable basis for the observed difference in support for the death penalty between males and females may be the many gender differences in socialization and the different value orientations emergent from such socialization differences. For instance, research

has shown that males and females tend to express different religious/spiritual orientations (Kaufmann, 2004; Thompson, 1991), as well as different social and political orientations (Atkeson & Rapaport, 2003; Howell & Day, 2000; Manza & Brooks, 1998; Norris, 2003). Such orientations, in turn, have been found to be associated with support/opposition to the death penalty. For instance, political conservatives (Cochran, Boots, & Chamlin, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Jones, 2007), religious conservatives (Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993; Grasmick & McGill, 1994; c.f., Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005), and social conservatives (Borg, 1993; Conover, 1988; Cook, 1998) have each been observed to be more inclined to be supportive of capital punishment, and women have been found to be less inclined than men to be either politically, religiously, or socially conservative. As such, any one of these gendered differences in value orientations could reasonably account for the gender gap in death penalty support.

These gender differences in value orientations, as the result of traditional gender socialization practices, may culminate as an explanation for the gender gap in death penalty support in the form of gendered differences in attribution styles and punitiveness. Attribution styles and punitiveness have both been found to account for death penalty support (Cochran, Boots, & Heide, 2003); those whose lay causal attributions for crime lean more heavily toward internal or dispositional causes have been observed to be more punitive and inclined to support the death penalty than those who inclined toward environmental or situational causal attributions. Given the observed gender differences in value orientations briefly describe above, it is no surprise that women have been observed to be more inclined toward situational attributions than men, and as result, less punitive than men. Hence, controlling for gender differences in attribution styles and punitiveness should substantially, if not fully, account for the gender gap in death penalty support.

Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care has been considered as viable explanation for gender differences in support for a number of public policy issues (Applegate et al., 2002; Howell & Day, 2000; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; Hutchings, Valentino, Philpot, & White, 2004; Trevor, 1999). Gilligan argued that women solve moral dilemmas with an entirely different set of rules than men. Men make moral judgments based on fairness and justice, while women are more concerned with the preservation of relationships, an ethic of care. This ethic of care may be the strongest and most well developed theoretical basis for accounting for the gender gap in death penalty support via differences in socialization and value orientations. Gilligan asserted that women, because of their ethic of care, want to avoid all violence, whereas men are more concerned with its fair application, such as a retributive response in the form of the death penalty for crimes of murder. As such, the gender gap in death penalty support should be substantially, if not fully, attenuated once controls for the ethic of care (i.e., empathy and altruism) are included in the model.

#### *Traditional gender norms and roles*

A second framework which could reasonably account for the observed gender gap in death penalty support may be among the various traditional gender norms and associated roles. Gender differences with regard to the proper roles for men and women, both within the household and outside it in the work place, the military, in government, etc., may generate gender differences in beliefs/opinions about salient social and political issues such that adherents to traditional gender norms and roles would be more politically and socially conservative, and thus, supportive of the death penalty; conversely, those more inclined to reject these traditional images of the proper role and place of women in society are also less social/politically conservative, and therefore, less inclined to support the death penalty. Research has shown that women have abandoned these traditional images of the proper roles of women at a rate considerably more quickly than have men (Harris & Firestone, 1998).

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