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10 October 2012

The prettier the guiltier

by Will Parker

Past research has linked physical attractiveness to success in a variety of fields, but a new study from the University of Granada (Spain) shows that beauty can be a handicap when it comes to culpability in domestic violence crimes.



The research, published in the *European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*, looked specifically at domestic violence crimes in which the woman kills her abuser.

For the study, two types of scenarios about legal proceedings were created in which the defendant was a woman accused of killing her husband. Her defense was that she had suffered prolonged domestic violence and thus acted in self-defense when killing him.

In one of the stories the description of the woman coincided with the prototypical battered woman - young, battered, physically deteriorated and fragile. In the other story, the woman was attractive, childless, worked as a financial consultant, as was resolute and calm during the proceedings.

The researchers asked the participants to take on the role of the jury and answer a series of questions related to their perceptions of credibility, responsibility and situational control generated by the descriptions of the women.

The authors found that one of the variables having the greatest effect on the woman's perceived criminality rating was whether or not she fitted the stereotype of the battered woman.

"One of the most interesting conclusions of the study was that when the woman accused of killing her abuser was attractive, participants attached greater culpability, whereas if considered 'unattractive', this

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decreases. The results showed that when dealing with a non-prototypical battered woman - in other words, someone who does not conform to society's idea of such women, they were seen to have more control over the situation, which in legal terms can translate as a higher degree of guilt," noted researcher Antonio Herrera.

Herrera and co-researchers Inmaculada Valor-Segura and Francisca Expósito say the findings highlight the need to increase training related to the handling of domestic violence cases for all law enforcement officers and police. "Their work is fundamental in the process and can be conditioned by external variables, such as physical attractiveness or stereotypical beliefs of domestic violence," they conclude.

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