Jury Nullification: Factoring the Role of Race
Rob Amodio, Allison Benjamin, Catori Labad, Richard Volovnik, & Zenobia Weekes
AFR 123-03 FYS Dr. Patricia Johnson-Cox, Peer Mentor: Ariana Castillo

Introduction

Many people ask how race plays a role in Jury Nullification. Jury Nullification is when the jury ignores the evidence of a case and makes a decision based on their own personal and oftentimes biased opinions. Jury Nullification has been used in the (Trayvon Martin) State of Florida v. Zimmerman case and the Florida warning shot case (defendant, Marissa Alexander), which involved the “Stand Your Ground” law. This law allows a person to shoot without first attempting to retreat if a reasonable fear of bodily injury is involved.

Research Question

Does race play a significant factor in Jury Nullification cases?

Background

The trial of George Michael Zimmerman gained national attention after the fatal shooting and death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Martin was an unarmed teen walking through a gated community to his father's girlfriend's home. Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator, stated to have seen a “suspicious man” walking through the neighborhood wearing a hoodie. He decided to pursue the 17-year-old teen against police advice, shooting and killing him. Zimmerman's claim was self-defense. Zimmerman fought his case and won when he gained his acquittal in the summer of 2013 with a jury consisting of six women, of which five were white and one Hispanic. Occurring two years before the Zimmerman v. Martin case (2012), Marissa Alexander was originally convicted in 2012 due to firing a warning shot at her abusive husband inside her home on Aug. 1, 2010. Her case was later overturned by the First District Court of Florida due to them finding that the presiding judge unfairly instructed jurors that Alexander had to prove her self defense. Alexander was sentenced to 20 years in prison with the possibility of receiving a 60-year sentence if convicted. These charges are because of Florida’s 10-20-Life mandatory penalties for crimes when a gun is involved. Alexander’s trial has been postponed until December because of the new law on firing warning shots legally in certain circumstances.

Materials & Methods

**Materials**
- Student participants from John Jay College of Criminal Justice

**Methods**
- Survey
- Scholarly research
- State, federal, and local cases
- U.S. Supreme Court cases

Findings

To clarify if race plays a factor in Jury Nullification, our group conducted a survey that asked a small group of John Jay College students, from different racial backgrounds, their opinions of Jury Nullification and race. The questions asked include: 1) Is Jury Nullification used too often in Court? and 2) Does race play a factor in Jury Nullification? Results for question number 2 are shown below.

![Bar Chart: Does Race Play a Factor in Jury Nullification?](chart.png)

Conclusions

Jury Nullification is when the jury sets aside evidence and makes a decision based on their own knowledge. We believe based on surveys and studying court cases that race is, in fact, a factor when Jury Nullification is used.

We conducted a survey asking students on the John Jay College campus if they thought race influenced jury nullification. The majority of the students surveyed said yes. Also, we looked at the George Zimmerman court case and the Marissa Alexander Stand-Your-Ground case and found that the jury was biased in both of their decisions.

When Jury Nullification is used in the mind of the juror, we can tell when it is racially biased, based on the impartial decision and the evidence presented.

References
