

Post-Verdict Attitudes Toward The O.J. Simpson Murder Trial: The LSU Study¹

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ABSTRACT: Were the reactions to the O.J. Simpson murder trial verdict as deeply split along racial lines as reported by local and national news media, or were such reports exaggerated? That was the question that motivated this study of students and townspeople in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Three viewpoints about the trial and its media emerged. All three typologies converged on the point that Simpson's status played a key part in prolonging the trial and encouraging media attention. They also concurred that, to some extent, society is unjust and racist. Two types were critical of media coverage. African Americans overall were very critical of the media, but more for reasons racial than journalistic. Both those who had not followed the trial and those who watched almost daily tended to believe in Simpson's guilt, leading to the conclusion that race played a larger part than trial knowledge in forming the attitude that he was innocent, or at least that his guilt was not established.

Introduction

From the beginning of the O.J. Simpson murder trial the media fueled speculation and discussion about a black and white split concerning Simpson's guilt or innocence. There also was some local controversy following the verdict because some of the all-white fraternities at the state university had protested the trial results by placing large posters outside their houses. This had irked some African-American students and community leaders. Mirroring national coverage, local television stations also had contrasted the enthusiastic reaction of Southern

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Louisiana University (a large African-American college) to the verdict with white LSU students who expressed disgust. Were these two extreme attitudes the only ones that existed toward the trial and toward media coverage, or were there others? Months after the verdict, the impact of race on the trial and media coverage was still being discussed and analyzed. But beyond some media-sponsored public opinion polls and interviews with lawyers, policemen and jurors involved in the trial, there appeared to be little or no evidence to prove that the racial split was real rather than a media invention. Because this study was a research class project, another goal was to demonstrate to the graduate students how Q methodology (Stephenson 1953, 1967, 1980) could separate people into groups based on their *attitudes* rather than their demographics. Published opinion polls merely indicated a split between blacks and whites over the Simpson trial; a more intensive look was needed.

Coupling this study with the two other Simpson articles in this issue of *Operant Subjectivity* (Thomas, McBride & Baas, 1996; Ketterer *et al.* 1996), an unusually rich view of the subjectivity involved in a matter of great public interest emerges. Thomas *et al.* conducted two studies, before and after, of the trial and focused on its spectacle and the issue of race in light of public opinion polling. Ketterer *et al.* conducted their study near the middle of the trial, capturing more of the dynamic of attitude formation in process, and focused on news media coverage. Despite different foci, the studies are complementary.

Methodology

The LSU subjects were asked to read a set of 50 opinion statements about the trial and indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement. The sample of statements was borrowed from a similar study done in Missouri during the trial and reported elsewhere in this issue (Ketterer, *et al.*, 1997). Some of the statements were edited to reflect the time difference between the two studies (the Missouri study was conducted during the trial; the LSU study was done within the fortnight after the verdict was announced) and the fact that the subjects knew the verdict. Twenty-eight members of a Louisiana State University graduate research methods class from multiple disciplines completed the Q sorts and were instructed to find another subject, preferably African-American, to complete the sort in the two weeks following the verdict. In all, 50 subjects completed Q sorts. There were more women (30) than men (20) and slightly more caucasians (28) than minorities (22),

than men (20) and slightly more caucasians (28) than minorities (22), most of which were African-American.

Principal components factor analysis isolated three factors, which were rotated using varimax criteria. Loadings of .40 were considered significant $p < .01$). Two factors contained subjects who were predominately Caucasian, and one factor contained subjects who were predominately African American. Both the Caucasian factors believed O.J. Simpson to be guilty, while the African American factor believed in his innocence. However, closer analysis shows that a third of the African-American subjects believed Simpson to be guilty, and about 19 percent of the Caucasian thought he was innocent (or at least not proven to be guilty). There were 25 subjects on Type I, 18 subjects on Type II and seven subjects on Type III. Type II was correlated .33 with Type III and .28 with Type I. Type I explained the most variance (23 percent), followed by Factor II (11 percent) and Factor III (7 percent). The types were named *The O.J. Supporter*, *the Fascinated Watcher* and *the Verdict Disbeliever*.

Findings: The Factors and Their Interpretations

Type I: The O.J. Supporter

Members of this type, predominantly African-American (12 of 18), were the most likely to believe that Simpson did not murder his ex-wife or that at least the prosecution did not prove its case. They were quite critical of the media, which they viewed as racist and "sensational," and they see injustice in the American justice system. They agreed that the jury reached the only verdict it could in the case, given the problems with possible evidence tampering. Typical comments from subjects defining this factor were:

Plenty of reasonable doubt was raised like when the gloves didn't fit. Based on the evidence he was not proven guilty. . . . It was obvious to me that O.J. was innocent—I think it was the only verdict possible. . . . The trial was about guilt and guilt wasn't proven. . . . I felt strongly he did [murder her], though it was not proven.

The O.J. Supporters followed the trial on television and concluded the trial was influenced by media coverage and racial issues. The three statements with the highest positive z-scores (all $z = 1.75$) were:

If the defendant was an average person the trial would have been over sooner . . . No matter what the jury had decided, the public would not have accepted it . . . If it were not O.J. the superstar charged with murder, it would not have been on TV.

Type I strongly disagreed with the claim that the media coverage would not have been any different if the victims were a black man and a black woman. Similarly, this type denied that there was no racial discrimination in the Simpson case:

The media coverage would not have been different if the victims were black ($z=-2.13$) . . . The media coverage would not have been any different if OJ were white ($z=-1.87$). . . . There is no racial discrimination in the Simpson case ($z=-1.75$). . . .

As one subject said, "If O.J. were white, a lot would have been different. Race wouldn't be an issue, so all the [media] would have had to find something else to talk about." The *O.J. Supporter* generally believed that the criminal justice system does not provide equal treatment for all. People on this factor agreed that "blacks have to prove themselves in court more than whites" and "the trial was about racial discrimination." As one subject put it, "I do not believe the American justice system works." Yet another said, "In the U.S., where everybody is supposed to be equal, there is still a lot of discrimination in laws. Black and white is just one area where there are problems."

The *O.J. Supporters* thought the trial was very professional and that the black lawyers and the jury members handled themselves well. They believed the trial was about guilt and innocence, not about "being slick." "[Johnny Cochran] wasn't slick, he was professional," one subject said. Another said, "I believe the black attorneys did a fine job and do not get the respect they should."

Persons defining Type I believed that societal issues, such as racism, celebrity favoritism, and wealth, played a key role in the case and its media coverage. They thought the media found Simpson guilty before he was even arrested. They also accused the media of bringing negative stereotypes into the trial. "I do not believe the news media [are] fair in their reporting, especially when it comes to black people," one said. Another agreed, saying, "People are gullible enough to almost follow as truth what the media say; the media did their best to convict O.J."

They also thought media coverage influenced the outcome of the trial. As one participant said, "I think media did affect the jurors' decisions. They knew once they were alone they would be in the media

and have to explain their verdict. They did not want to say why O.J. was guilty." Type I disagreed with the notion that televising the trial helped prevent biased reporting.

Some members of this type disapproved of the *amount* of media coverage more than of the racial overtones of media coverage. "I feel that the coverage was blown out of proportion: a man is accused of killing his ex-wife and suddenly there are fifteen fewer minutes of news each night. Totally irresponsible," grumbled one.

The *O.J. Supporter* is similar to Ketterer *et al.*'s *Equal Justice Doubter* and Thomas *et al.*'s *X Factor X—An Indignant Vindication*.

Demographic Profile: Similar to the Missouri profile of the *Equal Justice Doubter*, the typical *O.J. Supporter* was young (less than 30) and African-American. However, our type was more likely to be female (67 percent). The *O.J. Supporter* may be a little less well educated than the *Equal Justice Doubter*, but five members of this type were members of the class conducting the study. The majority had not taken law courses (70.6 percent), but almost half of them had taken journalism courses (47.1 percent). Three had served on a jury. The *O.J. Supporters* were more likely than other types to have watched the trial on television. Although about 77 percent said they had read stories about the trial in newspapers, like the *Equal Justice Doubter*, they were much less likely than the other types to regularly read any campus, local or regional newspapers.

Type II: The Fascinated Watcher

Persons associated with this view closely followed the trial on television, and many of them followed it in the newspapers, too. This mostly white type firmly believed in Simpson's guilt and strongly agreed that "If the defendant had been an average person instead of a rich celebrity, the trial would have been over much sooner" ($z=2.05$). It is not surprising that all three types agreed with this statement and that it tended to be ranked higher than in the Ketterer study because by the time the subjects were dealing with it, they knew exactly how long the trial lasted. Like Ketterer's *Media Devotees* and Thomas' Factor Y: *Enough Already About Race!* The *Fascinated Watcher* was deeply interested in the media coverage of the trial. He read or watched the trial enthusiastically and was positive about the role that the media played in trial coverage. He also insisted that race was not a major factor in the trial.

For the respondents on this type media coverage of the Simpson case

was entirely compelling. Two of the Q statements that they most strongly rejected were, "I don't understand why people were so fascinated with the trial," and "I did not want to watch the trial very much." Not only did this type understand the fascination with trial, they were caught up in it. One of the statements strongly endorsed was: "The coverage was interesting; you got hooked." Written comments from the respondents in this category also are telling. For example, one subject said, "I have been totally interested in day-to-day coverage because I knew he was guilty and it was almost as if by my viewing I could make certain he could be convicted." Another said, "I do understand why this trial fascinated people. It had everything that most people are compelled with: Money, sex, murder, suspicion, etc. . . ."

The attitudes expressed by members of this type reflect a high level of interest in the spectacle of the trial and awareness that the trial was an entertainment vehicle for the media. The *Fascinated Watchers* strongly agreed that "The line is blurring between shows like *Hard Copy* and the network news," and that "This story has all the elements of *news*: it's compelling, the people involved are famous, and the whole thing unfolds like an excellent narrative should." In sum, *Fascinated Watchers* most strongly agreed with five Q statements calling attention to the entertainment value of the trial.

Although Type III, the *Verdict Disbeliever*, thought it had learned nothing from the trial, Type II believed it had gained real insights. "Watching the O.J. Simpson trial on television was an excellent first-hand look at our legal system and how it works, or doesn't work," one subject said. This also was the only type to strongly agree with the statement: "I have paid more attention to the O.J. Simpson trial than any other non-local case I can remember."

Interestingly, the *Fascinated Watcher* does not make any overtly negative associations between the trial and the media coverage. For this type the media are reflections of society and should not, therefore, be held accountable for any injustice that exists. One of the statements the *Fascinated Watcher* most strongly agreed with was that, "It isn't the media that are to blame for the coverage placed on the trial—society is." It also agreed that "The media were trying to give the people what they wanted to know."

Although believing in Simpson's guilt, the *Fascinated Watcher* seemed uninterested in issues of equality or justice *per se*, but was captured only by the riveting nature of the trial and media coverage. Very few of this type's opinions reflected an explicit concern about racial inequality or injustice. The type disagreed with statements such

as: "The news media were not very careful in how they covered the evidence" and "The media controlled the trial." These views are indicative of a people who are not critical of the media.

Demographic profile: The demographics for the *Fascinated Watcher* also are similar to those of the Ketterer's *Media Devotees*, making it quite likely that these subjects would have landed on the same factor if they had done their sorts at the same time. When compared to our other two types, *Fascinated Watchers* tended to have the least experience with the media from an occupational and academic standpoint. They also were more likely to both watch and read about the trial in local and regional newspapers. In other words, those with the most inside knowledge of the media tended to be more critical than those without such knowledge.

The *Fascinated Watcher* had the highest percentage of people who had taken graduate classes and all of them had at least some years of college. A majority of them had taken law courses (57 percent) but less than 30 percent had taken journalism courses. This may explain why this type had a higher interest in the legal process and its portrayal in the media than they did in the media itself. Only one of the seven subjects in this type had worked as a journalist, and two had taken journalism courses.

Most significantly, all of the *Fascinated Watchers* indicated that they read at least some newspaper stories about the trial. In addition, all of them watched coverage of the trial on television and they comprised the type containing the highest percentage of people who watched the trial every day (14.3 percent).

Fifty-seven percent of those in this type are male. This was the only type that contained more males than females. Seventy-one percent, the highest of any type, are Caucasian. Their education level is fairly high, with most having completed at least some college and, in many instances, some graduate study. All were 45 or younger. Although most members of this type agreed that they could have done a good job as jurors, 86 percent of them reported never having served on a jury.

Type III: The Verdict Disbeliever

The largest type, both in terms of the number of subjects identified with it (25) and amount of variance explained (23 percent), was named the *Verdict Disbeliever*. The *Verdict Disbeliever* was sure that Simpson did murder his ex-wife and Ron Goldman and that the trial was about "slickness," not innocence or guilt. More than half said they did not

watch any of the televised proceedings because to them the trial became "a never-ending soap opera" or "a sporting event." As one subject summed it up, "I never was tempted to watch the trial and read little about it. O.J. is/was guilty."

Verdict Disbelievers strongly agreed that the amount of broadcast time and newspaper space devoted to the trial far outweighed the public interest in the system and that the media used the trial for their own profit. Their emphasis on the "entertainment" aspect of the trial was typified by strong agreement with statements such as: "Most of the people in the court acted like entertainers trying to get the audience's attention," and "The media feed our unquenchable thirst for idle speculation."

The typical *Verdict Disbeliever* was critical of the media coverage surrounding the trial, and believed that the coverage was mainly a way for the media to make money. Moreover, this type felt that the court proceedings were boring with a lot of repetition. In consequence, many were alienated by the sensationalism surrounding the trial and thought that the large amounts of media coverage vastly outweighed any possible benefit to the American public. Generally, the *Verdict Disbelievers* felt that the Simpson trial was cause for a great deal of idle speculation and that Simpson's fame was the main reason for the media-circus surrounding the trial. Therefore, they were against the use of cameras in courtrooms and did not think that anything was learned from the trial. As one subject put it, "I learned nothing about our legal system other than it doesn't work."

Verdict Disbelievers believed, further, that racial discrimination permeated the Simpson trial, and most agreed with the statement that "the trial wouldn't have attracted that much attention if O.J. had not been black and Nicole had not been white." They did not believe the trial was about justice and thought the trial was permeated by racial conflict. They did not believe, however, that the trial should have been about racial issues. One comment—which echoes Thomas *et al.*'s *Factor Z: A Matter of Class*—summarized many of the Type III subjects' feelings:

I firmly believe that O.J. is guilty. I was convinced by the evidence. I did not buy into a police setup at all because everyone in the DA's office would have had to be involved as well . . . This case, if nothing else, shows where this country places its values. It also mirrored the hierarchy in the U.S. O.J. Simpson was a man who killed his wife so he gets off. O.J. Simpson was a rich, famous man, thus he gets off! Typical American justice.

The *Verdict Disbelievers* also thought the criminal justice system is biased in favor of the wealthy. Their written comments reflected the opinion that the trial would have turned out differently if the defendant had been "an average person." They also strongly agreed that "all are not equal before the law." The *Verdict Disbeliever* type had much in common with Ketterer's *Cynical Intellectual* and *Disinterested Analyst*.

Demographic Profile: Eighteen (72 percent) of the 25 people in this type were mass communications graduate students in the methods class conducting this research. Consequently, 68 percent had taken journalism courses, and 40 percent had worked as a journalist. Fifty-six percent had taken at least one law course. Sixty percent of the *Verdict Disbelievers* were female and 68 percent were Caucasians, 12 percent were Asian and 20 percent were African American. Eighty-eight percent were 35 or younger. Only three members of this type had served on a jury. Slightly less than half had watched the trial on television. Those who had watched did so only occasionally. However, 88 percent had read newspaper accounts of the trial.

Discussion and Future Research

We can now return to our first major question: Did the massive coverage of the trial help or hurt the image of the media in the eyes of the public? It appears that it did much more harm to their image than it did to help. Most of the types in this study were very critical of the media's coverage of the trial and found the "media circus" label to fit. However, there were media "junkies" who believed that the media were giving the public what it wanted and were much less critical of the media.

Two of the types in both the Ketterer and LSU studies thought the media coverage was unfair. All types thought the trial was being covered like a sporting event, resulting in an image that resembled a soap opera. The most profound perception might be that the types saw a blurring between tabloid television and the network news.

Like Ketterer's *Media Devotee* our *Fascinated Watcher* was inclined to give the media a passing grade. They found the coverage compelling and got hooked on it. They thought that the trial had all of the elements of news and paid more attention to it than other non-local cases. More broadly, however, it appears that viewers, readers and listeners were evaluating the media coverage of the trial on its quality, not its quantity. And most of the subjects in this study seemed to conclude that quality was lacking.

The second major question was: Did the use of television cameras in the courtroom enhance the public's understanding of the legal system or lead to cynicism? Only the *Fascinated Watchers* thought they had learned anything substantive about the system from the coverage, and they were ardent supporters of its use. Possibly, the perceived amount of learning from the trial might have been elevated had more "average" readers been a part of the study. The large proportion of highly educated subjects might have skewed the results.

The LSU study was particularly concerned with the effect of race on attitudes, and it was most evident in the placement of the statements that specifically dealt with racial issues. Most analyses of the public's attitude toward the Simpson trial have tended to polarize African Americans and White Americans into two diametrically opposed groups. Although this study did confirm that a majority of African American subjects thought Simpson was innocent and that a majority of Caucasian and Asian subjects thought he was guilty, the three types had similar attitudes toward a number of important things.

First, all the types converged on the point that Simpson's status played a key part in prolonging the trial and encouraging media attention, strongly agreeing that "If the defendant had been an average person instead of a rich celebrity, the trial would have been over much sooner."

Second, all the LSU types recognized to some extent that society is unjust and racist. The *Verdict Disbeliever* and the *O.J. Supporter* strongly agreed with the statement: "Even in the United States all are not equal before the law." Conversely, both disagreed with the statement: "There is no racial discrimination in the Simpson case." Even the *Fascinated Watchers*, who were not so overtly concerned with the issue of fairness, saw racism as a defining factor in the media coverage—as registered by their disagreement with the statement: "The media coverage wouldn't have been any different if the victims were a black man and a black woman."

It is important to recognize that the subjects with direct media experience tended to be more critical of the media's coverage than the less media-savvy subjects. Blacks were very critical of the media, but more for racial reasons than journalistic ones. Both those who had *not* followed the trial and those who watched almost daily tended to believe in Simpson's guilt, leading to the conclusion that race played a larger part than trial knowledge in forming the attitude that Simpson was innocent, or at least that his guilt was not established.

In following up on such findings, a longitudinal study would be

beneficial. Subjects could be asked to sort the statements at the beginning and at the end of high-profile trials. It would be interesting to determine whether their perceptions of the media and the justice system change over the course of the trial. Finally, an issue for further investigation is raised by our finding that readers perceive a blurring between the network news shows and shows like *Hard Copy*. It would be interesting to study how much blurring has occurred and, to the extent that careful analysis can determine, what impact the Simpson trial has had on it.

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