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Running Head: DEHUMANIZATION, VIOLENT CRIME, AND PUNISHMENT

The Animal in You: Animalistic Descriptions of a Violent Crime Increase Punishment of  
Perpetrator

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## Abstract

Criminal acts are sometimes described using animal metaphors. What is the impact of a violent crime being described in an animalistic vs. a non-animalistic way on the subsequent retribution towards the perpetrator? In two studies we experimentally varied animalistic descriptions of a violent crime and examined its effect on the severity of the punishment for the act. In Study 1, we showed that compared to non-animalistic descriptions, animalistic descriptions resulted in significantly harsher punishment for the perpetrator. In Study 2, we replicated this effect and further demonstrated that this harsher sentencing is explained by an increase in perceived risk of recidivism. Our findings suggest that animalistic descriptions of crimes lead to more retaliation against the perpetrator by inducing the perception that he is likely to continue engaging in violence.

Keywords: dehumanization; perceptions of violent crime; prison sentencing; punishment of criminal offenders



In July, 2010, Raoul Moat shot three people and triggered a week long police search through rural England. The media coverage of these crimes and the subsequent chase were intense. Of particular note was the recurrent animalistic description of Moat and his activities. Moat was described as ‘a brute’ who was living as ‘an animal in the wild’ before being forced out of ‘his lair’ (Millard, 2010; Rayner, Gammell, & Stokes, 2010). Alternative media coverage described him as evading police in the countryside before abandoning his campsite (e.g., BBC, 2010). The case of Raoul Moat will never reach trial – he committed suicide – but it highlights how criminals and criminal activities can be framed in animalistic ways. These animalistic metaphors may constitute little more than a linguist flourish aimed at engaging the audience. However, describing crimes in an animalistic manner may have important implications for how severely the perpetrator is punished. The purpose of the current research was to examine whether and how the use of animalistic metaphors to describe a violent crime impacts both the perceptions of the perpetrator and the harshness of punishment he is to receive. Such punishment can be conceptualized as retributive behavior aimed at hurting individuals who commit acts of criminal violence.

There are numerous ways to describe a crime, and how it is described is likely to be important in the context of conviction and sentencing. Although a prison sentence serves several purposes, including protecting society from dangerous individuals, it also serves as retribution or retaliation against criminals for infringing on the rights of others and causing them harm in some way. Criminal sentencing is an important, yet, imperfect process. Despite the considerable guidance given to judges and juries, their decisions are influenced by a range of factors incidental to the crime (Diamond, 1981; Ebbesen & Konecni, 1981; Hogarth, 1971). Previous scholarly work has identified a number of extraneous factors that distort judicial decisions. For instance, sentencing can be biased by perpetrator race (Mitchell, Haw, Pfeifer, & Meissner, 2005; Sweeney & Haney, 1992), gender (Daly & Tonry, 1997; Doerner

& Demuth, 2010), socio-economic status (Mustard, 2001), age (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 2006), and sexual orientation (Farr, 2000). These are character-based sources of bias, as they originate in perceived stable characteristics of the perpetrator.

The notion that the ‘criminal character’ is literally animalistic or apish has at times been explicitly endorsed. The concept of atavism – the retention of animalistic traits in humans – was once widely applied in criminology. Proponents of atavism argued that criminals are trapped in a primitive stage of development, physically and psychologically more similar to apes than humans (Lombroso, 1887, cited in Jahoda, 1999; Lombroso & Ferrero, 1895/2004; Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973). Thus, ‘born criminals’ could be identified by the preservation of ape-like physical and mental characteristics (see also Ellis, 1890/1901). Atavism had an important impact on criminal sentencing during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his review of criminal anthropology, Gould (1996) detailed several cases where criminals were convicted based on their physical ‘apishness’.

Although the concept of atavism was rejected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural influence of the criminal-animal link may linger on in courtroom and media descriptions of crime. In particular, although the idea that criminals are literally apish is no longer defensible (Gould, 1996), the metaphors surrounding a crime may serve to frame the perpetrator as less than fully human. Farr (2000) examined the cases of five women sentenced to death for capital murder. Examining both courtroom descriptions and media reports, she argued that the women were first de-feminized and then dehumanized. This dehumanization involved portraying the accused as devilish, wild, and metaphorical ‘vampires’. Farr argued that this dehumanization was integral to applying the most severe punishment - death.

The effect of dehumanizing metaphors is not limited to the domain of gender. Previous research has indicated that latent ‘Black-Ape’ metaphors are associated with harsher

decisions in the justice system (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Lott, 1999). Goff et al., (2008) examined the impact of media reports on the sentencing of death-eligible cases in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from 1979 to 1999. They selected 153 cases (15 Caucasian defendants, 138 African-American defendants) and their related media coverage. Media coverage of the cases was subsequently coded for the presence of ape-related language (e.g., ape, jungle, howl, scratch). They found that African-Americans sentenced to death had significantly more ape-related words employed in their media coverage. They concluded that ape-related descriptions continue to be subtly employed and have life-or-death implications for defendants.

Previous studies have suggested that dehumanization might play an important role in the sentencing of perpetrators. However, prior research contains three important limitations. First, these studies employed an archival approach. Although this adds ecological validity – the cases and outcomes are real – it leaves multiple extraneous variables uncontrolled. For instance, it is possible that animalistic framings are only used in severe or particularly heinous cases, and these in turn are the most likely to receive a capital sentence. Second, this work has focused only on capital crimes. Although capital punishment is the most costly sentence for the defendant, the number of capital sentences is dwarfed by custodial sentences. For example, in the U.S. in 2009, 3,173 people were under a sentence of death, amounting to 0.20 percent of a total prisoners population of 1,613,740 under state and federal correctional control (BJS, 2008). Third, the studies do not reveal *why* dehumanizing animal metaphors results in harsher sentencing.

To date, there has been no empirical examination of the reasons why animalistic depictions of crimes result in harsher sentences for the perpetrator. It has been suggested that dehumanization makes the perpetrator ‘monstrous’ (Farr, 2000), with an animalistic appetite for crime (see also Haslam, 2006; Jahoda, 1999). Thus, the animalistic perpetrator is

incorrigibly criminal; they will reoffend if given the chance. However, it is currently unclear whether perceptions of recidivism underlie greater sentencing.

Although research on the consequences of dehumanization in a criminal setting has been limited, there are now several studies indicating that dehumanization changes the way that people are treated. People tend to withdraw from the dehumanized (Vaes, Paladino, Castelli, Leyens, & Giovanazzi, 2006) and want to limit their immigration (Hodson & Costello, 2007). People also tend to offer less assistance to the dehumanized (Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007; Vaes, et al., 2006) and express less concern when they are mistreated (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006; Cehajic, Brown, & Gonzalez, 2009; Goff, et al., 2008). Even more importantly, the dehumanizing of individuals can provide a justification for expressing more aggression towards them (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975). In short, the existing literature indicates that people withdraw positive treatment (e.g., help, empathy) under conditions of dehumanization. The current study examined whether people endorse more retribution (incarceration) for a violent crime under similar conditions.

The current research experimentally manipulated a violent crime to be seen as either animalistic or non-animalistic and measured the effect on sentencing recommendations. This design allowed us to establish whether the animalistic nature of such characterizations causally influenced the recommended sentence for a violent crime. Further, we investigated the underlying dimensions that influence these judgments about the perpetrator. This allowed us to investigate why animalistic descriptions lead to harsher sentences.

### Pilot Study

Before examining the effect of animalistic descriptions on sentencing recommendations, we sought to investigate whether people can distinguish between animalistic and non-animalistic descriptions of a crime. In an initial pilot study we developed

two stories intended to differ on whether the crime was viewed as animalistic. Further we examined whether this difference affects extraneous dimensions of the crime description that may influence sentencing, such as the severity, graphicness, or seriousness of the crime. The crime of aggravated assault was selected for two reasons. First, it is a serious, violent crime and conviction can lead to a custodial sentence. Second, unlike other crimes (e.g., fraud, theft), crime involving physical aggression is particularly prone to animalistic language and metaphors (Farr, 2000; Goff, et al., 2008). Given that the variable of interest in this research involved animalistic depictions, it was possible that our manipulation would influence the perceived severity of the offense, which would then alter peoples' sentencing recommendations. Further, since this research involved describing criminal acts, it was important to control for the graphic nature of these descriptions.

Twenty-six people were recruited on a university campus to complete a short questionnaire about crime. This sample was primarily young adults ( $M=29.46$  years,  $SD=10.05$ ) and equal numbers of males ( $n=13$ ) and females ( $n=13$ ) were recruited. They began by reading one of two different accounts of an aggravated assault, matched in length (see appendix). In the animalistic condition the perpetrator was described as slinking, roaring, pounding, splattering, and dashing. By contrast, in the non-animalistic condition the perpetrator was described as stealing (onto the premises), shouting, punching, painting, and running. This relatively subtle manipulation was intended to frame one attack as animalistic and the other as non-animalistic.

After reading this description participants were told that 'The attack you just read about happened next to a zoo in Berlin, Germany. The attack was perpetrated by either a human or an escaped chimpanzee'. They were then asked to rate on an 11-point scale whether the attack was perpetrated by a human or a chimpanzee (0=definitely a human; 10=definitely a chimpanzee). After this they were asked how graphic the description of the crime was

(0=not at all graphic; 10=extremely graphic), how severe it would be if perpetrated by a human (0=very mild; 10=very severe), and how serious the crime was (0=not at all serious; 10= extremely serious).

To examine if our description successfully manipulated animalization we examined human/chimpanzee judgments using an independent samples t-test. As expected, the animalistic description lead people to see the crime as more likely to be committed by an animal ( $M=5.75$ ) than the non-animalistic description ( $M=3.57$ ),  $t(24)=2.44$ ,  $p=0.022$ . Importantly, condition did not alter perceived severity, graphicness, or seriousness,  $t_s(24)<0.57$ ,  $p_s>0.57$  (see Figure 1). In short, our descriptions successfully manipulated perceived animality without altering extraneous dimensions.

### Study 1

In this study, we experimentally manipulated animalistic descriptions of a violent crime and examined its effects on sentencing recommendations. If the animalistic descriptions identified by previous archival work were the causal factor in harsher sentencing, then varying the degree of animalization should alter the punishment for the attack in our study. Specifically, we predicted that animalistic descriptions would lead to longer recommended sentences than non-animalistic descriptions.

### Method

Seventy-six jury-eligible adults were approached on campus to complete a short questionnaire in exchange for a small reward. The sample was primarily young ( $M^{\text{age}}=21.36$ years,  $SD=6.62$ ), and similar numbers of men ( $n=37$ ) and women ( $n=39$ ) were recruited.

Participants were approached to complete a brief questionnaire entitled ‘You be the juror’. Those who agreed to participate were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. They were presented with one of the crimes developed in the pilot test. The crimes were identical – aggravated assault – but were described in either an animalistic or non-animalistic manner. Both crimes referred to a human perpetrator. After reading about the crime, participants were asked to imagine that the perpetrator was caught by the police and found guilty. They were told that as a juror, they had the opportunity to recommend the duration of a custodial sentence for the perpetrator. They were provided with a six-point scale. Below each point was the number of years of incarceration, ranging from 0 years to 9-10 years in two year increments. To provide participants with more information, three anchors were included; they were told that zero years represented no sentence, 3-6 years represented a moderate sentence, and 9-10 years represented a very high sentence. After making their sentencing recommendation, participants reported basic demographics. They were then thanked and debriefed.

### Results and discussion

There was no effect of age or gender on sentencing and so these variables were excluded from further analysis. To examine whether animalistic or non-animalistic descriptions had an influence on sentence duration, we conducted an independent samples t-test. Consistent with our hypothesis, animalistic descriptions resulted in higher sentences ( $M=4.68$ ) than non-animalistic descriptions ( $M=4.05$ ),  $t(74)=2.30$ ,  $p=0.024$ . This corresponds to the difference between a 5-6 year sentence and a 7-8 year sentence (see Figure 2). In short, an animalistic description of the crime resulted in a 1-2 year increase in recommended sentence duration.

The findings of Study 1 provided initial support for our predictions. As expected, when a crime was framed as animalistic, participants were more punitive compared to when the crime was non-animalistic. Despite reflecting a mean difference of half a scale point, this increase is not trivial. In the animalistic condition participants recommended on average that the perpetrator spend an extra one to two years in prison, 33% more time than participants in the non-animalistic condition. Importantly, however, Study 1 did not examine the processes through which this effect occurs.

## Study 2

Our previous findings indicate that people recommend longer sentences for perpetrators whose crimes are described in an animalistic manner. However, it is not clear why this is the case. Careful balancing of the materials eliminates seriousness, severity, and the graphic description of the attack as potential explanations.

One effect of animalistic descriptions may be that they portray the perpetrator as especially violent and dangerous. People may view those who commit animalistic crimes as unable to control their drives and emotions, and as more difficult to rehabilitate. Such perpetrators may hence be perceived as having an increased likelihood of recidivism – and it is this increased likelihood of recidivism that we propose may be one of the factors that impact the recommended prison sentence. To examine this possibility, we measured perceived likelihood of recidivism by the perpetrator as a potential mediator for increased sentencing.

## Method

Fifty-nine jury-eligible adults completed this questionnaire voluntarily. The sample was primarily young ( $M^{\text{age}}=20.79$  years,  $SD=3.99$ ) and similar numbers of men ( $n=30$ ) and women ( $n=29$ ) were recruited.

The design was identical to Study 1, with the following alterations. The initial descriptions of the crime were artificially impersonal and did not specify perpetrator gender, a major source of sentencing bias (Mustard, 2001; Steffensmeier, et al., 2006). Therefore, in study 2, the offender was named Eric. All other features of the crime remained identical. In addition to asking about recommended sentence duration, participants were asked to report the likelihood that Eric would reoffend on a nine-point scale (1=definitely will not reoffend; 9= definitely will reoffend). This served to measure the perceived likelihood of recidivism following an animalistic or non-animalistic crime. Participants were approached on campus and asked if they would complete a brief questionnaire about 'being a juror'. After completing the questionnaire they were thanked and debriefed.

### Results and discussion

Participants were randomly assigned to the animalistic ( $n=30$ ) or non-animalistic ( $n=29$ ) crime. To examine whether description influenced recommended sentence duration, an independent samples t-test was used. As predicted and consistent with Study 1, participants assigned significantly longer sentences in the animalistic ( $M=3.97$ ) compared to the non-animalistic ( $M=3.17$ ) condition,  $t(57)=2.56$ ,  $p=0.013$ . To examine whether perceived likelihood of recidivism was similarly influenced, we conducted an independent samples t-test. This revealed that participants viewed the offender as significantly more likely to reoffend in the animalistic ( $M=3.93$ ) compared to the non-animalistic ( $M=3.37$ ) condition,  $t(57)=2.35$ ,  $p=0.022$  (see Figure 3).

To examine whether the perceived likelihood that the perpetrator would engage in another violent act influenced participants to assign longer sentences in the animalistic compared with non-animalistic condition, we conducted a mediation analysis following the protocols developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004). To begin, we coded condition such that positive values indicated an increase under animalistic framings (i.e., Non-animalistic=0, Animalistic=+1). In the first step, we entered condition as a predictor of sentencing, yielding a significant effect,  $\beta=0.321$ ,  $p=0.013$ . Next, we entered condition as a predictor of recidivism, yielding another significant effect,  $\beta=0.297$ ,  $p=0.022$ . Finally, we simultaneously regressed recidivism and condition onto sentencing revealing that recidivism was a significant predictor ( $\beta=0.387$ ,  $p=0.002$ ) whereas condition was now non-significant ( $\beta=-0.206$ ,  $p=0.098$ ). A summary of this model is shown below (Figure 4). Following the recommendations of Preacher and Hayes (2004), we tested this mediation using a bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping model. This mediation proved significant using a bootstrapping of indirect effects as evidenced by a confidence interval that did not include zero (0.03, 0.63). This analysis reveals that the effect of description on sentence duration was significantly mediated by perceived likelihood of recidivism. When the crime was described in animalistic terms participants believed the offender was more likely to act criminally violent in the future, and thus, should receive a longer custodial sentence.

The findings of Study 2 supported the hypothesis that participants who read about a crime depicted in an animalistic manner recommend harsher punishment for the perpetrator because they perceived him as more likely to reoffend. Sentence durations were somewhat lower compared to Study 1. This may be due to the shift from an impersonal to a personalized description of the criminal. Importantly, despite this mean shift in recommended sentence duration, there was a significant difference between animalistic and non-animalistic framings.

## General Discussion

There are many different ways to describe a crime. One type of description involves painting the crime and criminal as animal-like. Previous work has suggested that animalistic descriptions dehumanize the perpetrator and lead to more severe punishment (Farr, 2000; Goff, et al., 2008). In a series of experiments, we established that animalistic descriptions can be developed holding constant how graphic the description is, and crime seriousness and severity. Further, we show that under these controlled conditions animalistic descriptions elicit significantly harsher punishment. In two studies the difference was one to two years of added incarceration. Finally, we have demonstrated that one reason for these increased sentences is a greater perceived risk of future violence. Perpetrators who are described as committing animalistic crimes are viewed as particularly likely to continue to engage in acts of violence, and this makes people recommend longer custodial sentences.

Although the current work suggests that an increase in the perceived risk of recidivism is responsible for longer sentences, it does not examine the reasons why people who commit animalistic crimes are seen as particularly likely to reoffend. One possibility is that the perpetrators of animalistic crimes are seen as inherently, and thus irredeemably, criminal. Animalistic crimes might be seen as requiring a particular type of person who is unable to control him/herself, gives in to their passions and instincts, and lacks the capacity to regulate their behavior (Haslam, 2006). Non-animalistic crimes, by contrast, might be seen as requiring a particular type of situation, one involving provocation or mitigation, in which an otherwise law-abiding citizen might commit a criminal act. When people think that a behavior is inherent or essential to an individual, they tend to believe that the individual is unlikely – or even incapable – of change (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002). Yet another possibility is that the combination of reading about a violent crime and its description using animalistic terms may induce aggressive priming. Situations that induce aggressive priming have been shown to increase the recommended prison sentence for

violent criminals (see Vasquez, Bartsch, Pedersen, & Miller, 2007). The precise mechanisms underlying why people see the perpetrators of animalistic crimes as likely to reoffend awaits future research. The finding that recidivism underlies increased sentencing may help us understand the previously identified relationship between dehumanization and capital punishment (Farr, 2000; Goff, et al., 2008). Capital punishment is the ultimate manner of ensuring that a criminal does not reoffend. If framing a criminal act as animalistic paints the perpetrator as irredeemable, then capital punishment may appear a more fitting sentence for a heinous crime.

These findings also add to a growing body of literature examining the consequences of dehumanization. Previous work has shown that dehumanization is linked to a desire to withdraw from the dehumanized (Vaes, et al., 2006), reduced willingness to offer assistance (Cuddy, et al., 2007), and an indifference to their suffering (Cehajic, et al., 2009; Goff, et al., 2008). The current work shows that dehumanization goes beyond reducing the desire to interact and assist. When criminal acts are described in animalistic ways people want to inflict harsher sentences on the perpetrator. Future work may examine this effect at an intergroup level; if the actions of the out-group are described in animalistic ways, do people favor aggressive intervention?

It is important to note some limitations with the current study. Although we investigated sentencing recommendations, in reality these decisions are made under different circumstances. In many courtrooms sentencing is at the judge's discretion and jurors have no input in sentence recommendation. However, it is worth noting that several U.S. states (i.e., Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia) and nations (e.g., France, Canada) now allow jurors input in non-capital sentencing (King & Noble, 2004). Animalistic descriptions of crimes are likely to be more common in the media than the courtroom, and to have more effect over laypeople than legal experts (but see English, Mussweiler, & Strack,

2006). In addition, the descriptions we employed in the scenarios are probably not typical of the information about crime presented in court, and thus, it is difficult to know for sure how such description are likely to impact real sentencing decisions. However, even if these effects are limited to public perceptions based on media reports, they still have important implications for criminal justice. Media reports influence legal proceedings and most people rely on the media for information about criminal justice (Hans & Dee, 1991; Robbennolt & Studebaker, 2003; Roberts & Doob, 1990). Further, given that animalistic descriptions of crime lead to a greater perceived risk of recidivism and more desire for custodial sentences, people exposed to these descriptions through the media may vote for harsher policies to address crime. Another limitation is that our manipulation might have induced additional perceptions of the perpetrator. For instance, in addition to appearing animalistic, the perpetrator might also appear mentally unstable (although this may be part of appearing to act animal-like). Individuals might attribute the violent behavior to psychological problems. Nevertheless, such effects are still related to perceiving someone as less than fully human, and thus, dehumanize them. Yet another limitation is the fact that our sample consisted of a convenient sample of students, which may limit the generalizability of our findings.

In summary, animalistic descriptions of crime bias recommended sentencing in favor of more aggressive or punitive treatment. Although presumably few people may now believe that criminals are literally more animal-like than non-criminals, animalistic metaphors continue to influence our judgments of criminal acts. Returning to the case of Raoul Moat and the related media coverage, we might wonder what would have happened had he stood trial. The current research suggests that the media's repeated use of animal metaphors to describe his behavior extends beyond linguistic flourish. If jurors thought of Moat as a brute – an animal living in the wild – they may have been more inclined towards a harsher prison

sentence. It appears that animalistic descriptions can bias our sentencing decisions through altering perceived recidivism.

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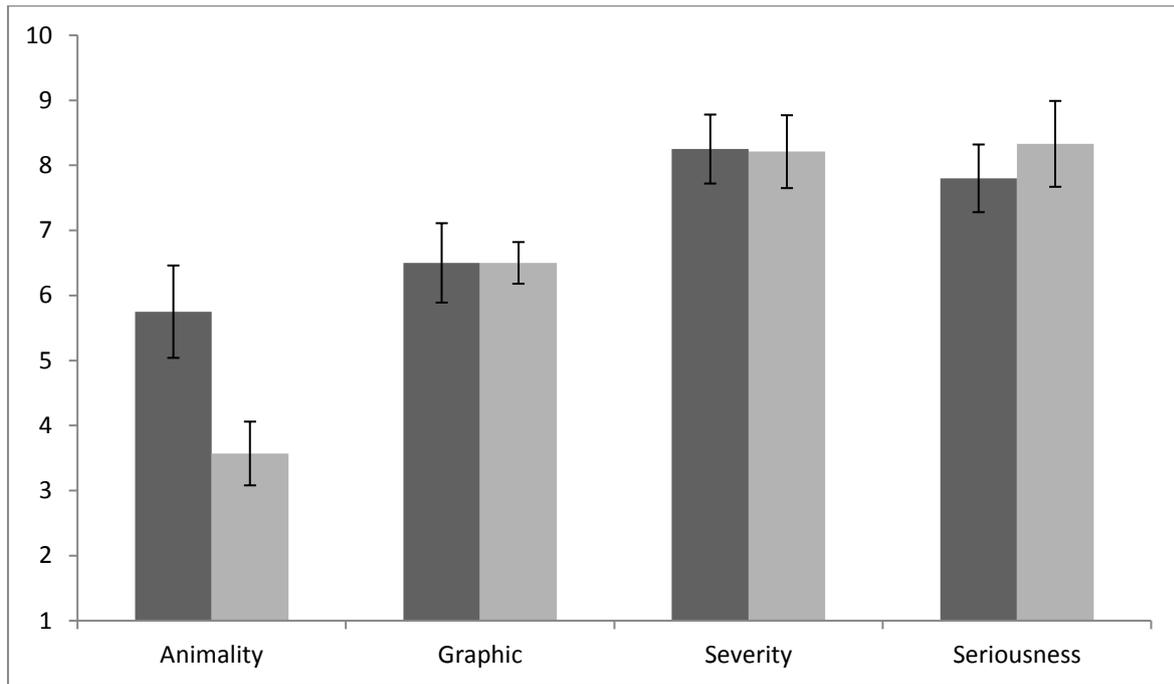
### Figure Captions

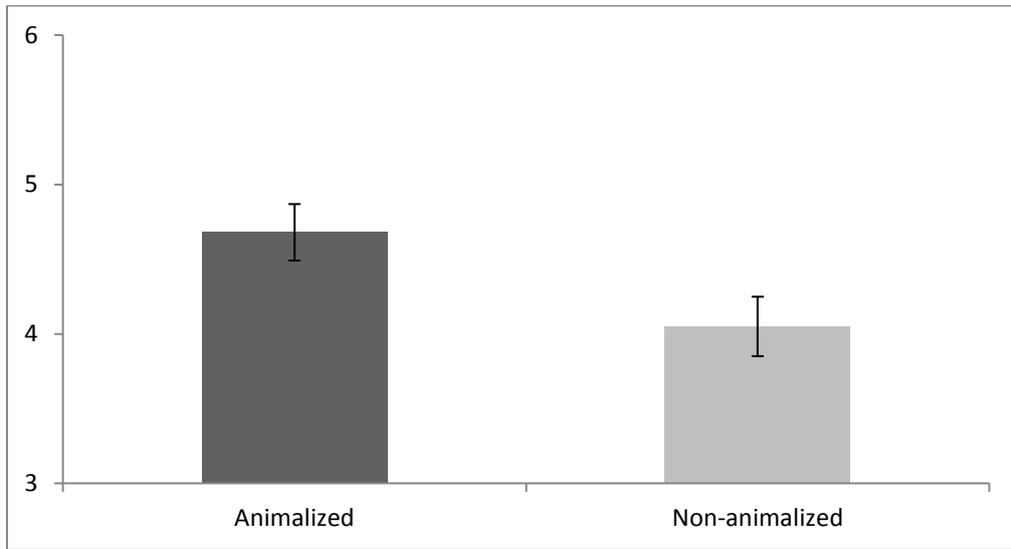
Figure 1: Crime perception as a function of animalistic (dark) and non-animalistic (light) framings.

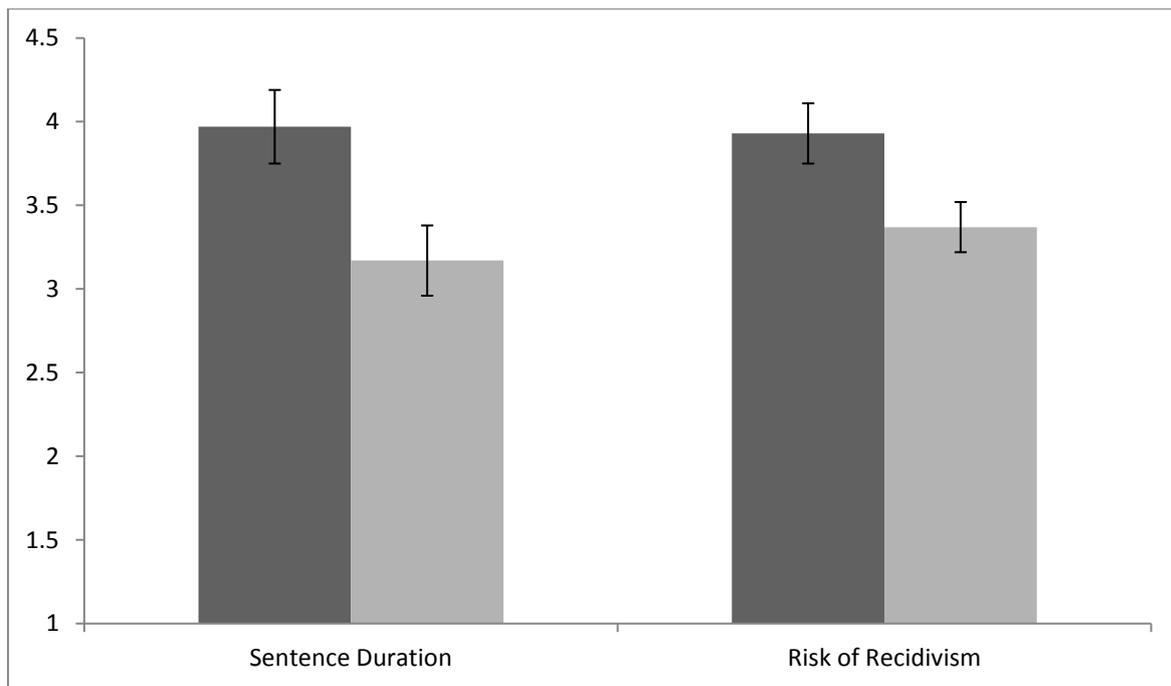
Figure 2: Sentence duration as a function of animalistic or non-animalistic framing.

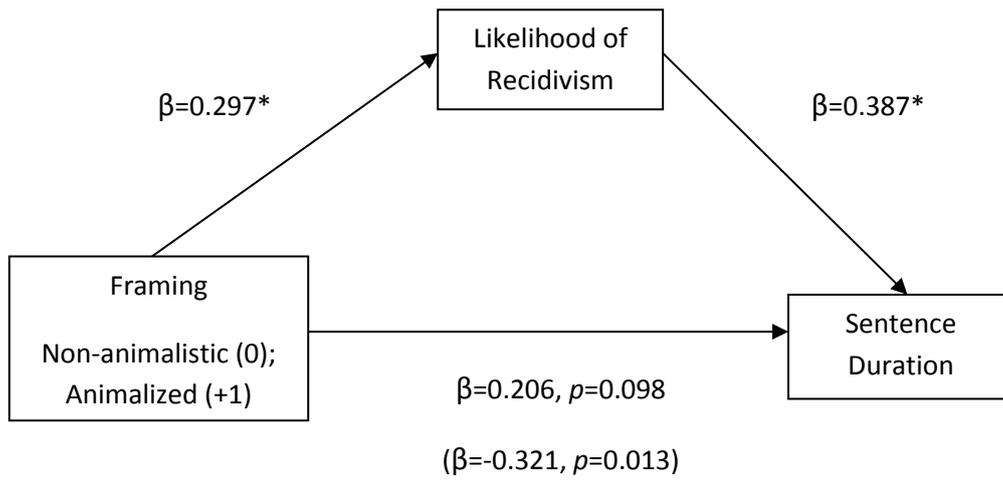
Figure 3: Sentence duration and likelihood of recidivism as a function of animalized (dark bars) and non-animalistic (light bar) framings.

Figure 4: Mediation of the effect of framing on sentence duration via likelihood of recidivism.  $*=p<0.05$









## Appendix

### Animalization Condition:

“At around 9pm, the perpetrator slunk onto the victims premises. He crept into the house via the kitchen door. He confronted the victim in the living room. He roared at the victim before pounding him with his fists. The attack was savage and the victim’s blood splattered on the floor, walls, and ceiling. The perpetrator dashed away from the premises via the kitchen door.”

### Non-animalistic Condition

“At around 9pm, the perpetrator stole onto the victims premises. He crept into the house via the kitchen door. He confronted the victim in the living room. He shouted at the victim before punching them with his fists. The attack was sustained and the victim’s blood painted the floor, walls, and ceiling. The perpetrator ran away from the premises via the kitchen door.”