The Psychological Stress of Rendering a Verdict: Detriments to Mental Health

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Layperson Summary

Jury simulations have been highly studied. Jury simulations look to imitate the process that occurs when people participate as jurors in a trial. Typically, these studies look to measure the factors that influence the decisions and perceptions of juries. Stress has also been studied in-depth. Typically, stress studies look at measures of stress, factors that may induce stress, and the responses to stress. However, few studies look at the combination of these topics. Jury trials often include testimony or evidence that may induce stress responses. It is important to examine the effects that a trial can have on an individual juror to ensure that jurors get any necessary treatment at its conclusion. The goal of this study is to identify stress levels directly after a jury simulation and compare them to other stress levels throughout a semester. Comparing stress levels will allow me to see if there are any direct effects on the stress levels of jury participants caused by the simulation.

Only one relevant study has been done that looks at the impacts of stress in jury members. Kaplan and Winget (1992) interviewed jurors in different criminal trials that included murder, sexual abuse, and pornography. They found that jurors exhibited signs of stress that lead to physical and mental illness. However, their focus on graphic cases ignores those that are less severe in nature. It is just as important to look at stress levels of juries that participate in these types of cases. This study will look at a less severe case that involves a student accused of plagiarism, which has been done in previous jury simulation research (Kaplan & Krupa, 1986).
In this study, students in undergraduate psychology classes will be divided into two conditions, based off of a previous methodological design by Kaplan and Krupa (1986). One group of juries (the “real” condition) will believe that they are making a real decision that will directly impact another individual. The other group of juries (the “hypothetical” condition) will believe that they are making a hypothetical decision. Participants will be asked to examine a booklet of evidence, render a verdict, and suggest the punishment for the accused based off of a list of available punishments if they find the student “guilty.” Participants’ stress levels will be measured at five different times throughout the semester using a stress subscale from the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) and additional questions will be asked regarding recent stress experiences.

Participants should have the highest stress levels of the semester directly after the jury simulation. Participants in the “real” condition should have higher stress levels than those in the “hypothetical” condition following the jury simulation. There should be more guilty verdicts for the “real” condition, as was found in Kaplan and Krupa (1986). Punishments should also be more severe in the “real” condition. Increased levels of stress will warrant attention to the instructions and treatments offered to juries at the end of trials.
References

