Understanding Jurors’ Judgments In Cases Involving Juvenile Defendants: Effects of Confession Evidence and Intellectual Disability

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Purpose of Study

• Based on previous confirmed studies, researchers believe that cases where juvenile’s have falsely confessed to crimes they did not commit suggests: Juveniles are at heightened risk for falsely confessing to crimes they did not commit, particularly if they are intellectually disabled.
Patronizing Effect

• People tend to attribute behavior less to internal than external factors and attribute less responsibility for disabled compared to nondisabled individuals, presumably because they believe that disabled individuals are incompetent and have little control over their lives.

• Thus jurors might be more likely to believe that a juvenile’s confession was coerced when he or she is disabled rather than nondisabled.
Hypothesis

• Tested whether the effects of confession evidence on jurors’ judgments would be moderated by a juvenile defendant’s disability status.

• There is good reason to study jurors’ perceptions of disabled juveniles in their own right.
Hypothesis (Continued)

• Sought to test the effects of confession evidence and disability status on mock jurors’ judgments for a juvenile defendant and to identify the psychological mechanisms that would explain the effects.

• 3 (confession evidence: no confession, coerced confession, voluntary confession) X 2 (juvenile defendant disability: intellectually disabled, nondisabled) between-subjects experimental design.
Method

• Participants: 270 jury-eligible undergraduate psychology students (36% men) who participated in exchange for course credit.

• Sample: All US citizens, young (M=19, SD=2, ranging from 18 to 29 years old), and all ethnically diverse (46% Caucasian, 28% Asian, 15% Hispanic, 7% African American, and 4% of other backgrounds).

• 25 participants dropped: 4 failed manipulation check, 16 missed confession manipulation check, and 5 failed disability status manipulation check.
Method (Continued)

• Materials:
• Trial Stimuli: Written and video materials were based on an actual criminal court trial involving a 16-year-old Caucasian girl accused of murdering her father.
• Video Clips: Two video clips used, original and manipulated.
• Written Case Summary: Six versions of written case summary also used to accommodate the manipulation of confession evidence and disability status.
Method (Continued)

• Jury Instructions: All jurors received exact same instructions that Illinois jurors receive in first-degree murder cases.

• Measures:

• Demographic Questionnaire: Mock jurors asked to provide age, citizenship status, gender, and ethnicity

• Verdict And Suspicion Judgments: Jurors asked what is your verdict (guilty or not guilty)
Method (Continued)

• Trial Venue And Sentencing Recommendations: Should suspect have been trialed in juvenile court or adult court.
• Mediating Constructs: 6-Point Likert Scale -3 strongly disagree to +3 strongly agree with no midpoint.
• Confession-related judgments: Perceived suggestibility scale
• Affective Reactions, Attributions And Perceived Responsibility For The Crime, And Sentencing: 3 item sympathy scale
Method (Continued)

• Manipulation Checks: Asked questions to make sure jurors were paying attention, such as suspects age

• Perceived Variable Measures: Included measures of what jurors actually believed about the manipulation variable (Why did suspect confess to crime)
Method (Continue)

• Procedure: In exchange for course credit, students participated in study alone or in mixed-gender groups of 2-10.

• Randomly assigned to experimental condition, with exception equal number of men and women in each condition.

• Provided consent.

• Introduced to juvenile defendant and watched video clips.

• Participants read copy of Illinois pattern jury instructions and completed the measures.
Results

• Used Log-Linear and Chi Square Analyses to examine effects of confession evidence and disability status on dichotomous judgments.
• Jurors more likely to convict juvenile when confessed voluntarily, no significant for juvenile who was coerced to confess and a juvenile who never admitted any criminal involvement, however jurors likely to think juvenile guilty when convinced under coercion or voluntarily. When presented with disability recommended juvenile less likely to be trialed as an adult, disability status did not affect suspicion of guilt, no significant evidence that disability status influenced jurors verdicts.
• Significant jurors thought juvenile more suggestible when confessed under coercion than when confessed voluntarily. Disabled juvenile significantly more suggestible.
• Confessions did not significantly affect jurors sympathy regarding responsibility of the crime. Jurors more sympathetic, less angry at disabled juvenile.
• Future Study Question: Would results have differed if suspect was a disabled adult?