The Effects of Victim Impact Statements on Juror Verdict
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ABSTRACT
Victim impact statements are used in courts during the penalty phase of a trial. The current study examined the effects of victim impact statements on verdict decisions and sympathy reactions among mock jurors. Results indicate that victim impact statements favoring the death penalty were significantly more likely to influence the jurors to rule in favor of the death penalty. Victim impact statement also increased reactions of unhappiness and vengeance toward the defendant.

METHOD
Participants: 75 (22 male, 53 female) undergraduate students at Mansfield University.

Procedure: After completing an informed consent, all participants listened to a summary of an actual murder case which involved the shooting of an off duty police officer. After hearing the case, participants in the pro-death group (N = 25) listened to a researcher-developed letter from the point of view of the murder victim’s sister, which advocated for the death penalty. Participants in the anti-death group (N = 28) listened to a similar letter from the murder victim’s sister which advocated for the defendant. Participants in the control group (N= 22) did not hear a letter. After listening to the case, all participants recommended a sentence, which ranged from an immediate acquittal to giving the death penalty. Next, participants completed a questionnaire which assessed their overall feelings about the event (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger, confusion) and their attitudes towards the defendant (e.g., vengeance). Participants then were debriefed.

RESULTS
Hypothesis 1 was supported. The experimental group that heard the pro-death penalty VIS was more likely to advocate for the death penalty than were the other two groups of participants, $X^2 (8, N = 75) = 16.46, p<0.05$.

Hypothesis 2 was supported. Participants who reported feeling unhappy after hearing the narrative recommended an extremely harsh penalty, $r(75) = .201, p<.05$. Therefore, low levels of happiness scale predicted a high scores on the sentencing scale.

Participants who reported high levels of vengeance recommended an extremely harsh penalty as well, $r(75) = .585, p<.01$. A high vengeance score predicted an extremely harsh punishment recommendation.

METHODOLOGY
Participants:

Condition: Released

Up to 25 Years

Life w Parole

Life No Parole

Death Penalty

Control

Pro Death VIS

Anti Death VIS

Table 1: Mock Juror Verdicts by Experimental Condition

DISCUSSION
These findings indicate that VISs are relevant and meaningful in a court setting and can have a significant effect on juror decisions. Specifically, the findings reveal that when the victim’s family member advocated for the death penalty, the jurors were significantly more likely to rule for the death penalty. Furthermore, mood also predicted severity of punishment; when participants were unhappy or vengeful sentencing was harsh.

Implications of the study include whether or not VISs should be admissible in court because they strongly influence juror decisions. Because of this, defendants who do not have a family provide a VIS might be treated more unfairly than an defendant whose family does provide a VIS. These statements might create an atmosphere of vengeance and negativity that clouds the judgement of the juror.

In addition, in regards to the findings in relation to mood, the jurors’ moods can affect their rulings. Jurors should be cautioned not to allow personal feelings to bias their judgments on appropriate sentencing decisions. VISs can create feelings of increased negativity and hostility toward a defendant, potentially causing an increase in severity of punishment ratings that would not normally be seen in the absence of a VIS.