Individual Perception on Crime Severity among College Students

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INTRODUCTION

Studies investigating jurors and the length of sentence they render a person convicted for a crime tend to focus on factors affecting how they perceive the crime and its past experiences of that crime (Findlay, 2001; Marcus, Lyons & Gyetvan, 2000). A factor that is rarely looked into, is what an individual studies while in college and the type of educational degree they receive. This is an important factor when looking into perceptions of crime seriousness because even though students attend college to receive an education, unless they are specializing in the criminal justice field, they would not be formally educated in the laws of society nor know the degree of severity of particular crimes. In addition, a student would not share the same attitudes as another student who has received formal training in the criminal justice field (Wimhurst, Marchetti & Allard, 2004).

Even though previous studies have not investigated college major as a main factor of crime perception, studies have investigated victimization. As a result, they have indicated that there are 3 types of victimization; felony victims, misdemeanor victims and non-victims (Smith & Torstensson, 1997; Winkel, 1998). Felony victims are classified as people who were a victim of a felony crime. Felony offenses are crimes which are punishable by death and/or imprisonment in a state prison (West, 2004). In addition, felony crimes are considered the most severe type of crime in western society. Misdemeanor victims are classified as people who were a victim of a misdemeanor crime. Misdemeanor crimes are all crimes other than a felony crime and include offenses which are punishable by death or imprisonment in a state prison. Non-victims agreed to participate in the experiment they signed the researcher's consent form.

Instruments

The participants in this experimental study were forty-eight undergraduates that were psychology majors (n=28) and criminology majors (n=20) at the University of La Verne. Of the 48 participants, 14.6% classified themselves as victims of felony crimes, 12.5% as victims of misdemeanor crimes, 72.9% as non-victims. Participants included psychology majors (n=28) and criminology majors (n=20) at the University of La Verne. Of the 48 participants, 14.6% classified themselves as victims of felony crimes, 12.5% as victims of misdemeanor crimes, 72.9% as non-victims. Felony victims were classified as people who were a victim of a felony crime. Felony offenses are crimes which are punishable by death and/or imprisonment in a state prison (West, 2004). Felony crimes are considered the most severe type of crime in western society. Misdemeanor victims are classified as people who were a victim of a misdemeanor crime. Misdemeanor crimes are all crimes other than a felony crime and include offenses which are punishable by death or imprisonment in a state prison. Non-victims agreed to participate in the experiment they signed the researcher's consent form.

PROCEDURE

Participants signed up for various times to participate in the experiment which was held at the University of La Verne’s psychology lab. At the psychology lab, participants were given a consent form and the researcher explained what the consent form consisted of and how to find out the results of the experiment. Once the participants agreed to participate in the experiment they were given a packet which contained a 6-item demographic questionnaire and 3 vignettes in randomized order describing a different crime taking place. The crimes that were described in the vignettes were sexual assault, battery, and theft.

RESULTS

A repeated measures 3-way ANOVA (2 X 2 X 3) was used to test the four hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis tested that criminology students will give more serious punishment (longer sentence) for various crimes than psychology students. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between criminology majors (M=17.75, SD= 5.95) and psychology majors (M= 26.07, SD=6.49) on length of punishment given, contrary to what was hypothesized F(2,82)=14 p=0.5, n²=87.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis tested that the victim type would affect sentence length given to crimes. Results indicated no significant differences among victim types on length of punishment given, contrary to what was hypothesized F(4,82)=1.55 p=0.20, n²=20. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis tested if there was an interaction among college type, victim type and type of crime. Specifically it was expected that criminology students who were felony victims would perceive the sexual assault vignette as the most severe crime, when compared to other groups. Results, however, indicated that there were no interaction effects of college major, type of victim, and type of crime on length of punishment and, therefore, this did not support the hypothesis F(4,82)=17 p=0.5, n²=95.

CONCLUSION

• The perpetrator in the sexual assault vignette was given a longer punishment than perpetrators in either battery or petty theft vignettes.

• There were no differences in crime perceptions among college majors or victim types.

Despite the significant finding of crime type on crime perception, this study could be limited in that there was a lack of information regarding if participants were previously convicted of a crime. It is important because if a participant was previously convicted of a crime then their outlook on crime seriousness would be different from someone who has never been convicted of a crime. For example, if a person was convicted for driving under the influence of a controlled substance (DUI) they would not perceive this crime as serious as someone who has never been convicted of a DUI. Another limitation of this study was that there was a small sample size of participants. Gender comparisons were not examined either. Perhaps if the sample size was larger and gender comparisons were examined the study may have yielded different results.

Future research may wish to incorporate gender as a factor to see how males and female perceive crime as well as if there are any differences between the two groups. Furthermore, if we are able to examine how people who were previously convicted of a crime would perceive crime serious, this could have an impact on juror selection. This would be interesting to examine because prosecutors might possibly try and get non-convicted people on a jury and the defense might try and get convicted people on the jury. Future researchers may wish to examine those factors pertaining to perceptions of crime seriousness.