The Modification of Jury Instructions To Improve Juror Verdicts and Confession Recognitions in a Criminal Trial

Pasala, Meghan (School: Spring Valley High School)

False confessions are a leading cause of wrongful convictions in the American legal system. Jury instructions have been identified as an effective judicial safeguard in an effort to prevent wrongful convictions and allow jurors to better comprehend confession evidence in the courtroom. The purpose of this study was to determine whether the modification of standard jury instructions would have an effect on juror verdicts, confession identifications, and overall juror decision-making. It was hypothesized that participants given modified jury instructions would have the highest correct verdict determinations and confession recognitions with both the coerced and voluntary trial transcripts. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, and they were randomly assigned into an experimental group. Participants read a trial transcript and completed a questionnaire. The use of modified instructions displayed a statistically significant effect on both verdict determinations and confession identifications. The interaction effects between modified instructions and the coerced confession transcript were also shown to be statistically significant. The results demonstrated that participants who were given modified jury instructions had the highest percentages of correct verdict determinations and confession recognitions compared to participants who were given standard instructions or no instructions. Participants given modified instructions were also more aware of factors such as interrogation coercion. Further research should be conducted to maximize the potential of jury instructions and other safeguards in a criminal trial.

Awards Won:
American Psychological Association: Third Award of $500