Word Crimes: A Study on Bias, Justice, and Compassion

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The purpose for this experiment was to determine if providing more information to a subject about a imaginary character that committed a crime will cause that subject to respond more compassionately towards that character. The hypothesis is that if subjects are given more information about a character, they will respond more compassionately to questions such as, “Should this person go to jail?” In this matched-pair experiment, subjects were given a survey with three scenarios. Each scenario was simple, compound, or complex. The subjects were then asked five questions about each scenario. A quantitative score was calculated based on how compassionately a subject responded to each question. The scores for the simple, compound, and complex treatments were then analyzed. Additionally, a compassion mean was calculated, which was the mean compassion score for each subject’s responses to the three scenarios. This was used to analyze the demographics, questions included on the last page of the survey. For this sample, providing more information about a character that had committed a crime increased compassionate responses towards that character. Strongly religious subjects seemed to be less compassionate than other levels of religiosity, and females seemed to be less compassionate than males. Subjects with self-reported household incomes of $30,000 or less seemed to have higher compassion scores, and people who admitted to having committed a crime seemed more compassionate than people who had not committed a crime.

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