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MENTAL ILLNESS AND CRIME CONGRUENCY EFFECTS



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Rationale for the Current Study

Mental illness is a common experience among Canadians, affecting approximately 1 in 5 individuals in their lifetime (Smetanin et al., 2011). The rate of prisoners with mental illness is three times greater than the rate of mental illness in the general population, highlighting the over-representation of the mentally ill in the criminal justice system (Fazel & Danesh, 2002).

Particular biases influence jurors' perceptions of a case and verdict decisions; for example, racial biases may interfere with jurors' ability to make unbiased decisions (Devine et al., 2001). Sunnafrank and Fontes (1983) found that certain races are associated with particular crimes, and that jurors return harsher judgments for individuals accused of a crime that is perceived to match behaviours of their race than a crime that is perceived to be incongruent with behaviours associated with their race, creating a race-crime congruency effect. Adshead (1998) further argued that we seek explanation for inexplicable acts; he found that mental illness provides us with such an explanation, but also results in character derogation and potential misrepresentation of this population.

While there is much research investigating the influence of racial bias on jurors' abilities to make unbiased decisions, minimal research has been conducted concerning the existence of juror bias toward defendants with a history of mental illness, and how this bias may influence how these defendants are treated within the criminal justice system.

Research Questions

1. Are crime congruency effects specific to race, or do they extend to legal judgments of those with a history of mental illness?
1. Does a defendant's history of mental illness interact with the type of crime alleged to have been committed to predict jurors' perceptions of the case and legal judgments? Specifically, is a defendant with a history of mental illness charged with an irrational (random, violent) crime judged more harshly than a defendant without a history of mental illness charged with the same crime?
2. Does participants' previous exposure to or attitudes about those with a history of mental illness influence their perceptions of the case and legal judgments?

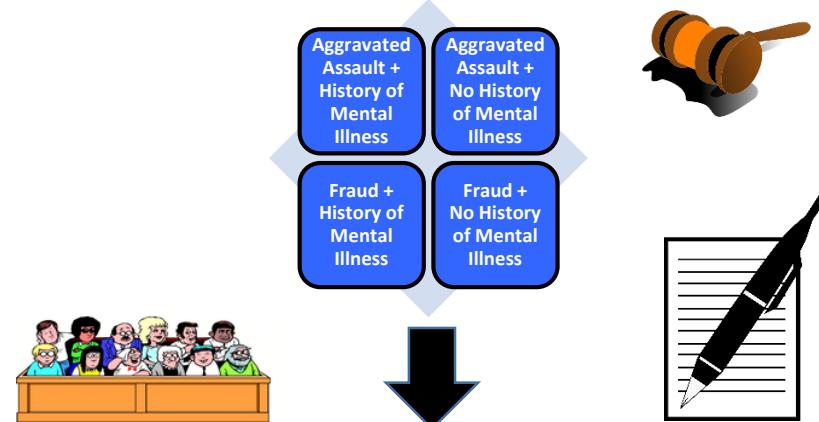
Questions can be directed to Sarah Sheedy at sksheedy@ucalgary.ca

Design

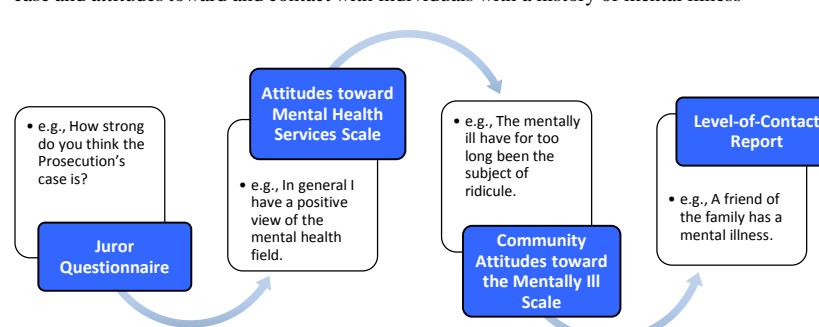
2 (Crime: Aggravated Assault vs. Fraud over \$5,000) x 2 (Defendant Mental Illness: Yes vs. No) between-subjects design

Procedure

Part 1: Participants read one of four fictional trial transcripts in which the two independent variables were varied as follows:



Part 2: Participants were asked to complete four questionnaires regarding their judgments of the case and attitudes toward and contact with individuals with a history of mental illness



Results

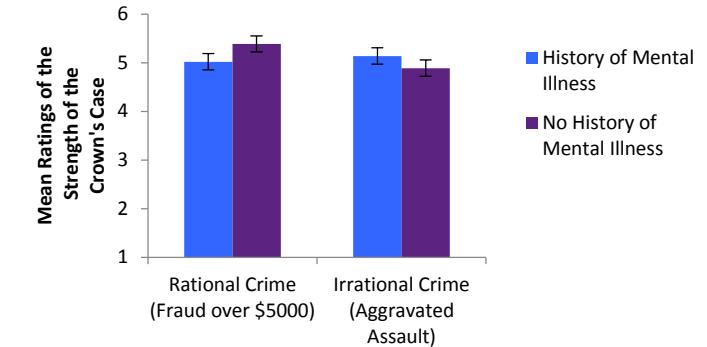


Figure 1. Mean ratings of the strength of the Crown's case. Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

As can be seen in Figure 1, a marginally significant interaction ($p = .068$) between Crime and Mental Illness was found. Participants judged the Crown's case to be stronger against a defendant charged with fraud when he did not have a history of mental illness, and to be stronger against a defendant charged with aggravated assault when he did have a history of mental illness relative to when he did not have a history of mental illness.

Prior exposure to individuals with a history of mental illness did *not* influence legal judgments.

Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that jurors may stereotype individuals with mental illness, indicating that the race-crime congruency effect extends to mental illness-crime congruency. This study poses implications for the real-world in that juror biases toward those with a history of mental illness may interfere with jurors' ability to make impartial decisions.

Main limitations of the study:

1. Only psychology undergraduate students from the University of Calgary were included
2. This study did not examine real-world jury members

Directions for future research:

To recruit a greater number of participants from a variety of backgrounds to see whether these effects remain stable