



The Effects of Mental Illness Attitudes and Political Ideology on Juror Decisions

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Introduction

The present study examines how jurors' views towards the mentally ill and political affiliation may influence verdict decisions, sentencing, and culpability. It was hypothesized that those participants who held more conservative views and who had negative perceptions of the mentally ill would be more punitive on verdict, sentencing, and find the defendant more culpable.

Corrigan and O'Shaughnessy (2007) note how mentally ill persons are often stigmatized, stereotyped, and discriminated against. Lund and Boggero (2014) hypothesized that these biases and behaviors may be evolutionarily linked. Moreover, Espinoza, Willis-Esqueda, Toscano, Coons (2014) and many others have identified the negative behavioral effects of bias as it relates to the court system. The present study investigates how biases against mental illness are reflected in the court system.

Although prejudice has declined over time, however, subtle forms, such as aversive racism, still exists to this day (Dovidio, 2001). The theory of aversive racism served as the theoretical framework for this research. We hypothesize that mock jurors will not be affected simply by race alone, but decisions will be more punitive as more variables come into context.

Main Hypothesis

- Those mock jurors with conservative views who also held negative views of the mentally ill will be more punitive compared with all other conditions on verdicts, sentences, and culpability measures.

Method

Participants

Three-hundred and twenty participants (197 Female, 123 Male) with a mean age of 19.16, std. 1.41 acted as mock jurors and read through a trial transcript. Racial/ethnic breakdown was 37% Latino, 25% European-American, 19% Asian, 5.5% African-American, 1% Native American, and 12.5% Other.

Materials and Procedure

After giving consent, mock juror participants read a trial transcript in which a defendant diagnosed with schizophrenia was accused of committing murder. The court document described the events that had taken place, the description of the crime (murder), and the charges against the defendant. In the description of the defendant a history of mental illness, schizophrenia, was diagnosed and intermittently treated throughout the adult years of the defendant. Following closing arguments, a juror instruction page stipulated that in order to find the defendant guilty it must be shown that the defendant purposely and willfully killed the victim, the defendant was acting on his own accord, the defendant did not suffer from a defect of reason, and the defendant knew the nature and quality of the act he/she was doing and as a result, understood that what he/she was doing was wrong. These stipulations are juror instructions based on the M'Naghten Rule and used in the State of California where the crime has ostensibly taken place. Participants then completed a juror verdict form where they had three verdict options: not guilty, not guilty by reason of insanity, or guilty. If jurors found the defendant GUILTY they were instructed to recommend one of three sentencing choices of a) Life in prison with the possibility of parole after 20 years and time for good behavior; b) Life in prison without the possibility of parole after thirty years; c) Life in prison without the possibility of parole. In addition, mock jurors answered culpability and trait questions. Following the trial portion of the study, participants filled out a survey of various scales. Among these scales was the Community Attitudes Toward the Mentally Ill scale (CATMI: Taylor & Dear, 1981). Finally participants answered various demographic questions including political affiliation. We chose only those participants who described him or herself as republican, democrat, or independent. For our analyses we conducted a median split on the CATMI subscales and conducted analyses using a 3 (political affiliation: republican, democrat or independent) X 2 (high and low scores on the views toward mentally ill) between groups design.

Table 1

Verdict political affiliation MI subscale 2

	Not Guilty	NGBRI	Guilty	Total
Republican - MI Low	0	17	27	44
Republican - MI High	0	15	22	37
Democrat - MI Low	2	63	38	103
Democrat - MI High	0	31	31	62
Independent - MI Low	1	26	10	37
Independent - MI High	1	12	24	37
Total	4	164	152	320

$\chi^2(10) = 23.817, p < .05$

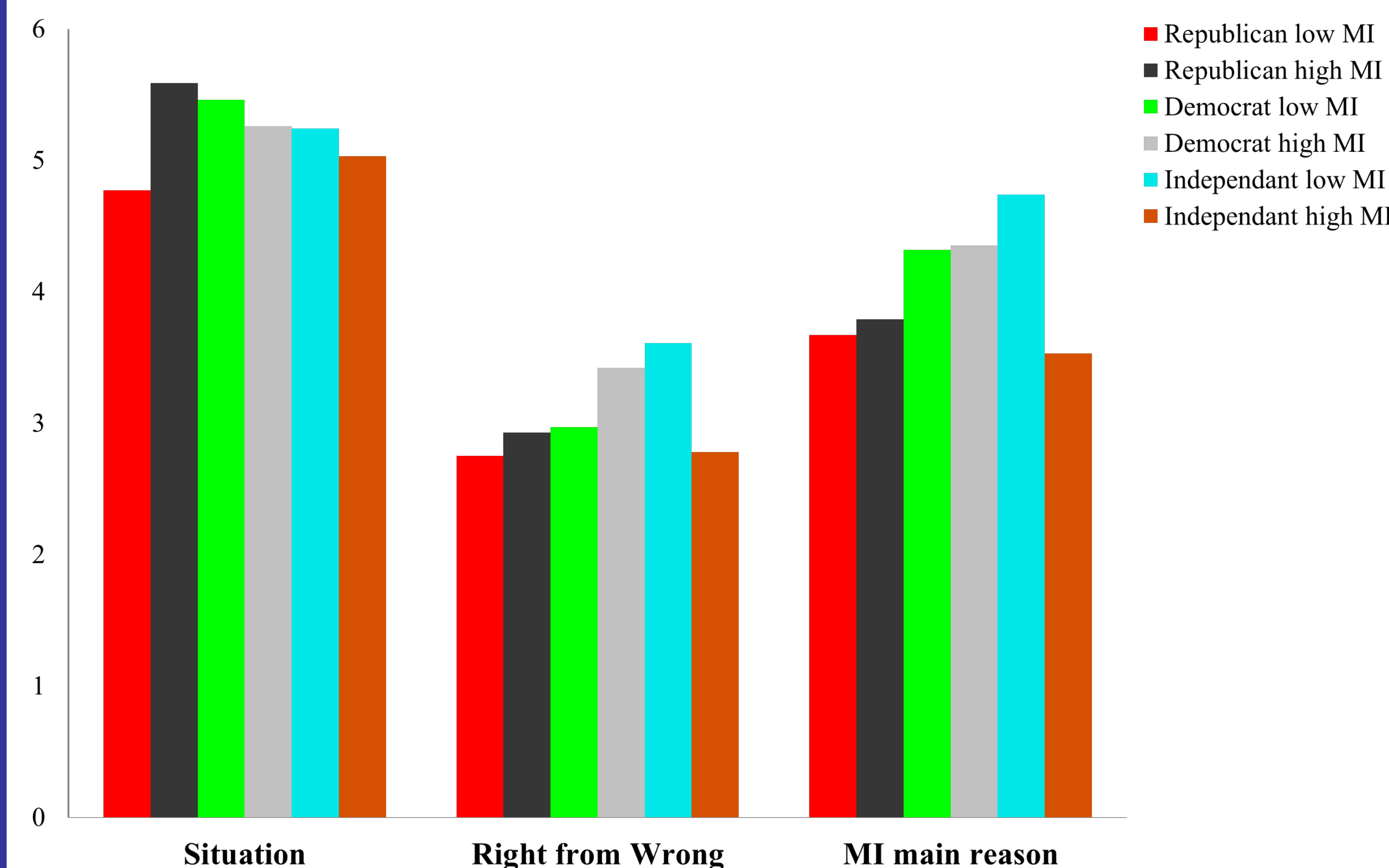


Figure 1. Political Affiliation interacting with authoritarian subscale on culpability

Results

Verdict

In support of our research hypothesis, data revealed a significant pattern of relationship between political affiliation and the benevolence subscale of perceptions of mental illness, $\chi^2(10) = 23.817, p < .05$ (see Table 1). Post hoc tests were performed to identify individual differences. We found that republicans with high and low benevolent scores were both significantly harsher than independent with low benevolent scores on verdict [$\chi^2(3) = 10.165, p < .05; \chi^2(3) = 8.45, p < .05$; respectively]. With republicans compared to Democrats, results showed that republicans with low benevolent scores were significantly harsher than the democrats with low benevolent scores, $\chi^2(3) = 7.904, p < .05$. Additionally, when looking at independents with low benevolent scores were significantly harsher than Independents with high scores $\chi^2(3) = 10.922, p < .05$. Contrary to our hypothesis, none of the other subscales demonstrated a significant pattern of relationship.

Sentence

Contrary to our hypothesis, no significant differences were found for sentencing based on political affiliation and views towards the mentally ill.

Culpability

A MANOVA was conducted in order to test if the effects of political affiliation and perceptions of the mentally ill effect jurors perceptions of defendants' culpability. Data revealed a main effect for political affiliation for blame defendant should receive [$F(2, 296) = 3.46, p < .05$], mental illness was the main reason for the crime [$F(2, 296) = 3.397, p < .05$], and mental illness impacted jurors decision [$F(2, 296) = 3.102, p < .05$]. Post hoc analyses revealed that republicans were significantly more harsh in the amount of blame defendants should receive.

Additionally, there was a significant interaction between political affiliation and the authoritarian subscale when considering all measures. As hypothesized, a significant two-way interaction between political affiliation and perceptions of the mentally ill on culpability was found, $F(19, 297) = 1.789, p < .05, h^2 = .103$. Follow-up univariate analyses demonstrated significant effects for "How much did the situation influence the defendant's behavior?" $F(2, 314) = 3.403, p < .05, h^2 = .021$, "Do you believe the defendant was mentally ill, and therefore did not know right from wrong?" $F(2, 314) = 3.877, p < .05, h^2 = .024$, "Do you believe the defendant's mental illness is the main reason for the murder?" $F(2, 314) = 6.951, p < .05, h^2 = .042$ (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Overall, data tended to support our hypotheses. republicans, regardless of Mental Illness Scale scores voted guilty significantly more often than democrats. This supports our hypothesis that republicans are more punitive regardless of defendant mental illness. However, Independents who were high on benevolence also were more punitive with regard to verdict. This was not expected. One possible explanation may be that the independents in this sample may have actually been more similar to republicans with regards to views of mentally ill defendants and the legal system in general.

Additionally, data revealed a significant interaction between political affiliation and the authoritarian subscale of the CATMI for the culpability measures. Data support our hypotheses that political affiliation and views toward the mentally ill contribute to juror decisions. Political affiliation and perceptions of the mentally ill were shown to contribute to defendant culpability. Those participants who were republican and independent and who held more negative views toward the mentally ill found defendants more culpable on the situation influencing defendant behavior, they felt the defendant did not know right from wrong, and they felt mental illness contributed to the defendant's actions less than all other conditions. Future studies should investigate other interactions between these variables to understand these relationships.