

ABSTRACT

A Social Psychological Study of Race, Evidential
Ambiguity and Jury Decision Making

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In studying the influence of the race composition of the jury and levels of ambiguity on jurors' decisions 720 potential jurors were randomly selected from a jury list and further randomly assigned to either an Afro-dominated jury (8 Afro-jurors and 4 Indo-jurors) or an Indo-dominated jury (8 Indo-jurors and 4 Afro-jurors). These juries were exposed to either of two video recordings of a criminal trial involving an Afro-Trinidad person accused of murder. One video recording exposed jurors to a low level of evidential ambiguity while the other exposed jurors to a high level of evidential ambiguity.

A questionnaire was administered to jurors to assess their perceptions of prosecution and defense cases, credibility of witnesses, impression formation, perception of the accused attractiveness, informational influence, pre-deliberation decision, juror biasness, level of authoritarianism, in determining final verdict. The juries' deliberations were video taped and content analyzed. The major findings showed that jurors in Indo-dominated juries exposed to high evidential ambiguity were more convict-prone, ($\chi^2=86.54$, $df=3$, $p<.01$), more likely to make reference to negative case facts (i.e. anti-accused) ($F=4.62$, $df=2$, 701 , $p<.01$) and less likely to mention positive case facts (i.e.

pro-accused) ($F=37.70$, $df=2$, 698 , $p<.01$), give lower ratings of the attractiveness of the accused ($F=7.03$, $df=2$, 656 , $p<.01$), and first impressions of the accused ($F=3.11$, $df=2$, $p<.05$) than jurors in Afro-dominated juries exposed to the same level of ambiguity. Regression models for the composition of the jury ($R^2= .037$, $F=27.41$, $p<.001$), levels of ambiguity ($R^2= .040$, $F=29.72$, $p<.001$) and the interaction of ambiguity and levels of evidential ambiguity ($R^2= .203$, $F=60.80$, $p<.001$) were found to be significant. Findings suggest that jurors' predeliberation verdicts were more likely to be their final verdicts and the judges' instruction was indicated by jurors, exposed to high evidential ambiguity, as the most important influence on verdict. Results are interpreted in terms of race attitudes and social categorization and the implications for a fair trial.

I am grateful to Mr. Rolston Nelson and East West Travels for their kind assistance. Last, I wish to thank all those persons who participated in the research project.