Study Name: Statistical vs. Moral Arguments Against the Death Penalty
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Exploratory or Confirmatory: Exploratory

Procedure

We are examining which types of arguments—statistical versus moral—are more successful in reducing individuals' positive beliefs towards capital punishment. In order to investigate this, we have developed both statistical and moral-based arguments against capital punishment that address three common beliefs that people have for supporting capital punishment. These three beliefs are that society has a right to get revenge on murderers (retribution), the death penalty deters criminals from committing murder (deterrence), and that the death penalty is cheaper than life-imprisonment (cost).

Participants will be randomly assigned to the statistical or moral intervention. They will receive *either* three statistical arguments or three moral arguments that respond to these beliefs, so we will be using a between-subjects design for this study.

Before participants receive either intervention, they will be asked to rate how much they agree with three pre-intervention statements (one for each commonly-held belief about capital punishment). After this, participants receive either the statistical or moral intervention. Once the participants have read through these arguments, they will be asked to respond to our post-intervention measure. This includes 13 statements obtained from the Death Penalty Attitudes Questionnaire, which was designed to assess a person's support of capital punishment (O'Neil, Patry, & Penrod, 2004). This questionnaire includes specific subsets that contain statements pertaining to each of the three commonly-held beliefs about capital punishment, and general statements about capital punishment. All of the statements and arguments will be presented in a random order. Finally, participants will answer some general demographic questions.

The complete interventions and pre and post-intervention measures can be found in the next sections of this document.

Pre-Intervention Measure

Participants will indicate how much they agree or disagree with the following three statements on a seven-point Likert scale:
1. Society has a right to get revenge when murder has been committed.
2. The death penalty makes criminals think twice before committing murder.
3. We should execute murderers because it is less expensive than keeping them in prison for the rest of their lives.

Statistical Intervention Arguments

Participants will read three statistically-based arguments that each pertain to one of the three arguments for capital punishment.

Retribution Argument:

> Many people believe society has a right to get revenge when murder has been committed. However, recent studies have found that the death penalty produces negative effects on families and friends of murder victims (referred to as "co-victims"). One study found that just 2.5% of co-victims reported achieving closure as a result of capital punishment, while 20.1% said the execution did not help them heal. Another study reported that co-victims had improved physical and psychological health and greater satisfaction with the legal system in cases where perpetrators received life sentences, rather than death sentences.

Deterrence Argument:

> Many people believe the death penalty makes criminals think twice before committing murder. However, according to a survey of the former and present presidents of the country's top academic criminological societies, 88% of these experts rejected the notion that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to murder. These experts concluded that studies claiming that the death penalty has a deterrent effect on murder rates are "fundamentally flawed" and should not be used when making policy decisions.

Cost Argument:

> Many people believe we should execute murderers because it is less expensive than keeping them in prison for the rest of their lives. However, the average cost per execution in the United States (for the entire process) is estimated to range from $2.5 million to $5 million. If an inmate sentenced to life without parole lives for 31 years, and the average annual cost of imprisonment for the first 21 years is about $23,4000 per inmate, and the average annual cost of imprisonment for the last 10 years is $70,000 per inmate, then the cost of the life without parole sentence is roughly $1 million. This makes capital punishment, on average, two and one-half to five times more expensive than life without parole.

Moral Intervention Arguments

Participants will read three morally-based arguments that each pertain to one of the three arguments for capital punishment.

Retribution Argument:

> Many people argue that murderers deserve the death penalty and that this, all by itself, constitutes a good reason for society to inflict this punishment on them. However, society does not automatically take it upon itself to give people "what they deserve" in other respects. For example, people who do good deeds—people who are kind, charitable, caring, who take care of ailing relatives or help strangers in distress—might be thought to deserve reward, yet society does not routinely administer rewards for this behavior.

Similarly, people who regularly commit morally wrong acts that do not violate a criminal law are generally not subjected to sanctions by society. Why then should society make sure that people who violate criminal laws receive what they deserve? Why single out precisely this one category—murderers—and insist that the state must give them what they deserve?

Deterrence Argument:

Many people believe the death penalty makes criminals think twice before committing murder. Let's assume that capital punishment deters people from committing crimes. However, preventing murders is only one way in which society protects the lives of its citizens. It also does this through public health policies, environmental protection, workplace safety regulation, and the like. Given the costliness of the administration of the death penalty, if the same dollars spent on executions to prevent people from committing murders could be spent on preventing a greater number of people from dying in accidents or from diseases, why should we think that capital punishment is permissible? If the government could avert more fatal accidents or cure more childhood diseases with the resources that executions require, why should we feel morally compelled to insist on capital punishment? Indeed, shouldn't a "life-for-life tradeoff" perspective require us to believe that capital punishment should be abandoned to fund these other initiatives? As the point remains, society's collective moral duty should not be considered in isolation, but be determined in the broader context of all government action.

Cost Argument:

Many people believe we should execute murderers because it is less expensive than keeping them in prison for the rest of their lives. Let's assume that capital punishment is the cheaper option. However, determining if someone should live or die based off of financial considerations is both morally suspect and not a practice that we otherwise engage in. Consider the fact that if someone is shot we do not merely let them die because they do not have insurance and it would be expensive to treat them. Similarly, if someone needed medication necessary to keep them alive, we would still treat them. Indeed, most people would not decide to withhold a lifesaving medication just because of the expense of the medication alone. Thus, we should not base the decision of whether or not to impose the death penalty based on how expensive it is.

Post-Intervention Measure

Participants will indicate how much they agree or disagree with the following 13 statements on a seven-point Likert scale:
1. I think the death penalty is necessary.
2. It is immoral for society to take a life regardless of the crime the individual has committed. *R*
3. No matter what crime a person has committed executing them is a cruel punishment. *R*
4. The death penalty should be used more often than it is.
5. The desire for revenge is a legitimate reason for favoring the death penalty.

6. Society has a right to get revenge when murder has been committed.
7. There are some murderers whose death would give me a sense of personal satisfaction.
8. The death penalty is the just way to compensate the victim's family for some murders.
9. The death penalty does not deter other murderers. *R*
10. The death penalty makes criminals think twice before committing murder.
11. Executing a person for premeditated murder discourages others from committing that crime in the future.
12. We should sentence murderers to death because it is more cost efficient than giving them life in prison.
13. We should execute murderers because it is less expensive than keeping them in prison for the rest of their lives.

References

O'Neil, K.M., Patry, M.W., & Penrod, S.D. (2004). Exploring the effects of attitudes toward the death penalty on capital sentencing verdicts. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 10*(4), 443-470.