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A Geographic Distribution Analysis and Examination of Social-Psychological Factors and their Impact on Death Penalty Support in the United States

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A GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION ANALYSIS AND EXAMINATION OF
SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON
DEATH PENALTY SUPPORT IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Katy Moharter

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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A GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION ANALYSIS AND EXAMINATION OF
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DEATH PENALTY SUPPORT IN THE UNITED STATES

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Western Michigan University, 2016

Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in the United States in 1977, research has focused on shifting attitudes and waning public support for this institution. Support for the death penalty varies between different temporal, geographic, and demographic boundaries. Research also suggests that social-psychological factors such as attributional style and moral disengagement play a significant role in rationalization of death penalty support, as well as the intensity of the support. Aspects of moral disengagement serve as reliable predictors for death penalty support for a limited sample of participants, which this research intends to evaluate at a greater scale. This research surveyed geographers at the 2015 American Association of Geographers meeting in Chicago, Illinois by means of a specially designed questionnaire, and results indicate that aspects of moral disengagement do serve as a predictor of death penalty support, although attributional style is less reliable.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION/STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Introduction

The death penalty has been used as a means of punishment for offenders of capital crimes, particularly murder, in the United States since the country's creation. Since its reinstatement in January 1977, after experiencing a brief moratorium of 10 years, over 1,000 individuals have been executed (Death Penalty Information Center, 2014). Recent estimations suggest, conservatively, that approximately 4.1% of individuals sentenced to death between 1973-2004 in the United States were innocent of the crime in which he or she was convicted (Death Penalty Information Center, 2014). Additionally, 146 individuals have been completely exonerated from death row prior to their scheduled execution (National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, 2014). Despite these facts, the majority of Americans, approximately 55%, support this institution, although this support has dramatically declined by 23% from 78% over the last decade (Lipka, 2014).

Factors that affect support or opposition to the death penalty include race, religion, gender, and political affiliation, but this is hardly an exhaustive list. Many other factors that are more difficult to measure, such as social and psychological factors, likely play a significant role in the rationalization of support for the death penalty. These factors may impact perceptions of the limitations of the death penalty as well as contributing to its arbitrary use in the United States.

Statement of Problem/Hypotheses

Little research has been able to provide generalizable correlations between certain social and psychological factors and support for the death penalty, although a preliminary study (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, 2009) has linked factors such as attribution style, moral disengagement, and the value expressive function of attitudes with support for the death penalty within a small, limited sample. The purpose of this research is examine the impact that social-psychological factors have upon death penalty support, and to examine how mutable, or changeable, that support is when faced with information that challenges that support. As a dedicated and invested death penalty abolitionist, I chose this research to aid in the literature about how death penalty opinions can change. I contend that the conclusions reached through the work of Vollum and Buffington-Vollum (2009) will extend to a larger, more diverse sample size and will, therefore, be highly significant for opposition groups working to alter public opinion and abolish the death penalty. I hypothesize that higher levels of moral disengagement will not only correlate with stronger death penalty support, but also with lower levels of mutability (likelihood of changing initial opinion). Individuals that attribute guilt and blame inwardly as opposed to outwardly are also predicted to have stronger death penalty support and lower levels of mutability, while individuals who place blame on external factors and view behavior as more or less circumstantial are believed to be less likely to support the death penalty. Individuals that do support the death penalty but exhibit greater external and global attribution styles are hypothesized to have a more mutable opinion than those with more internal attribution styles. The following section will outline historical and geographical

trends of death penalty support throughout the United States, highlighting important shifts over space and time.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

Historical Trends

Historically, there are many reasons to question the effectiveness of the death penalty. Massachusetts, an abolition state, has a history of opposing capital punishment. In the Revolutionary Era, Massachusetts made significant strides to protect the rights of defendants, and thus recorded a decrease in death sentences proportional to absolute population (Allen, 2009). This was done with no reference to capital murder rates, which did not increase after the death penalty was essentially abolished in 1951. This lack of deterrence is further supported by a 2006 study by Fagan et al. This study demonstrates that the majority of those previous assessments did not focus specifically on crimes that are death eligible, and therefore relied upon broad, error-laden data for these conclusions. Correcting this, the Fagan et al. study focused on death eligible crime rates between 1976 and 2003 in death penalty states. They compared these rates to rates in abolition states of the same crimes as well as with total homicide rates. Their conclusions revealed that there is little to no deterrence factor present in the use of the death penalty (Fagan et al., 2006).

Despite the fact that research suggests a deterrent factor is not present in the death penalty, Vidmar (1973) discovered that 54% of those who favored the death penalty in Canada would still be in favor of its use even if it was proven beyond a doubt that it did not serve as a deterrent to crime. Those found in the 54% were also found to exhibit higher levels of retributiveness, which correlates with Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's (2009) survey that revealed those that show greater levels of moral disengagement are

more likely to support the death penalty and are less likely to be swayed to change that opinion in the face of negative information. Additionally, Blumenthal et al. (1972) studied perceptions of violence used to either promote social control, such as police action against a gang, or social change, such as a protest that results in bodily or property damage. Results indicated that a large majority supported at least one use of social violence, and the greatest correlating factor with this support was belief in retributive justice. Retributive justice was determined by examining multiple intercorrelated items, the main item being support for the death penalty (Blumenthal et al., 1972).

The decline in support for the death penalty since its reinstatement in 1977 can be assessed by examining the factors associated with the trend. More representative juries and the option of life without parole both work to curb the number of death sentences, but certain crimes, such as the Oklahoma City bombings perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh in 1995, are seen as only properly punishable by death, and are therefore demonstrative of the resiliency of support for capital punishment in America (Sundby, 2006). Death penalty opponents are advised to focus on smaller scale factors, since it is anticipated that only DNA proof of an innocent individual having been executed would be strong enough to counteract what is referred to as the “McVeigh factor” (Sundby, 2006).

The general decline in support for the death penalty over time can also be connected to decreasing death sentence rates for certain groups within the United States. U.S. Department of Justice data were used in a 2005 study to compare juvenile death sentence rates with those of adults in death penalty states across the country from 1990-2003 for the purpose of discovering changes in death penalty application associated with juvenile offenders. Juvenile death sentences have been rarely assigned since 1990, and

have decreased at a much faster rate than adult death sentences over the same time period (Fagan et al., 2005). The majority of juvenile death sentences were handed down in three states, Texas, Florida, and Alabama. These states also have the highest respective numbers of death sentences overall.

Radelet and Borg (2000) assessed the change in death penalty arguments due to shifts in research over time in regards to deterrence, incapacitation, caprice and bias, cost, miscarriages of justice, and retribution. Over the last few decades, pro-death penalty arguments centered on ideas that current research has begun to contradict, including that the death penalty is much more cost effective than sentencing a person to life imprisonment and that application of the death penalty deters future crime. While the arguments have become less persuasive over time, the one argument that is ever pervasive is that of retribution. The argument of retribution states that the most heinous or pre-meditated murderers should receive the death penalty simply because they deserve it (Radelet and Borg, 2000). Since retribution is a non-empirical justification for the death penalty, it is impossible to mathematically measure how much punishment a defendant “deserves”. Even though retribution as a justification for the death penalty is still strong within the United States, attitudes regarding execution method have changed over time. More death penalty advocates have begun supporting what they deem more “humane” forms of execution (lethal injection, for example) over more potentially painful options, such as the electric chair (Radelet and Borg, 2000).

Geographical Trends

Use of capital punishment and death sentences vary between geographical regions, as shown in Figure 2.1.

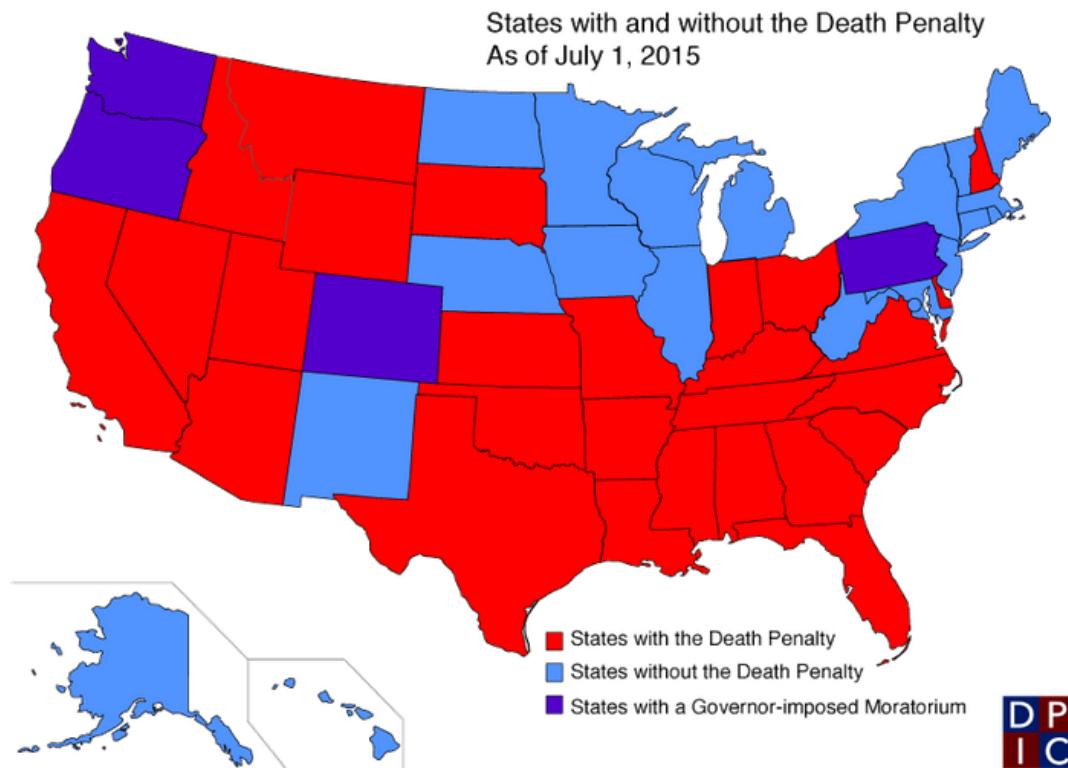


Figure 2.1: Death Penalty States of the United States
(Death Penalty Information Center, 2015).

A 2012 analysis of the geographic concentration of death sentences in America from 2004-2009 indicates that the majority of death sentences were handed down in what is known as the “death belt”, incorporating the contiguous states of Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina (Smith, 2012). Even within these states, death sentences were imposed with no sense of regularity. This contributes to the arguable arbitrariness of the death penalty itself. Such arbitrary use raises questions about its compliance with the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits the use of cruel and

unusual punishment, as well as the use of state death sentences to fully determine death penalty ramifications (Smith, 2012).

Potential ramifications of irregularity and arbitrariness can also be identified at the federal level. In 2010, Cohen and Smith's evaluation of the use of the federal death penalty for, and its impact upon, racial minorities correlates to an increasing number of notices to seek the death penalty against minorities in predominantly African American areas that are surrounded by largely Caucasian areas in death penalty allowed states. Instituting the federal death penalty in these instances requires the pulling of jurors from the federal district as opposed to just the county that is used in state capital cases, largely affecting the demographic make up of the jury while introducing potential racial bias (Cohen, 2010).

The temporal diffusion of legislation that is moral or non-moral in nature also varies across the United States. The death penalty is defined as a morality policy, and through comparison of three death penalty laws, varying in degrees of their moral and non-moral nature, it was concluded that morality policy diffuses at a faster rate when it is supported by the majority of the citizens as opposed to being first introduced through policy and law (Mooney, 1999). This conclusion offers valuable information for death penalty opponents. In practical terms, changing the policies without first changing the majority opinion will not be as successful in morality policy diffusion as first working to alter opinions.

Conclusion

Death penalty use and support varies across different spatial and temporal boundaries, and the understanding of the underlying reasons why this occurs is essential

knowledge for organizations working to abolish the death penalty in the United States. Previous research, outlined in the next section, will provide hypotheses as to why this occurs, how people rationalize support, and what factors influence this support. First, potential sources of influence on support will be reviewed, followed by current capital trial policies and the limitations of these policies, followed lastly by general limitations of the use of the death penalty, such as racial discrimination and arbitrary application.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

For reasons beyond morality, capital punishment remains a controversial topic in the United States. Religion, psychology, and environmental factors are thought to play a significant role in influencing one's opinion and attitude regarding capital punishment. Additionally, capital trial policies and their limitations as well as high costs, unfair application, and racial discrimination, have a profound effect on the future use of capital punishment. Previous studies have assessed the aforementioned factors as well as geographical and historical trends, for the purpose of tracking the above factors as they change over space and time.

This review has three sections. The first section outlines previous research that addressed sources of influence on support for the death penalty. The second details research conducted regarding current capital trial policies and their limitations. The final section outlines research relating to application of the death penalty and the limitations of its application.

Sources of Influence on Support for the Death Penalty

Identifying underlying reasons for individual opinions of capital punishment is essential to understanding the mutability of those opinions, although past research has been inconclusive in finding one particular factor that can change one's opinion and perception of capital punishment. During his 1972 opinion regarding *Furman v. Georgia*, Justice Thurgood Marshall stressed his belief in the connection between public opinion concerning the death penalty and its perceived constitutionality in the United States

legislature. Marshall's main assumption was that support for the death penalty is a function of lack of knowledge on the subject and that the opinion is generally mutable when faced with reasonable persuasion (Bohm, 1991). Marshall does, however, acknowledge one exception to his assumption: that those whose beliefs are rooted in retribution rather than ignorance are unlikely to be swayed by information. This assumption generated his three hypotheses, including "(a) the public lacks knowledge about the death penalty and its effects; (b) an informed public generally would oppose the death penalty; and (c) to the degree that retribution provides the basis for support of the death penalty, knowledge will have little effect on public opinion" (Bohm, 1991, 361). Marshall also operated under the assumption that public opinion drives death penalty legislation in the United States, and because of the majority support for the institution, it has not been deemed "cruel and unusual", as the Eighth Amendment could suggest. Sarat and Vidmar (1976) tested Marshall's hypotheses, particularly that support for the death penalty is generally rooted in lack of knowledge, and the application to public opinion within the United States. They discovered that the general public is not overwhelmingly unknowledgeable about how the death penalty is applied, but is decidedly less knowledgeable about the effects of the death penalty. Those who expressed stronger opinions of either support or opposition were less likely to be swayed by conflicting information presented to them, while those without a definite opinion were more inclined to oppose the death penalty afterwards (Sarat and Vidmar, 1976).

Studies such as Sarat and Vidmar's set the foundation for Ellsworth and Ross's research in 1983, which also sought to explore Marshall's hypotheses. While Sarat and Vidmar's results indicated that the public is generally unknowledgeable about the effects

of the death penalty on a society, Ellsworth and Ross extended this notion to discover whether this lack of knowledge would translate to a mutable or ignorant opinion. While the respondents were, again, overwhelmingly lacking in knowledge, they were not swayed from their strong, uneducated opinion in the face of opposing facts. This suggests that one's belief in the death penalty is not necessarily rooted in factual evidence, but rather related to deeper, more complicated attitudes and beliefs (Ellsworth and Ross, 1983).

Roberts' study supports the notions of Ellsworth and Ross, suggesting that attitudes concerning the death penalty impact how one remembers information, which will in turn alter their opinions. Those who supported the death penalty (in the U.S.), a 58% majority, were more likely to recall statements that supported their beliefs as opposed to those statements that disagreed; the same was true for those opposing the death penalty (Roberts, 1984). Those who identified as neutral to the subject recalled relatively equal numbers of statements that supported and opposed the death penalty. The biases between the supporting and opposing groups varied slightly as well, with the supporters holding a stronger bias to only remember information that supported their opinion, suggesting possible linkages between selectivity and extremity of beliefs (Roberts, 1984). This research may also be useful for suggesting that this selectivity could impact one's receptiveness to conflicting information and therefore decreases the likelihood of the opinion being mutable.

Bohm (1991) later evaluated Marshall's hypotheses concerning public opinion on the death penalty and aimed to resolve the differences between Sarat and Vidmar's (1976) report and Marshall's conjectures. Using 272 undergraduate students enrolled in a death penalty class at an Alabama University during the years 1985-1988, a questionnaire was

distributed to the students at both the beginning and conclusion of the semester (the course ran for a period of four weeks). The questionnaire inquired about the students' initial opinions about the death penalty, general knowledge about the death penalty, and their desire for retribution, although only students from the 1985 and 1988 classes were asked about their desire for retribution (Bohm, 1991). He asserts that the results of the study generally support the three hypotheses proposed by Justice Marshall. The second hypothesis, however, was not supported in all parts of the study. When examined at different scales, results varied. As a whole, the information suggested that the second hypothesis, that generally an informed public would oppose the death penalty, was true, but when each of the four conditions (concrete examples of imposing the death penalty) were examined separately, this was not always true. Four conditions of death penalty opinion were examined: whether one supports the death penalty for all persons convicted of a capital crime, only some people convicted of a capital crime, whether they would convict someone of a capital crime if they served on the jury, or whether they would pull the lever to actually execute the convicted themselves. While most respondents indicated they would not pull the lever themselves, before or after they were presented with negative information, differences between groups before and after the presentation of facts were generally not significant.

Between April and June 2006, focus groups of juror-eligible participants in Indiana County, Pennsylvania, were asked about their support or opposition to the death penalty, and invited to expand upon those opinions and react to recent findings about the use of the death penalty, offering greater insight into their beliefs. The study concludes that beliefs on the death penalty are multifaceted, and do not simply change due to the

presentation of unfavorable information (Falco, 2011). A similar conclusion was found in an anonymous 2009 survey by Vollum and Buffington-Vollum of 495 college students at a small Texas university. This survey measured participants' relative levels of moral disengagement, attribution style, and value-expressive functions and the impact these have on opinions of the death penalty and the mutability of those opinions. Results indicate that moral disengagement is highly correlated with death penalty support and lower levels of mutability, although participants found mutability arguments (unfavorable information regarding the use of capital punishment) generally compelling (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, 2009). Furthering the conclusion that unfavorable information does not sway capital punishment opinions, a 2013 study found that an overwhelming majority of law enforcement officials support capital punishment, believing that it provides closure for victims' families, although they acknowledge severe problems with its use, such as the potential executions of innocent civilians (Hughes, 2013).

As Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's 2009 study suggests, psychological factors can be used to predict an individual's opinion on capital punishment as well as the likelihood a person may change that opinion when it is challenged. Some psychological factors may be insignificant, however, as suggested by Beckham et al.'s 2007 study that was unsuccessful in finding a correlation between an individual's internal-external locus of control, a defendant's physical attractiveness, and the likelihood of the individual to impose a death sentence. Study participants, eligible jury members from a Midwestern community, were rated on a proven 1966 internal-external locus of control scale used in psychological research and then assigned to decide the fate of a randomly selected attractive or unattractive defendant. Correlation analyses between these factors were

inconclusive, although older males and younger females were more likely to sentence defendants to death, regardless of appearance (Beckham et al., 2007).

Religious beliefs are an essential aspect of any given person to assess, since many religions have different views regarding capital punishment. A qualitative study, conducted in 2011 by Miller and Hayward, incorporating a mock trial presented to 994 Nebraska community members, demonstrated differences in demographics and religion and their relationship with one's likelihood to implement a death sentence. This study demonstrated that insight into religious beliefs, such as literal interpretation of the Bible, the opinion of how "God" views the death penalty, as well as one's gender, can predict the likelihood of returning a death sentence in a capital trial. Males who literally interpret the Bible and believe "God" calls for the execution of criminals are more likely to sentence people to death than others (Miller, 2008). The extent to which one participates in a formal religion may also have an effect on capital punishment perceptions, as demonstrated by Bias, who in 2011, sought to explore the impact of Catholicism on one's likelihood to support the death penalty and be persuaded by current events and news media. Previously conducted surveys by the National Data Program for the Sciences were analyzed for the years 1976-2005, excluding 1979 and 1981. Strongly devoted Catholics use their religion as a filter to block out persuasion from their environment. This study demonstrates that more traditional Catholics are less likely to be affected by these outside factors and instead ground their opinions, most often an opinion of opposition, in the official position taken by their church (Bias, 2011).

While evidence suggests that one's religion can impact their opinion of capital punishment, it also suggests that introducing a defendant's religion at trial impacts the

likelihood of the jurors implementing a death sentence. A 2006 study based on a mock trial scenario of 184 individuals from a mid-size Midwestern area indicated that while the prosecution's use of religion did not affect jurors, the defense's mention that a defendant converted to Christianity significantly increased their perception of the defendant's remorse for the crime, therefore decreasing the likelihood of receiving a death sentence (Miller and Bornstein, 2006).

As Bias' 2011 study mentioned, news media and current events are potentially powerful factors in influencing an individual's perception of capital punishment. Additionally, media reliability is essential in shaping public perceptions of local and national issues, including the death penalty. In a 2004 study, Claussen surveyed Americans' opinions of media in the 1990s and early 2000s, based on reliability, accuracy, honesty, and bias, as well as the participant's levels of cognitive dissonance and media literacy. While the majority of Americans still rely heavily on television media, newspapers are generally rated to be more accurate and honest, particularly by younger generations (Claussen, 2004). Lower media literacy rates as well as cognitive dissonance are generally correlated with higher opinions of television media (Claussen, 2004). With the introduction and wide popularity of social media, however, this research may require modification.

Age as a correlating factor in terms of support for capital punishment opinion is increasingly important to focus on throughout the world, since generational differences could indicate potential future policy changes in countries where capital punishment has not yet been abolished. In 1997, surveys were administered to 142 high school students and 112 state college students in the United States evaluating support for the death

penalty given 20 different crime scenarios. While gender and personality, evaluated through measuring neuroticism and extraversion, were found to play no significant role, high school students were found to be more likely to support a death sentence than college students (Lester, 1997). Whether this indicates students change their beliefs as they get older, or the more punitive high-schoolers do not attend college, is unknown.

In addition to comparing age differences in one country, comparing the opinions of a single age group across cultural boundaries can reveal significant insight to factors that affect one's opinion of capital punishment. In a 2005 study, college students in two nations that still have a legal death penalty for civilian crimes, the United States and Nigeria, were asked their opinions and the reasonings for those opinions on the death penalty. Students at one Midwestern university in the U.S. and two universities, one in Ebonyi and one in Abia in Nigeria were administered surveys, and results demonstrated that attitudes concerning the death penalty are generally uniform. Similar percentages of students in each country either opposed or supported death, and had similar reasonings for those opinions, although Nigerian students were more likely to support the death penalty as a means of deterrence than American students (Elechi, 2006).

One's fear of being a victim of crime also has a substantial impact upon one's perception of capital punishment. Telephone interviews conducted in two Maryland counties in 1983 were used to determine the relationship between one's fear of becoming a victim of crime and support for the death penalty. Those who are either very afraid of crime victimization, or not afraid at all, are more likely to support implementing a death sentence than those who were only "somewhat" afraid (Seltzer, 1987). Fear level was a better predictor of one's ability to accept mitigating information in a penalty phase capital

trial, whereas basic opinions of the criminal justice system better served to predict abstract support or opposition to the death penalty (Seltzer, 1987).

Capital Trial Policies/Limitations

Capital trial policies and the limitations of these policies contribute substantially to the use of capital punishment in the United States. Capital trial policy states that in order to serve on a capital jury, one must be death-qualified, or willing to implement the death penalty at least under certain circumstances. Juries that are death-qualified are suggested, through various studies conducted throughout the 1980s and 1990s, to be more likely to return a guilty verdict, favor prosecution testimony, and are decidedly less diverse (the majority are older, Caucasian men) than non death-qualified juries (Salgado, 2005). This very well might infringe upon a defendant's constitutional right to a fair trial by one's peers. Prosecutors occasionally seek the death penalty with the sole intention of impaneling a jury more likely to convict the defendant in the guilt phase, even in cases where the death penalty would not be seen as warranted for the crime committed. For these reasons and in response to *United States v. Green* in 2004, a Memorandum and Order was issued with two suggestions to rectify the bias: impanel a unitary jury without death-qualification, or impanel separate juries for the guilt and penalty phases, with only the penalty phase jury required to be death-qualified (Salgado, 2005). In 2002, 450 venirepersons (members of an empaneled jury) from the 11th district in Miami, Florida, participated in a study that evaluated perceptions of aggravating factors versus non-statutory and statutory mitigating factors, since previous research suggested that those who are death-qualified for a capital jury are more likely to be receptive to aggravating factors presented by the prosecution. This study by Butler and Moran (2002) supports this

notion; those death-qualified were more receptive to the aggravating factors while the excludable jurors were more receptive to the non-statutory mitigating factors. There was no significant difference between the groups regarding statutory mitigating factors.

In addition to the conclusion that death-qualified jurors are more receptive to aggravating factors, previous evidence suggests that American capital jurors make premature decisions on whether to impose a death sentence. These premature decisions are based largely on their reactions to the defendant and understanding of their responsibilities, and are generally not swayed by the presentation of mitigating factors in the penalty phase (Schroeder et al., 2006). Schroeder et al.'s assessment of these decisions attributed other factors, such as the defendant's demeanor during trial, to the success of mitigation presentation, and suggests that social workers that have a deep understanding of human behavior are ideal tools for the defense team in ensuring thorough, thoughtful evaluation and mitigation presentation. This finding is corroborated by the work of the Capital Jury Project (CPJ), that held in-depth interviews with capital jurors about their decision making process. Results indicate that jurors make premature decisions about the punishment long before the penalty phase of the trial even begins (Bowers, 1995). Many jurors indicated that while they were supposed to be debating guilt or innocence in guilt phase deliberations, often times they were in fact discussing the proper punishment.

Mechanisms of moral disengagement play a significant role in the rationalization of capital jurors in their decision to condemn a defendant to death, and are even inherently part of capital trial procedures. Haney (1997) concluded that without five facets of moral disengagement, including dehumanization of the defendant, diffusion of

personal responsibility, minimization of consequences of one's actions, the perception of self-defense, and the exaggeration of difference between the juror and the defendant, it would be impossible for the death penalty system to work. Capital jurors are never instructed to consider the humanity and positive contributions of the defendant while debating life or death, such as the relationships between the defendant and loved ones or a potential life of redemption, and are instead focused on what separates them from the defendant (Haney, 1997). Jurors are able to diffuse their own responsibility for a death sentence to appellate judges, since almost all death sentences are appealed. This allows the jurors to distance themselves from the moral implications of their decision, believing they are only a contributing entity and not the final decision makers, while in actuality, many appellate decisions defer to the verdict of the jury. Condemning a defendant to death can be referred to as a "crime of obedience", since the decision to kill someone is permitted by those in an authoritative position and therefore does not feel morally corrupt to the jurors in charge of that decision (Haney, 1997). Lastly, Haney argues that the law seems to favor death sentences over sentences of life imprisonment due to the exclusion of jurors opposed to the death penalty. People in support of the death penalty are more apt to choose death over life, and since the law prohibits those morally opposed to the death penalty to serve on a capital jury, the system itself seems to send the message to jurors that they should choose death. The CPJ also concluded that many jurors do not find themselves responsible for a death penalty decision, citing the defendant and the law themselves that permit such a punishment as more responsible for that decision (Bowers, 1995). This relates to the idea of diffusion of responsibility.

One of very few studies concerning the influence of plea-bargaining and the use of the death penalty on capital defendants was conducted in 2008 (Ehrhard, 2008). The research was based on a set of 27 interviews with 12 prosecutors and 15 defense attorneys in a death penalty state to address each respective party's experience and perception of offering a plea bargain in exchange for removing the fear of a death sentence at a public trial. Defense attorneys and prosecutors agreed that this ability puts prosecutors in a powerful position that changes the trajectory of a case. Although many prosecutors felt that while abuses to this power may be occurring elsewhere, they were not taking part (Ehrhard, 2008).

The potential abuse of power in the case of plea-bargaining is not the only area in which prosecutorial misconduct may emerge. Platania and Moran (1999) discovered the effects of improper, inflammatory, and misleading comments made by prosecutors in their final plea with capital jurors on the likelihood of implementing a death sentence. In a metropolitan area of the Southeast U.S., 320 participants were shown the prosecution's closing argument in the penalty phase of *Brooks v. State*, 1977. Of those subjected to the inflammatory remarks, an overwhelming majority voted for a death sentence (Platania and Moran, 1999).

Prosecutors are not the only agencies that operate with a heightened level of power in capital cases. Clear limitations are indicated in the Constitution for states' rights on the matter, but the federal government, which operates under essentially no policing system, appears to have limitless powers. The federal government's ability to overrule non-death sentences in any state, including those that have abolished the death penalty at the state level, places a burden on state-level policy-making (Connor, 2010). Debates

over the use of the death penalty on the basis of cost or fairness of execution are becoming more common at the state-level due to these limitations, but the federal government is unlikely to follow suit, simply because it operates with minimal constraints to its power in this arena.

Death Penalty Limitations

Penalty phase deliberations in a capital trial may influence the imposition of a death sentence. In a 2009 study, death-qualified eligible jurors were selected from an urban California county to participate in mock deliberations where the race of the defendant and victim were varied. Results suggest that deliberations caused a more punitive shift in death sentencing, particularly in regards to African American defendants, and that even during deliberations, high rates of poor instructional comprehension remained (Lynch et al., 2009). The relationship between jurors' inability to comprehend penalty phase instructions may also affect the exhibition of racial bias against the defendant and the jurors' decision to impose death. The participants, eligible jury members from a California county, were involved in a study in 2000 that simulated a penalty phase, where the race of the defendant and the victim varied in four different instances. The results indicate that overall understanding of the instructions were poor, and that while African American defendants were more often sentenced to death overall, the major discrepancy in racial bias was demonstrated by those with the least comprehension of the penalty phase instructions (Lynch et al, 2000). These aforementioned studies, among others, demonstrate that juror comprehension of the penalty phase instructions are generally low (Smith, 2011). In a 2010 study, researchers sampled 211 urban university students and required them to read four versions of

instructions, including the California “plain-language” version. Most students’ comprehension improved over the process of reading differing versions, although the participants who were death-qualified showed a slower rate of understanding and a generally lower comprehension of the instructions (Smith, 2011). Again, the results of the CPJ found similar conclusions, citing that jurors tended to misunderstand their responsibility of weighing aggravating factors against mitigation factors, leading them to unfairly weigh aggravating factors and disregard mitigation (Bowers, 1995).

The cost of capital trials and pursuit of the death penalty serve as general limitations for the use of capital punishment. Homicide cases in Los Angeles County, California between 1996 and 2008 serve as the source of data evaluating the cost differences between capital and noncapital cases, as well as time to solution and prosecutorial discretion in pursuing a death sentence. Death penalty cases are much more costly in terms of money and time, whereas noncapital cases cost less and are concluded more quickly (Petersen, 2012). Further, prosecutors are more likely to pursue the death penalty in cases where multiple special circumstances are present, as opposed to those with only one special circumstance (Petersen, 2012).

In 2006, a comparative analysis of the top executing state, Texas, and the state with the highest number of people on death row but few executions, California, was conducted to determine what factors influence the continued legality of capital punishment in states where executions are seldom carried out. Results indicate various factors that differ depending on the state, although it is also concluded that procedural delays, and not reversal of capital sentences (as in the case of Pennsylvania), are the main reason for the limited number of actual executions in California (Steiker, 2005).

Conclusion

While vast research exists on perceptions, limitations, and general trends related to factors resulting in death penalty support, many insights remain uncovered.

Discovering the roots of one's beliefs regarding capital punishment and correlating those roots with locational and/or demographic factors will establish a much stronger explanation for changing trends throughout the country as well as offer insight into the future of capital punishment in the United States.

CHAPTER IV

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Methodological Approach

The methods that were employed in this research mirrored those used by Vollum and Buffington-Vollum in 2009. A similar questionnaire was used (Appendix A), including Likert style questions and demographic questions, including age, professional title, state of residence, political and religious affiliation, and their initial opinion of the death penalty. Data were collected from participants at the 2015 Association of American Geographers (AAG) conference in Chicago, Illinois. This was done in an effort to test the conclusions produced by Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's research on social psychological factors including attribution style and level of moral disengagement and the effect these factors have on support or opposition for the death penalty on a specific respondent group.

At the conference, a data collection table was utilized. The target group was United States citizens over the age of 18. Interested participants approached the table for more information. The study was explained to them using the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board's (HSIRB) approved script and consent form (Appendix B). Participants were then directed to sit at another table directly behind the data collection table to complete the survey. Every person who approached the table was asked to participate. Some conference attendees were also asked to participate in the study as they passed by. All respondents were offered a Western Michigan University Department of Geography pen and a full sized candy bar as a gift for their time. Potential participants were thanked for their interest before leaving the table. Because it was difficult to

exclude non-U.S. citizens during data collection, these questionnaires were omitted from the dataset after the collection period was over. After necessary omissions, the total number of responses used in this research was 135.

Data Analysis

Independent Variables

Independent variables present in this study included attributional styles and moral disengagement. Attributional style was discerned from the Attributional Styles Questionnaire (ASQ), which is a previously validated tool for measuring three aspects of attributional styles: internality, stability, and globality (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, 2009). The internality dimension asked participants to indicate, on a scale of 1-7, whether certain scenarios are “Totally due to other people or circumstances” (1) or “Totally due to me” (7) (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, 2009) (refer to Appendix A for sample questions), with 1 indicating an external style and 7 indicating an internal style. The stability aspect asked participants to rank on a scale of 1-7 whether certain scenarios “Will never be present again” (1) or “Will always be present” (7) (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, 2009), with 1 indicating unstable and 7 indicating stable. Globality will ask participants if a scenario “Influences all situations in my life” (1) or “Influences only this situation” (7) (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, 2009), with 1 indicating a global view and 7 indicating a specific view. Moral disengagement was evaluated through a validated scale that asks participants to rank, on a scale of 1-5 (numbers are coded in such a way that higher numbers indicate higher levels of moral disengagement; whether 1 indicates “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree” depends on the specific question), agreement or disagreement with the statement (refer to Appendix A). Moral

disengagement was divided into eight separate subcategories: moral justification, euphemistic language (using sanitized language to distract from the harmful nature of an act), advantageous comparison (when compared to acts presented as worse), displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting consequences (minimizing the negative consequences of an action), attribution of blame (to the victim of a negative action), and dehumanization (stripping one of his/her humanity; regarding them as less than human). Each facet was evaluated by responses to four questions. Mean scores were calculated for each facet to represent each respondent's relative level of that facet. These numbers were then used in a statistical logistic regression analysis to discern if any facet of moral disengagement serves as an accurate predictor of death penalty support among the respondents. These average scores were also utilized in an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to determine if any moral disengagement facet accurately predicts acceptance of information and/or mutability of opinion among death penalty proponents.

In order to determine the predictability of death penalty support based on differing social-psychological factors explored in this research (attributional style and moral disengagement), a logistic regression model was created. Each question pertaining to the three aspects of attributional style (internality, stability, and globality) was run against the binary responses of support or opposition to the death penalty to determine if a correlation was present. Level of moral disengagement was divided in eight different facets: moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization (Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, 2009). Of the

total 32 questions asked that pertained to moral disengagement, each facet was represented by four questions each. For each respondent, an average response score was created for each of the eight facets of moral disengagement, and was then run in a logistic regression analysis to determine if varying levels of these facets significantly influenced support for the death penalty.

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses were used to determine predictability of acceptance of information and support mutability based on attributional style and moral disengagement levels. The previously utilized average response scores for each facet of moral disengagement and aspect of attributional style were run in a regression against acceptance of information values (how compelling respondents rated each argument against the death penalty) and whether or not these respondents were less likely to support the death penalty after being exposed to that negative information. Acceptance of information and mutability only utilized respondents who initially supported the death penalty (N = 45).

Dependent Variables

Support or opposition to the death penalty as well as mutability are characterized as the dependent variables. Support or opposition was answered as a binary response (yes/no), while mutability asked whether the presented information, unfavorable information concerning the death penalty shown in Appendix A, has impacted the participants' initial opinion of the use of the death penalty. Supporters were asked if they were more likely to support the death penalty after the presented information, less likely to support the death penalty, or if their opinion was not affected by the presented information. "Less likely to support the death penalty" was coded as a 1, while the other

two responses were coded as a 0 because the hypothesis only focuses on individuals that are less likely to support the death penalty in the face of negative information.. This information was evaluated similarly to the acceptance of information, or compelling argument data. After reading each argument, participants ranked them as “Not at all compelling”, “Doesn’t affect me one way or the other”, “Somewhat compelling”, or “Very compelling”. Responses were ranked between 1-4, respectively. A sum of each response was then divided by the total number of valid responses to create a mean scale score for this data.

Control Variables

Control variables are defined as demographic factors: age, gender, race, political affiliation, religion, professional title (undergraduate student, master’s student, doctoral student, professor, or other faculty/staff), and regional location within the United States, shown in Figure 4.1. These demographic factors were compared by ANOVA analyses as well as Chi-Square tests of independence (for gender and race only) to discern any significant differences within each group. These variables were then converted into dummy variables to incorporate in an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses to explore the influence (if any) that the independent variables (attributional styles and moral disengagement levels) have upon support and mutability of opinions of the death penalty in the United States.

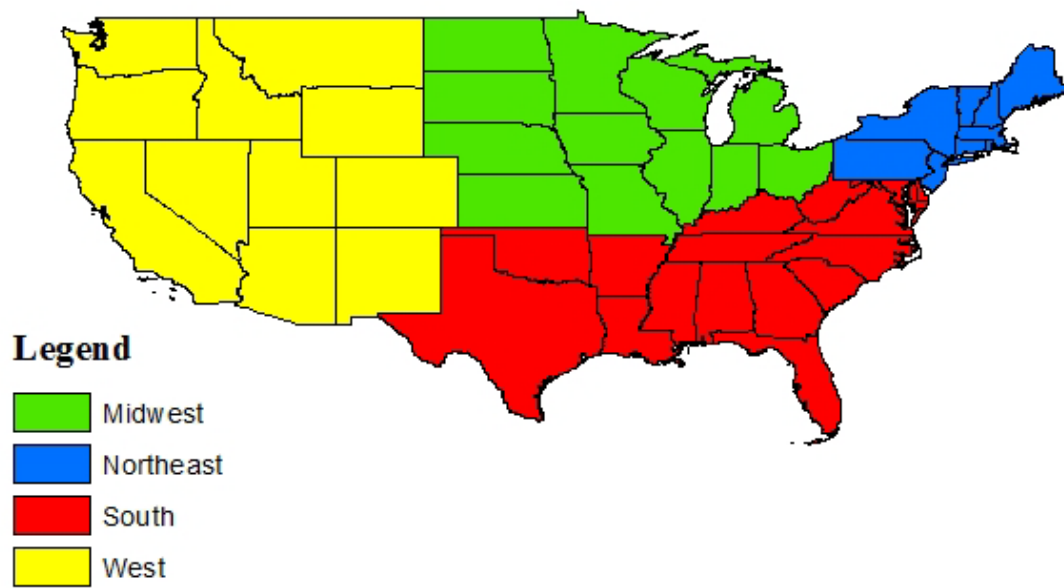


Figure 4.1: U.S. Regions of Study

CHAPTER V

RESULTS AND STATISTICAL ANALYSES

This chapter discusses the statistical analyses of my data as well as the implications of the results. Results are separated into categories including basic respondent demographics, comparisons of groups, and regression analyses to determine correlation and predictability of attributional style and moral disengagement on death penalty support, acceptance of unfavorable information pertaining to application of the death penalty in the United States, and mutability of an opinion of support.

Respondent Demographics

A total of 135 valid responses were collected for this research from the Association of American Geographers Annual National Conference held in Chicago, Illinois, from April 21-24, 2015. Of these respondents, 61% were male and 39% were female. The subjects overwhelmingly identified as Caucasian (90%) and were predominately initially opposed to the death penalty (67%). Other factors, such as political and religious affiliations, were more evenly distributed. Twenty seven percent of respondents identified as Catholic while 29% identified as atheist, accounting for over half of those surveyed (Figure 5.1). The majority of the subjects associate with the Democratic Party (45%), but 30% consider themselves to be independent (Figure 5.2). While 100% of the respondents were in some way connected to academics since these data were collected at a national academic conference, the spread was rather even between those identifying as undergraduate students, master's students, doctoral students, professors, and other faculty/staff (Figure 5.3). Approximately 65% of respondents were

under the age of 40 (Figure 5.4), and 45% resided in the Midwest region of the United States (Figure 5.5).

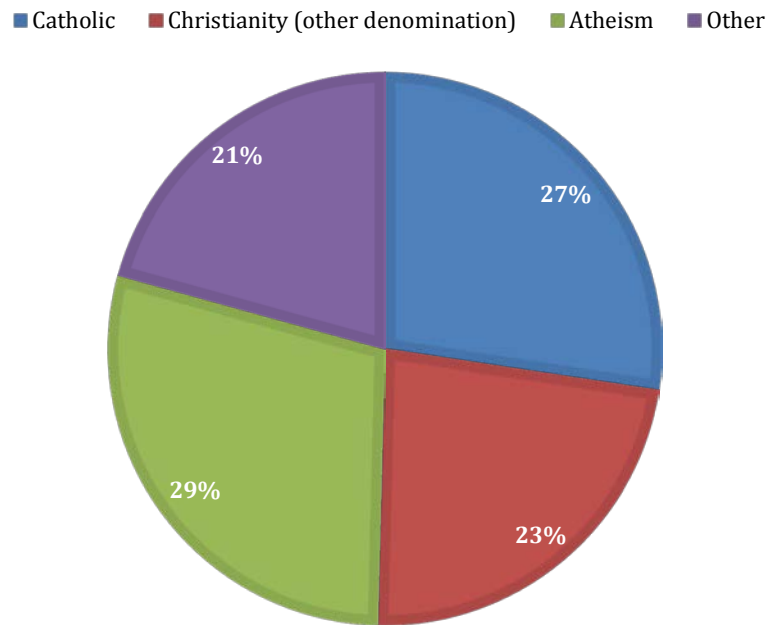


Figure 5.1: Religious Affiliation Demographics

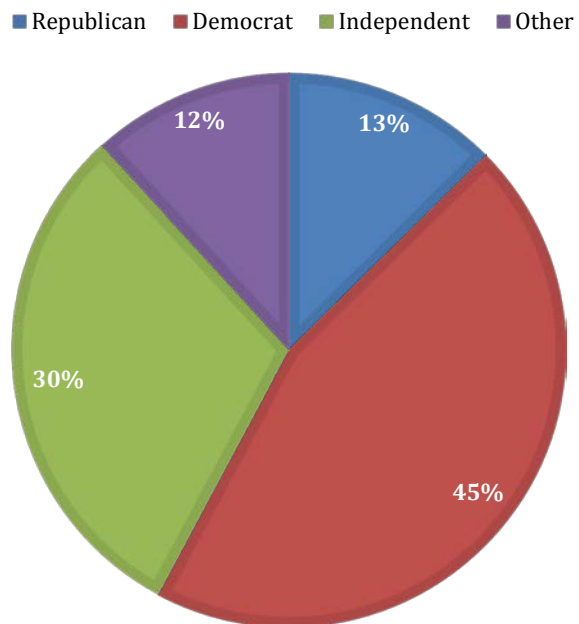


Figure 5.2: Political Affiliation Demographics

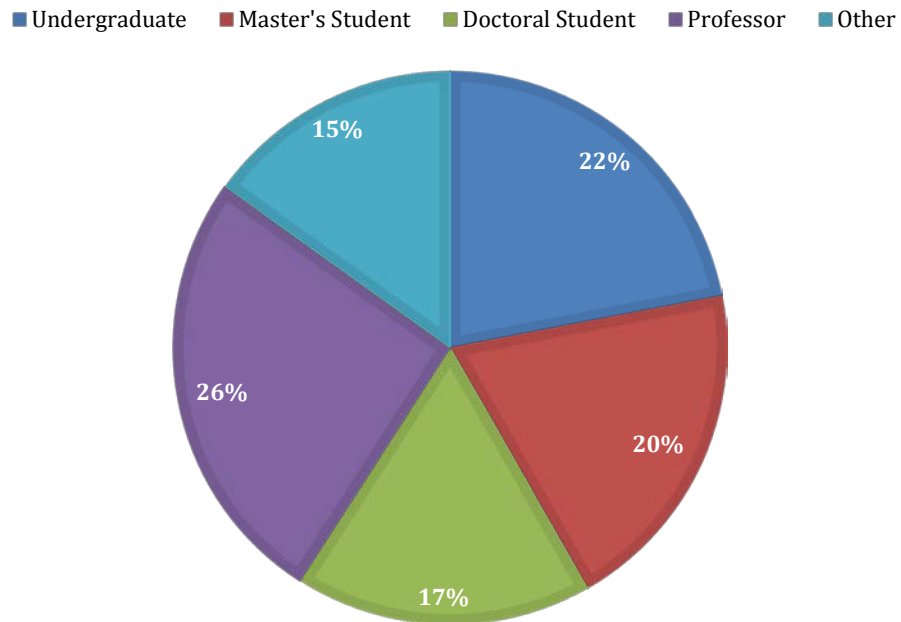


Figure 5.3: Professional Title Demographics

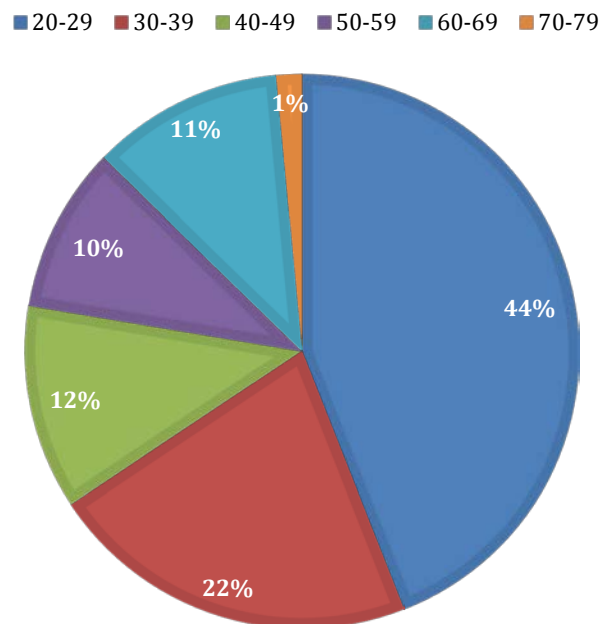


Figure 5.4: Age Group Demographics

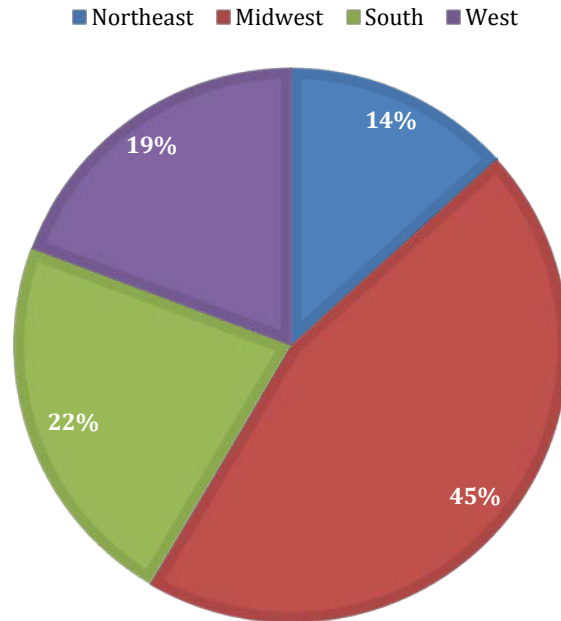


Figure 5.5: Regional Demographics

Comparison of Groups

Differences in support or opposition to the death penalty between groups were measured by conducting a Chi-Square Test of Independence (for differences between genders and races) and One-Way ANOVA analyses with Fisher's LSD Post-Hoc tests (for political and religious affiliations, age groups, region of residence, and professional title). No significant interaction exists between gender and death penalty support ($\chi^2=0.817, p > 0.05$) as seen in Table 5.1.

No significant differences in death penalty support were revealed between the different represented races in this research ($\chi^2 = 0.035, p > 0.05$) (Table 5.2). Since the respondents were predominately Caucasian, accounting for 90%, all other represented races (African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic) were included into the "other" category. Respondents with differing racial identities did not differ significantly

in their support or opposition to the death penalty. Caucasian respondents had a mean score of 0.333 ($sd = 0.4734$).

Table 5.1: Difference in Support between Genders (χ^2)

Gender	Death Penalty Support		χ^2 Value	Significance
	Yes	No		
Male	36%	64%	0.817	0.366
Female	28%	72%		

Table 5.2: Difference in Support between Races (χ^2)

Race	Death Penalty Support		χ^2 Value	Significance
	Yes	No		
Caucasian	33%	67%	0.035	0.852
Other	31%	69%		

Significant differences were present in death penalty support between age groups ($F(5,127) = 5.009, p < 0.05$) (Table 5.3). The Fisher's LSD post hoc test analysis revealed that respondents between 20-29 years old were significantly more likely to support the death penalty ($m = 0.525, sd = 0.5036$) than those between 30-39 years old ($m = 0.172, sd = 0.3844$), 40-49 years old ($m = 0.067, sd = 0.2582$) and 60-69 years ($m = 0.133, sd = 0.3519$). Respondents between the ages of 50-59 ($m = 0.385, sd = 0.5064$) and

70-79 ($m = 0$, $sd = 0$) were not significantly different from any of the other represented groups.

Table 5.3: Difference in Support between Age Groups (ANOVA)

	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F-value	Significance
Between Groups	4.85	5	0.97	5.009	0.00
Within Groups	24.593	127	0.194		
Total	29.444	132			

No significant differences in support for the death penalty were discovered between regions within the United States ($F(3,130) = 1.385$, $p > 0.05$) (Table 5.4). Respondents from the four separate regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) did not significantly differ from one another. Respondents from the Northeast region had a mean score of 0.278 ($sd = 0.4609$). Respondents from the Midwest region had a mean score of 0.361 ($sd = 0.4842$). Respondents from the Southern region had a mean score of 0.200 ($sd = 0.4068$). Respondents from the Western region had a mean score of 0.440 ($sd = 0.5066$).

Significant differences in death penalty support were present between political groups ($F(3,130) = 7.586$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 5.5). The Fisher's LSD post hoc test was used to determine differences among the political parties. This analysis revealed that respondents identifying themselves as republican were significantly more supportive of the death penalty ($m = 0.813$, $sd = 0.4031$) than those identifying as democrat ($m = 0.230$, $sd = 0.4240$), independent ($m = 0.293$, $sd = 0.4606$), and other ($m = 0.313$, $sd = 0.4787$).

Republicans had the greatest death penalty support, while democrats showed the least. No significant differences in death penalty support were detected between any of the other represented political groups.

Table 5.4: Difference in Support between Regions (ANOVA)

	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F-value	Significance
Between Groups	0.916	3	0.305	1.385	0.250
Within Groups	28.637	130	0.220		
Total	29.552	133			

Table 5.5: Difference in Support between Political Affiliations (ANOVA)

	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F-value	Significance
Between Groups	4.403	3	1.468	7.586	0.000
Within Groups	25.150	130	0.193		
Total	29.552	133			

ANOVA results indicate that a significant difference does not exist in death penalty support between the various religious affiliations explored in this research ($F(3,130) = 1.037, p > 0.05$) (Table 5.6). Respondents identifying themselves as Catholic had a mean score of 0.405 ($sd = 0.4977$). Non-denominational or other denominational Christians had a mean score of 0.233 ($sd = 0.4302$). Respondents identifying as atheist had a mean score of 0.282 ($sd = 0.4559$). Lastly, respondents identifying as other had a mean score of 0.393 ($sd = 0.4973$).

Table 5.6: Difference in Support between Religious Affiliations (ANOVA)

	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F-Value	Significance
Between Groups	0.691	3	0.230	1.037	0.379
Within Groups	28.862	130	0.222		
Total	29.552	133			

A significant difference in death penalty support was observed between individuals of different professional titles ($F(4,126) = 4.846, p < 0.05$) (Table 5.7). The Fisher's LSD post hoc test revealed that respondents who were undergraduate students ($m = 0.586, sd = 0.5012$) were significantly more likely to support the death penalty than doctoral students ($m = 0.217, sd = 0.4217$), professors ($m = 0.147, sd = 0.3595$), and other faculty/staff ($m = 0.200, sd = 0.4104$). No significant difference was present between undergraduate students and master's students ($m = 0.400, sd = 0.500$). Significant differences were also present between master's students (more likely to support) and professors. Undergraduate students were the most likely to support the death penalty, while professors showed the lowest support rate of all the represented groups.

Table 5.7: Difference in Support between Professional Titles (ANOVA)

	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F-Value	Significance
Between Groups	3.756	4	0.939	4.846	0.001
Within Groups	24.412	126	0.194		
Total	28.168	130			

Regression Analyses

Attributional Style and Death Penalty Support

Logistic regression analysis indicates that overall attributional style, measured by evaluation of three facets (internality, stability, and globality), was not a statistically reliable predictor of death penalty support of the respondents (-2 Log Likelihood = 162.376; $\chi^2(3) = 4.849$, $p > 0.05$). The model only accurately predicted 66.4% of cases, and none of the attributional factors measured (internality, stability, or globality) were included in the model. Regression coefficients are presented in Table 5.8. *Wald* statistics indicate that neither internality, stability, nor globality significantly predicts support or opposition to the death penalty.

Table 5.8: Logistic Regression of Attributional Style on Death Penalty Support

Attributional Style	<i>B</i>	Wald	Degrees of Freedom	Significance	Odds Ratio
Internality	0.267	3.737	1	0.53	1.306
Stability	-0.114	0.591	1	0.442	0.893
Globality	0.006	0.004	1	0.952	1.006
Constant	-1.346	1.905	1	0.168	0.260

Moral Disengagement and Death Penalty Support

Logistic regression analysis results indicate that facets of moral disengagement serve to be accurate predictors of support or opposition to the death penalty (-2 Log Likelihood = 114.749; $\chi^2(8) = 21.920$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 5.9). The model correctly classified 78.1% of cases, compared to the constant-only model, which only predicted 66.7% of cases. Not all facets of moral disengagement were significant predictors of

death penalty support, however. Euphemistic language, attribution of blame, and dehumanization were all positively correlated with death penalty support while distorting consequences was negatively correlated with death penalty support. *Wald* statistics indicate that euphemistic language, attribution of blame, dehumanization, and distorting consequences significantly predicted death penalty support among respondents.

Acceptance of Statements and Opinion Mutability

Mean scores and percentages of acceptance of statements (those rating 3 or 4) were calculated to determine how compelling those that support the death penalty found each argument against application of the death penalty (Table 5.10). Results indicate that respondents overwhelmingly found the arguments compelling, particularly Statement 2, which referenced possible execution of innocent people and wrongful convictions.

Table 5.9: Logistic Regression of Moral Disengagement on Death Penalty Support

Moral Disengagement Facet	<i>B</i>	Wald	Degrees of Freedom	Significance	Odds Ratio
Moral Justification	0.284	0.350	1	0.554	1.329
Euphemistic Language	1.440	5.259	1	0.022	4.219
Advantageous Comparison	-0.676	1.241	1	0.265	0.509
Displacement of Responsibility	-0.459	0.670	1	0.413	0.632
Diffusion of Responsibility	-0.217	0.154	1	0.695	0.805
Distorting Consequences	-2.569	9.747	1	0.002	0.077
Attribution of Blame	1.392	4.957	1	0.026	4.025
Dehumanization	1.820	8.314	1	0.004	6.172
Constant	-3.332	5.709	1	0.017	0.036

Statement 1, referring to the lack of evidence that suggests the death penalty serves as a deterrent to crime, was the least compelling to the respondents. A mutability percentage was then calculated, taking the number of respondents that reported they were less likely to support the death penalty divided by the total number of respondents that found each argument compelling. Overall, 40% of respondents that initially supported the death penalty reported that after reading the six arguments against usage of the death penalty, they were less likely to support it. Both Statement 4 (Execution is more costly than life in prison without parole) and Statement 6 (Inadequate legal representation for the offender) showed the highest mutability rates among those who found the statement compelling. Surprisingly, Statement 2, which the greatest number of respondents found compelling, had the lowest mutability percentage, indicating that a majority of respondents that found the statement compelling were not coerced enough to alter their support.

Table 5.10: Acceptance of Information and Mutability Comparison

	Mean Score	Percentage Finding Statement Compelling	Percentage Less Likely to Support Death
Statement 1: Lack of Deterrent Effect	2.33	53.3%	45.8%
Statement 2: Innocence and Wrongful Convictions	3.31	88.8%	45.0%
Statement 3: Lack of Closure for Victim's Families	2.84	75.5%	47.1%
Statement 4: More Expensive than LWOP	3.02	75.5%	52.9%
Statement 5: Discrimination based on Offender/Victim Race	2.96	75.5%	50.0%
Statement 6: Inadequate/Incomplete Legal Representation	2.98	80.0%	52.9%

Ordinary least squares multiple regression analyses indicate that the overall model of the three aspects of attribution style and the eight aspects of moral disengagement did not significantly predict respondents acceptance of negative statements regarding the death penalty ($R^2 = 0.330$, $R^2_{adj} = 0.056$, $F(11,27) = 1.207$, $p = 0.329$) (Table 5.11). However, dehumanization significance fell just outside the significant 0.05 threshold and was negatively correlated with acceptance of statements indicating that respondents exhibiting higher levels of dehumanization could serve as a potentially significant predictor for lower acceptance of the negative statements ($\beta = -0.560$, $t(27) = -2.011$, $p = 0.054$). The overall model of the three aspects of attribution style and the eight aspects of moral disengagement also did not significantly predict mutability of death penalty support ($R^2 = 0.317$, $R^2_{adj} = 0.039$, $F(11,27) = 1.139$, $p = 0.372$).

Demographic variables were transformed into dummy variables to determine correlation and predictability with acceptance of statements and opinion mutability. A significant relationship between gender and acceptance of information was found ($F(1,43) = 8.024$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 5.11). This positive relationship indicates that females who support the death penalty were significantly more accepting of the arguments against its use. However, gender did not play a significant role in predicting opinion mutability ($F(1,43) = 1.654$, $p > 0.05$).

Table 5.11: OLS Regression Analyses of Acceptance of Information and Mutability

	MODEL I Acceptance of Information Among Death Penalty Supporters			MODEL II Mutability of Death Penalty Attitudes Among Death Penalty Supporters		
Independent Variables	B	β	S.E.	B	β	S.E.
Attributional Style						
Internality	-0.039	-0.082	0.088	-0.033	-0.089	0.070
Stability	-0.012	-0.023	0.103	0.110	0.280	0.082
Globality	-0.066	-0.180	0.065	0.060	0.208	0.052
Moral Disengagement Facet						
Moral Justification	0.075	0.076	0.894	-0.060	-0.078	0.167
Euphemistic Language	0.260	0.268	0.272	0.133	0.175	0.215
Advantageous Comparison	-0.194	-0.209	0.300	-0.196	-0.270	0.237
Displacement of Responsibility	0.340	0.294	0.253	0.133	0.146	0.201
Diffusion of Responsibility	-0.184	-0.178	0.321	0.118	0.145	0.254
Distorting Consequences	0.189	0.150	0.426	-0.020	-0.021	0.337
Attribution of Blame	0.176	0.155	0.259	-0.033	-0.037	0.205
Dehumanization	-0.592	-0.560	0.295	-0.255	-0.307	0.233
Control Variables						
Gender (Female)	0.506	0.397	0.178	0.200	0.192	0.156
Political Affiliation (Republican)	-0.557	-0.429	0.179	-0.373	-0.353	0.151
Constant	2.932	-	0.894	-0.018	-	0.708

Political affiliation, specifically identifying as a republican, served as a significant predictor for both acceptance of statements ($F(1,43) = 9.695, p < 0.05$) and opinion mutability ($F(1,43) = 6.111, p < 0.05$) (Table 5.11). Identifying as a republican and acceptance of information were negatively correlated, indicating that republicans were significantly less likely than other political affiliations to find arguments against the death penalty compelling. Identifying as a republican and opinion mutability were also negatively correlated, again indicating that republicans were less likely alter their support for the death penalty after being presented with unfavorable information regarding it. No other demographic factors were found to be statistically significant.

The following chapter will detail the implications and importance of each presented statistical analysis, and discuss how these results compare with previous research and assumptions regarding support for the death penalty as well as acceptance of negative information and opinion mutability.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Hypothesis One

The first hypothesis explored in this research stated that individuals exhibiting higher levels of moral disengagement will be more likely to support the death penalty and will also be less likely to change their support after being exposed to arguments against the death penalty. The first part of this hypothesis was supported by my data, which showed that euphemistic language, attribution of blame, and dehumanization were all positively correlated with death penalty support. This indicates that individuals exhibiting higher levels of these facets of moral disengagement were more likely to support the death penalty. This result correlates to the findings of Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's (2009) study, which also found that moral disengagement was positively correlated with death penalty support. However, different facets of moral disengagement were found to be significant. Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's study revealed that moral justification, displacement of responsibility, and dehumanization were significant predictors of support, where dehumanization is the only agreed upon factor. This may have occurred due to differences in subjects surveyed, particularly education levels, age, and location.

The second part of the hypothesis, that higher levels of moral disengagement correlate with lower acceptance of arguments against the death penalty and also with lower levels of mutability, was not supported by my data. Moral disengagement was not a significant predictor of acceptance of statements or mutability, although dehumanization fell just outside the significance threshold ($p = 0.054$) and was negatively correlated with both acceptance of statements and mutability, indicating that it could be a useful factor to

consider in further research. This is particularly important since dehumanization was found to be significant in predicting death penalty support in both this research and Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's study, potentially suggesting its overall significance to one's perception and thought process regarding the death penalty.

These findings are not particularly surprising, predominantly the importance of dehumanization. Dehumanization is the separation of oneself from others, and when discussed in the context of the death penalty, it is somewhat expected that those who are able to separate themselves from and dehumanize the offender of a capital crime are more apt to support the death penalty. Vollum and Buffington-Vollum (2009) also found correlations between higher levels of dehumanization and death penalty support for mentally ill and juvenile offenders. Mentally ill offenders and juveniles tend to be regarded with lower levels of culpability when considering their criminal behavior, which Vollum and Buffington-Vollum also explored in their 2009 study, but dehumanization was positively correlated with support across all categories, highlighting the significance separating oneself from a population can be in determining support for the death penalty. This finding, and that of Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, is substantiated by previous work that found dehumanization as a primarily expressed function by executioners (Osofsky et al., 2005). As discussed, only half of the hypothesis was supported by the data. Therefore, hypothesis one as a whole cannot be accepted.

Hypothesis Two

The second hypothesis explored in this research stated that individuals that attribute guilt and blame inwardly as opposed to outwardly will be more likely to support the death penalty and have lower mutability, and those that place blame on external

factors and view behavior as more or less circumstantial will be less supportive of the death penalty. Results indicate that no aspect of attribution style, internality, stability, or globality is an accurate predictor for death penalty support among respondents, leading to a non-acceptance of the second hypothesis. The same was true when comparing attribution style to acceptance of information and mutability; no significant correlation existed. This finding is consistent with that of Vollum and Buffington-Vollum (2009), which also found no significant correlation between any aspect of attribution style and death penalty support, acceptance of information, or opinion mutability.

It is surprising, however, that attribution of blame as a facet of moral disengagement was significant in predicting death penalty support, but no aspect of attributional style was found to be significant. Attribution of blame refers to how an individual assigns blame, either inwardly or outwardly, while attributional style is generalized beyond blame. It would be expected that since attribution of blame was a successful predictor of death penalty support, that internality, particularly, would also be significant, although results indicate that this is not the case.

Hypothesis Three

The third hypothesis explored in this research stated that individuals that do support the death penalty but exhibit greater external and global attribution styles will have a more mutable opinion than those with more internal and individualized attribution styles. This hypothesis cannot be accepted based on these data because no significant correlation was found between attributional style (any facet of it) and acceptance of information or opinion mutability. This finding is consistent with that of Vollum and Buffington-Vollum (2009).

Other Findings

One of the most interesting findings from this research was that while supporters of the death penalty overwhelmingly found arguments against the death penalty to be compelling, the majority of respondents (60%) did not change their initial support. This finding directly conflicts with Marshall's argument that support for the death penalty is mainly a function of lack of knowledge in how it is applied, and that people are more likely to reject its usage when they become aware of negative facts (Bohm, 1991). My findings were consistent with that of Ellsworth and Ross (1983), who found respondents were not likely to be swayed from their opinions in the face of opposing facts, suggesting that death penalty support is not solely rooted in factual evidence.

Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's (2009) study revealed that Statement 2, the argument that innocent people are killed by the death penalty and that wrongful convictions have been proven, was the most compelling, which was supported by this research. However, while 88.8% of respondents were compelled, a mere 45% (the lowest percentage of mutability) were then coerced enough to alter their opinion of support. This was not found to be true in Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's (2009) research, where 90% found the argument compelling and 33.2% (the highest percentage of mutability) were compelled to alter their support. My research, however, yielded a higher percentage of overall mutability than that of Vollum and Buffington-Vollum, at 40%. These results suggest that death penalty support is not predominantly rooted in lack of knowledge, but in deeper social-psychological and value-expressive factors, such as dehumanization. This also suggests that death penalty perception is not entirely rational, which brings to light the importance and significance of finding new ways to compel attitude shifts in

efforts to abolish the death penalty in the United States. As Mooney's (1999) study suggests, morality policy diffuses more quickly when supported by the majority, so efforts to abolish the death penalty must begin to focus on less rational conventions in order to ensure abolition policy will continue to diffuse to states with greater death penalty support.

Death penalty cost was one of the most compelling arguments to sway many death penalty supporters at 75.5%, and served to be the argument with the highest mutability percentage, at 52.9%. This is particularly important, since as Vollum and Buffington-Vollum argue, state budgets and cost issues serve as primary reasons for states to consider abolishing the death penalty, as it is more expensive than sentences of life without the possibility of parole. This is also significant because it highlights the rational side of death penalty opinion. While the yielded results indicate that death penalty support and mutability is not entirely rooted in rationality but rather deeper morality mechanisms and factors, this aspect indicates that rationality, while not the predominant factor, does indeed play a role in death penalty support.

A significant difference existed between age groups and support for the death penalty. Younger respondents, those between the ages of 20-29, were statistically significantly more likely to support the death penalty than older age groups. This is consistent with undergraduate students, who were significantly more likely to support the death penalty than those in graduate programs or at the professor level. This finding is consistent with that of Lester (1997), who found college aged individuals to be less supportive of the death penalty than high school students. Whether death penalty support

wanes as a result of age or higher education cannot be concluded, although research results would indicate that either or both may be the case.

While no significant differences in death penalty support were present between religious affiliations, it is worth noting that Catholics had the highest mean score among religions. This relates back to Bias's 2011 study that revealed Catholics were less likely to be influenced by outside factors and conflicting information and used their religion as a means to block out environmental persuasion.

It is notable that identifying as a republican was statistically significantly linked to greater death penalty support, lower acceptance of information, and lower rates of mutability. This is unsurprising, as pro-death penalty legislation tends to originate in states with republican governments. The aforementioned "death belt", where the majority of death sentences were handed down between 2004-2009, consisting of Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina, all have republican governments and residents that primarily identify as republican (Smith, 2012).

Limitations

Clear limitations were present in this research. Primarily, the sample size was relatively small and respondents were pulled from an academic conference, limiting the pool to generally more educated individuals involved in the education system within the United States. While comparison was still possible between age groups and levels of education (to an extent), many groups were left under-represented that would have been valuable to include in the study, such as groups less educated and more diverse. This limitation may have also impacted the geographical distribution and its significance (or lack thereof) when considering death penalty support. Based on legislation alone, it is

clear that death penalty support is likely high in the southern states, as the majority of those states still have a legal state level death penalty. According to this research, however, no difference was found in support between regions. This may be a product of the convenience sample, which only surveyed educated individuals, the majority of which were democrats (45%), a group that was significantly less likely to support the death penalty, particularly when compared to republicans.

Additionally, an overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents were Caucasian. This skews the results in a way that could potentially ignore some of the impacts that racial bias present in the usage of the death penalty has upon death penalty support. Racial discrimination served as a rather compelling argument against the death penalty (75.5%), and of those that found it compelling, 50% were less likely to support the death penalty. It would be interesting to see if, perhaps, those numbers would be higher when analyzing a more diverse dataset. Those directly impacted by the potential for bias may (or may not) be more compelled by such an argument and therefore less likely to support the death penalty. Since this research did not utilize a vastly diverse group, this question cannot be analyzed by these data presented.

Another limitation present is that this research does not explore acceptance of information or mutability of those who oppose the death penalty. While the focus of the research was how to alter opinions of those in support of the death penalty, examining the alternative would have served as useful and informative comparison.

Despite the present limitations, this research offers insight into rationalization of death penalty support and gives insight into the complexity of that support. Simply educating individuals about the arbitrariness, unfair application, expense, and the fact that

innocent individuals may be put to death is not enough to sway the opinions of the majority of people that support the death penalty. This research highlights that social-psychological factors, particularly moral disengagement, contributes to the complexity of death penalty attitudes and alters how an individual perceives information that conflicts with one's beliefs. This idea, as Vollum and Buffington-Vollum (2009) argue, is especially important for activists, lawyers, and policy-makers to consider. Probing for knowledge on how an individual attributes blame as well as their relative level of dehumanization during voir-dire, for example, could be highly beneficial for defense attorneys in selecting jurors more apt to be receptive to their presentation of mitigating facts, and therefore less likely to hand down a death sentence. As Salgado (2005) suggests, a death-qualified jury is more likely to favor prosecution testimony during the guilt phase of a capital trial and are more likely to hand down a death sentence, but perhaps utilizing some of the information presented in this research could benefit defense attorneys in avoiding a death sentence at the conclusion of the penalty phase of the trial.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

As the death penalty in the United States becomes increasingly controversial and overall support for its usage wanes, it is imperative to analyze who still supports it and the reasons behind that support. It is also necessary to investigate how mutable that support is, and under what circumstances. Support for the death penalty is not rooted entirely in rational thought, as research indicates that social-psychological factors, particularly the dehumanization facet of moral disengagement, significantly predicts death penalty support. In reference to death penalty abolition, it is important to identify those who support the death penalty and why, but it is equally essential to then investigate how to use that knowledge to alter support. Knowing who supports it, where they live, and why they support it provides the basis for uncovering more persuasive and effective ways to change majority support and therefore the entire criminal justice platform.

While this research only explores who, where, and potential whys, it would be beneficial to utilize a longitudinal study to explore how opinions and beliefs change over the course of time. Significant life changes may significantly impact one's beliefs and opinions about controversial topics, such as religion, politics, and the death penalty. My research, as well as previous studies, indicates that age and/or education may play a vital role in death penalty support, making a longitudinal study of shifting ideals particularly important.

An interesting facet to focus on in future research could be to delve deeper into the comparison of those identifying in different political parties, particularly the

difference between republicans and democrats. Republicans were found to be significantly more likely to support the death penalty, be less receptive contradicting information to their beliefs, and less likely to alter their opinion in the face of that information, which is interesting and deserves further scrutiny. What separates these groups? Would democrats, who generally opposed the death penalty, be similarly difficult to sway their opinions of opposition? How does where one falls along the political spectrum impact their receptiveness to contradicting information and their ability to alter their opinion in the face of this information?

Additionally, exploring deeper into why someone supports the death penalty, such as having each participant not only assess various situations in which the punishment would be employed, such as terrorism, rape, juvenile offenders, or mentally ill offenders, but also asking that each person provides an explanation for their opinion. This would be especially interesting if support shifted across various situations as it did in the few provided examples in Vollum and Buffington-Vollum's (2009) study. This information would be incredibly relevant, particularly in light of the heightened fears of terrorism in the United States. Are terrorism suspects regarded differently when considering the death penalty, even to those that normally do not support its use in standard murder cases? If so, why are these suspected terrorists deemed more deserving of the death penalty and what does that explain about an individual's rationale? As Seltzer (1987) concluded, one's fear of becoming a victim of a crime significantly impacts one's view of capital punishment, so it would be interesting to discover how this applies and how it differs in regards to terrorism.

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Appendix A

Death Penalty Support Survey

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Department of Geography
College of Arts and Sciences

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a Western Michigan University research project entitled "A Geographic Distribution Analysis and Examination of Social-Psychological Factors and their Impact on Death Penalty Support in the United States". The study is designed to analyze social-psychological factors, such as attributional style, levels of moral disengagement, and the value expressive function of attitudes, and their relative correlation with support or opposition to the use of the death penalty in the United States. A geographic distribution analysis will be conducted to determine any spatial patterns. Information may aid death penalty opposition groups in their efforts to change protocol and legislation. The study is being conducted by Dr. Lisa M. DeChano-Cook and Ms. Katy Moharter from the Department of Geography of Western Michigan University. The research is being carried out for part of the thesis requirements for Ms. Katy Moharter.

Your responses will be completely anonymous, please do not put your name or address anywhere on this form. You may choose not to answer any question by leaving the question blank. If you do not want to participate in the survey, please tell the researcher and return the survey. Returning the completed survey indicates your consent for the use of the answers you supply. If you have any questions, you may contact Dr. Lisa M. DeChano-Cook at (269-387-3536 or lisa.dechano@wmich.edu), Ms. Katy Moharter at (269-873-6957 or katy.l.moharter@wmich.edu), the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269-387-8293) or the vice president for research (269-387-8298).

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the lower left corner. Subjects should not participate in this project if the stamped date is more than one year old.

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H.S.I.R.B.

Approved for use for one year from this date:

MAR 24 2015

x 
HSIRB Office

Survey Code: _____

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Death Penalty Support Survey

Please answer some questions about yourself. This information will remain completely confidential.

AGE: _____ years GENDER: Male _____ Female _____

STATE OF RESIDENCE: _____

Choose the political affiliation you most closely identify with:

- A. Republican B. Democrat C. Libertarian
D. Independent E. Other: _____

Choose the religion you most closely identify with:

- A. Christianity – Catholic B. Christianity - other denomination
C. Judaism D. Islam
E. Atheism - I do not follow any religion F. Other _____

What is your race?

- A. Caucasian B. African American
C. Native American D. Asian/Pacific Islander
E. Hispanic F. Other: _____

What is your professional title?

- A. Undergraduate student B. Master's student
C. Doctoral student D. Professor
E. Other faculty/staff

Generally, do you support the use of the death penalty as a means of punishment?

- A. Yes, I support the death penalty B. No, I do not support the death penalty

Consider the following hypothetical situation:

You have been looking for a job unsuccessfully for some time.

1. Write down the one major cause:

Please circle one number for the following questions:

2. Is the cause of your unsuccessful job search due to something about you or to something about other people or circumstances?

Totally due to other people or circumstances
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Totally due to me

3. In the future when looking for a job, will this cause again be present?

Will never again be present
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Will always be present

4. Is the cause something that just influences looking for a job or does it also influence other areas of your life?

Influences just this particular situation
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Influences all situations in my life

5. How important would this situation be if it happened to you?

Not at all important
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Extremely important

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. It is alright to fight to protect your friends.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Damaging some property is no big deal when you consider others are beating people up.	1	2	3	4	5
4. A kid in a gang should not be blamed for the trouble the gang causes.	1	2	3	4	5
5. If kids are living under bad conditions they cannot be blamed for behaving aggressively.	1	2	3	4	5
6. It is okay to tell smart lies because they don't really do any harm.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Some people deserve to be treated like animals.	1	2	3	4	5

8. If kids fight and misbehave in school it is their teacher's fault.	1	2	3	4	5
9. It is alright to beat someone who bad mouths your family.	1	2	3	4	5
10. To hit obnoxious classmates is just giving them "a lesson."	1	2	3	4	5
11. Stealing some money is not too serious compared to those who steal a lot of money.	1	2	3	4	5
12. A kid who only suggests breaking rules should not be blamed if other kids go ahead and do it.	1	2	3	4	5
13. If kids are not disciplined they should not be blamed for misbehaving.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Children do not mind being teased because it shows interest in them.	1	2	3	4	5
15. It is okay to treat badly somebody who behaved as a "worm".	1	2	3	4	5
16. If people are careless where they leave their things it is their own fault if they get stolen.	1	2	3	4	5
17. It is alright to fight when your group's honor is threatened.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Taking someone's bicycle without their permission is just "borrowing it".	1	2	3	4	5
19. It is okay to insult a classmate because beating him/her is worse.	1	2	3	4	5
20. If a group decided together to do something harmful it is unfair to blame any kid in the group for it.	1	2	3	4	5
21. Kids cannot be blamed for using bad words when all their friends to it.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Teasing someone does not really hurt them.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Someone who is obnoxious does not deserve to be treated like a human being.	1	2	3	4	5

Statement 3: Contrary to popular perceptions, many families of murder victims do not want to see the offender executed. In fact, studies have revealed that victims' family members and other "survivors" often are not helped by the execution and even experience further victimization and traumatization from the associated criminal justice process.

Not at all compelling	Doesn't affect me	Somewhat compelling	Very compelling
1	2	3	4

Statement 4: Recent studies have found that the average cost per execution is between \$2.5 million and \$5 million. This is 2.5 to 5 times more expensive than the cost of keeping an offender in prison for their natural life (which, on average, costs \$1 million).

Not at all compelling	Doesn't affect me	Somewhat compelling	Very compelling
1	2	3	4

Statement 5: Numerous studies have found that race of both offender and victim plays a role in the administration of the death penalty. All relevant research shows that racial minorities are significantly more likely to receive the death penalty than white and/or wealthy individuals. Furthermore, offenders whose victims are racial minorities are substantially less likely to receive the death penalty than offenders whose victims are white.

Not at all compelling	Doesn't affect me	Somewhat compelling	Very compelling
1	2	3	4

Statement 6: Organizations such as the American Bar Association, countless observers and participants in capital trials, capital jurors, and scholarly research studies have all testified to the grossly incompetent legal representation offered to many capital defendants during their trials and sentencing. In addition to the often ill-prepared, ill-equipped, inexperienced or simply incompetent representation in many capital cases, numerous cases of mentally ill, drunken, and sleeping lawyers have been documented in recent years.

Not at all compelling	Doesn't affect me	Somewhat compelling	Very compelling
1	2	3	4

Based on the previous six statements, I am: **(circle one)**

- A. More likely to support the death penalty
- B. Not affected one way or other
- C. Less likely to support the death penalty

Thank you for your time and participation in this important research project.

Appendix B

HSIRB Approval Letter

HSIRB Approval

Date: March 24, 2015

To: Lisa DeChano-Cook, Principal Investigator
Katy Moharter, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 15-03-31

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “A Geographic Distribution Analysis and Examination of Social-Psychological Factors and their Impact on Death Penalty Support in the United States” has been **approved** under the **exempt** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., ***you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study.”*** Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 23, 2016