

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND ITS INFLUCENCE
ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF
THE DEATH PENALTY

by

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ABSTRACT

Public opinion on the death penalty has a long history of portraying individuals who receive the death penalty as the worst of individuals within our society. This perception has led to the idea that the killing of another individual is an adequate form of punishment, despite the history long battle to eradicate the use of the death penalty. The aim of the current study was to understand how those who support the death penalty justify their reasoning, using the Moral Disengagement theory to support the death penalty under varying questions which hint at illogical aspects of the death penalty that is used today. A two-part online survey to 70 criminology students at the University of Alabama and 55 online individuals via Prolific. Participants received questions which evaluated their overall knowledge on the death penalty, as well as questions aiming to prompt the use of disengagement techniques. These findings suggest that supporters of the death penalty may rely on techniques such as dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling to support the opinion on the death penalty. Results also revealed that factors such as gender, education, political party, and current region of residence influences both confidence on death penalty knowledge and total use of disengagement tactics. Implications from the current study may provide further insight in how individuals justify extreme acts of punishment such as the death penalty despite the punishment being a direct reflection of the original crime committed.

Keywords: Death Penalty, Moral Disengagement, Capital Punishment, Public Opinion

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

The aim of the current study was to understand how individuals, specifically those who support the death penalty utilize the theory of moral disengagement when justifying their opinion under various sets of questions. While past researchers have linked the theory to individuals who work in close proximity to the death penalty, the theory has not yet been generalized to the public. The current study seeks to understand how demographics like political party, gender, or geographical region influence the use of moral disengagement techniques among those support the death penalty. Over the course of two surveys, participants were evaluated on their knowledge of the death penalty, confidence in knowledge on current policies and how often disengagement techniques were activated.

The current research will be introduced by discussing, in detail, the theory of moral disengagement and how it has evolved over the past two decades for the purpose of the thesis in the first chapter. Next, relevant background information regarding the history of the death penalty, and how public opinion has shaped current policies throughout history is discussed in the second chapter. Methodology, including research design, data collection, design of the study, and the plan of analysis are described in the third chapter. The findings of the current study are detailed in the fourth chapter, before being discussed alongside the limitations of the study within the fifth and final chapter of the thesis.

Theoretical Framework

Moral disengagement is a preemptive cognitive process that justifies socially unacceptable behavior and reduces the associated guilt (Walters, 2020; Sykes and Matza, 1957; Bandura, 1999). Stemming from the psychological theory of moral behavior (Kohlberg, 1984), moral disengagement was developed by Albert Bandura (1999) to aid theorists in conceptualizing moral behavior. It instead focuses on explaining the self-regulatory (i.e., process of managing behaviors and feelings) and self-sanctioning mechanisms (i.e., process of refraining from morally distant behaviors) that eliminate anticipated feelings of guilt (Bandura, 1999; Walters, 2020).

There are prior cognitive processes that need to be explored to fully grasp moral disengagement: moral standards and moral agency. Moral standards are shaped through socialization from peers, parents, institutions, or interactions with strangers that allows an individual to shape a morality guide (Bandura, 1999). The latter, moral agency, is exercised through construction and adaptation of moral standards. As individuals exercise moral agency, judgement of personal standards in conjunction with situational circumstances are evaluated and responded with self-sanctions deemed most appropriate. Explicitly, refraining from actions which directly violate their moral standards, thus, avoiding self-condemnation (Bandura, 1999;1994, Osofsky, 2005). Both moral standards and moral agency are expressed through our self-regulatory mechanisms and self-sanctions.

However, self-regulatory mechanisms that govern moral conduct (i.e., conduct that is aligned with moral standards) must be activated. Once activated, there are various psychosocial maneuvers in which self-sanctioning behaviors can disengage from inhumane conduct (Bandura,

1999;) McAlister et al, 2006). These psychosocial maneuvers through which a person disengages, has led to the development of the moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999).

The act of moral disengagement rests on the idea of moral agency and is completed through eight different processes. The first set of disengagement techniques operates on cognitive reconstruction. This is the ability to identify negative mental distortions and alter them, so they fit within the suited context (American Psychological Association, 2021). Techniques in this category are moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison. (Bandura, 1999; McAlister et al., 2006).

Moral justification arises when a situation is socially unacceptable but is later justified to make it personally acceptable (Bandura, 1999;1994). To illustrate, Bandura (1999), stated that moral justification occurs within military conduct. During the transformation from citizens to military personnel, individuals undergo an alteration of their cognitive morality allowing for the act of killing others while avoiding self-censure (i.e., conscious self-blame). Euphemistic labeling is when language is sanitized to avoid the harsh realities of the action. For example, when discussing warfare, the term collateral damage is often used to avoid details of the negative outcomes associated with war (Corgan et al., 2008). Lastly, advantageous comparison is where individuals compare their behaviors to those who have committed worse actions to appear more acceptable (Bandura, 1991). Terrorists for example, see their acts as righteous when compared to the pain that is inflicted onto those with whom they most identify (Bandura, 1999).

The next set of techniques rely on minimizing the agentic role in which responsibility is claimed, rather than the individual accepting the responsibility, an authoritative role instead assumes the responsibility of harm. Techniques under these distortions include displacement and diffusion of responsibility (Bandura, 1999; McAlister, 2006).

Displacement of responsibility refers to attributing delinquent behaviors to a higher authority and thereby easing associated self-condemning thoughts and feelings. An example of this phenomenon is portrayed within the Milgrim (1974) experiment where individuals were instructed to administer a shock to others. The reason this experiment was successful was due to the participants being instructed that they were not responsible for the harm being done. Since they were not physically administering the shock, this allowed them to proceed with consenting to the administration of a shock to strangers. Diffusion of responsibility is a disengagement technique where the responsibility is acknowledged but is dispersed among an array of individuals (Bandura, 1999; McAlister, 2006). Notably, Kelman (1973) acknowledged a prominent avenue for this technique: division of labor. When distributed among a group, these activities have become detached as subfunctions, shifting from a morality perspective to an operational point of view (Bandura, 1999).

The third set of techniques include weakening moral control operating through the misrepresentation of the effects of one's behaviors. This is accomplished through disregarding consequences and distorting consequences (Bandura, 1999). When an individual disregards their consequences, actions are minimized during moral dilemmas. According to Bandura (1999), minimization is achieved through social pressure, personal achievement, physical proximity and within hierarchal chain of commands.

The final set of moral disengagement mechanisms rely on how an individual views the perpetrators (Bandura, 1999). When individuals perceive others with common humanity, our empathic emotional reaction is activated and is constructed through perceived similarity and a sense of social obligation. Accordingly, when individuals are perceived to be different than us,

there is a lack of response to their wrongdoings, allowing for harsher reactions (Bandura, 1999; Deaner, 2012). Techniques within this set include dehumanization and attribution of blame.

Dehumanization, explain by Bandura (1999), takes take form as depriving someone of human qualities (e.g., dignity) and subjecting individuals to degrading conditions. As a result, dehumanization allows individuals to no longer view others as human who possess feelings, hopes or concerns, they are instead considered subhuman (Kelman, 1973; Bandura, 1999). For instance, nations experiencing wartime will dehumanize their opponents with demonic or bestial images alleviating self-censure, and making it easier to attack (Levi, 1987; Bandura, 1999).

The final technique of moral disengagement, attribution of blame, rests on turning one's adversaries into justification for punitive sanctions (Bandura, 1999). People will view themselves as fault-less victims where their injurious conduct is fueled by an outside source. In addition, Bandura (1999) argues that under this technique punitive conduct is more a reasonable defense to harmful behavior. Unfortunately, this allows for extreme maltreatment due to devaluing individuals based off their perceived culpability (Lerner and Miller, 1978; Bandura, 1999). Furthering the harm caused by this technique, Bandura (1999) expressed that shifting the blame onto circumstances, individuals see their injurious actions not only as excusable but also self-righteous.

Originally, Bandura (1999) concluded that there are eight techniques of moral disengagement, however the current study will only be concerned with dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling. Reasoning to focus on these three techniques rather than all eight was intentional. The three techniques focused on in the current study are the least prominent among current capital punishment statues unlike the remaining

techniques. Additionally, the three chosen techniques are believed to be the most relevant to the public.

Dehumanization

Dehumanization occurs when individuals deny human orientated qualities to collective out-groups to mitigate a sense of self guilt (Bandura, 1999; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Boucher, 2019; Vaes et al., 2021; Agadulla et al., 2022). Presentation of dehumanization tactics can vary from subtle microaggressions (e.g. “you throw good for a girl”) to mass acts of genocide. Determination of which tactics that will be utilized may be determined by either personal context (e.g., emotional, or cognitive) or contextual aspects like threatening situations (Bandura, 1999; Diniz et al., 2019).

Later theorists expanded on the idea of dehumanization and the specific ways it presents among individuals. Research by Haslam (2006) developed the dual model of dehumanization which expressed two main routes of dehumanization: animalistic and mechanistic. This model guides the analysis of the current research.

Animalistic dehumanization deprives individuals of human unique qualities (Haslam, 2006; Vaes et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2022). These human unique qualities mark the boundary of humans from other species insinuating a lack of intelligence, self-control, rationality, or civility, therefore allowing the perpetrator to justify their violent acts without the associated self-guilt (Haslam, 2006; Agadullina et al., 2022). Animalistic dehumanization allows individuals to process their feelings of disgust or contempt arising from the out-group collective as an explanation of their behavior (Haslam, 2006; Agadullina et al., 2022).

The latter portion of the dual model of dehumanization is mechanistic, which strips individuals of their human nature qualities such as warmth, agency, emotionality, and the

cognitive capacity for depth (Haslam, 2006; Agadullina et al., 2022; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2022). Individuals utilize mechanistic dehumanization to equate individuals to inanimate objects to fulfill the assumption that they lack qualities of human nature. Rather than trying to reason with a negative feeling, mechanistic dehumanization transpires from perceived differences from others who are seen as emotionally inert (Haslam 2006).

Presentation of dehumanization can occur in everyday environments (e.g. educational settings, workplaces, or social media) or during high stake events like political debates (Stinglhamber et al., 2022). More subtle dehumanization often take form as microaggressions which occur in everyday conversations (Cascalheira et al., 2023). Microaggressions can be presented within verbal, behavioral, or environmental insults that aim to belittle others. Additionally, evidence has also indicated that blatant dehumanization may be more common among those who hold stigmatizing attitudes, anger, avoidance of others, lack of pity and increased blame of others (Atkinson et al., 2021). Results of dehumanization can lead to mental health problems, or the possibility of hostile attitudes and behaviors as a form of retaliation (Kim et al., 2023; Kteily & Landry, 2021).

Dehumanization is also present in death penalty cases, where depictions of these individuals occur not only during the trial but can also occur within the environments they are housed in while awaiting their death (Johnson, 2014; Myers et al., 2018; Sutton et al., 2022). Instances of dehumanization for those on death row may be highlighted in the language that is used surrounding these individuals. For example, Weill & Haney (2017) found that language used to characterize these individuals play a role in how others view the perpetrator and the nature of their crimes. Even simple words such as ‘monster’ can be enough to enable further dehumanization within all capacities. The current study will be looking at how individuals

among the general population utilize dehumanization tactics when asked about their opinions on those who are currently incarcerated.

Advantageous Comparison

According to Bandura (1999) advantageous comparison is a tactic that relies on comparing an individual's behavior to something worse. This allows an individual to rationalize their behavior as appropriate and thereby continue the cycle of moral disengagement.

Advantageous comparison can be used in various contexts ranging from violent acts such as war to school children not wanting to participate in physical exercise. When comparing inherently violent injustices, individuals rely on this mechanism to alleviate the associated guilt (Bandura, 1999).

Previously, advantageous comparison has been used to rationalize a range of behaviors (e.g. terrorism, warfare, and lack of focus among students). This study is investigating how individuals use advantageous comparison to justify their support of capital punishment. In doing so, the current study will be comparing the procedures of the criminal justice system and the similarities they have to the individuals that are being sentenced to death row.

Euphemistic Labeling

The last technique that is being examined for the current study is euphemistic labeling. With this technique, sanitizing (i.e. less graphic) language allows harmful conduct to be seen as respectable and reduces the responsibility for the individual. Euphemistic labeling may be used within a context to describe unpleasant outcomes like being fired from a job, rather describing it as a "career altering enhancement" (Bandura, 1999).

In fact, humans have resorted to euphemistic language to camouflage the realities of life with other expressions (Halmari, 2010). Again, we can see this technique be used for more

intense situations such as bombings during war. Civilians who are in the crossfire are referred to as “collateral damage” therefore sanitizing state executions rather than exploiting the horrifying truth (Bandura, 1999). Research from Elizabeth (1975) unveiled that loaded language (e.g., collateral damage, or friendly fire) can influence memory and overall perception of events. Through these euphemisms, there is a psychological distance between the perpetrators and their inflicted actions.

Euphemisms may be an escape to the growing concern at the attempt to manipulate thoughts and opinions which may be difficult in the face of public perception. This underhanded (i.e., misrepresentation) type of euphemism is not the only type of euphemisms that is relied on within language. Other forms of euphemisms may take place to protect (i.e., created in response to taboos such as drugs), to uplift (i.e., inflate phrases), to reveal or inspire, to show solidarity or to merely entertain others (Burrige, 2012)

The current study will aim to understand the ways individuals sanitize the language they use around capital punishment, specifically the death penalty. Measures will probe participants to describe how individuals feel when talking about methods of execution in the most explicit form.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review

Over the last 5 years, an average of 26.6 death sentences and 18.6 executions are occurring per year (Death Penalty Information Center, 2023). Most commonly individuals may be convicted of a capital sentence if they commit first-degree murder, treason, genocide, or are involved in the killing or the kidnapping of a Congressman, President, or Supreme Court Justice (Justice.gov, 2019). Typically, capital punishment is a state mandated policy therefore, states have the opportunity to include additional criminal offenses that are eligible for the death penalty. For example, as of April, 2023, Governor Ron Desantis signed a bill that allowed for a supermajority (e.g. 8 out of 12) of jurors to recommend a sentence of death (Fl.gov, 2023). Where in Alabama, the supermajority is 10 out of 12. These previously mentioned states are outliers, where the remaining states require a unanimous recommendation from jurors. The number of jurors to conclude their sentence is not the only difference among states. Criminal offenses may also range to include rape of a child, drug trafficking, or aggravated kidnapping (Death Penalty Information Center, 2017).

Death Penalty Support

Historically, Gallup polls have been utilized the most to evaluate support for the death penalty. Other polling platforms such as the Harris Poll and General Social Survey are also used to evaluate public support on the death penalty. Although having been accepted, they hold their share of ambiguity due to the nature of their questioning (Harris, 1986). Polling first began in the early 1900s with results showing a steady decrease in support beginning around the 1950's and continuing throughout the early 1960s (Newport, 2010). Support for the death penalty reached an all-time low of 42% in 1966. Following the *Furman vs Georgia* (1972) case, gradual increase of support peaked in 1994 with a majority (e.g. 80%) of individuals supporting the death penalty (Burgason and Pazzani, 2014). Although support for the death penalty is influenced by time periods, other factors may influence the everchanging state of death penalty support.

Situational factors may influence how individuals feel regarding the death penalty in specific moments, however, research continuously shows differences in support among demographic groups (Borg, 1997). A robust difference in support is common between genders, with men predominately supporting the death penalty more than women. Past literature indicates higher levels of support among individuals leaning towards more conservative values, married individuals, and white males (Borg, 1997; Eisenberg, 2001; Stack, 2004; Cochran and Chamlin, 2006; Anderson et al, 2017; Jones, 2018).

Commonality of support also stems from southern regions of the country. Research from Borg (1997) concluded that southern subculture promotes more punitive sanctions when it comes to punishing offenders. The theme of punitiveness is not exclusive to criminal offenses, when punishing school children, the method of spanking was favored by 86% of southerners. Whereas

only 66% of northerners favored the punishment of spanking (Flynn, 1994; Borg, 1997). Dispute over the death penalty is not only reliant on factors like geographical regions, but it also has been a nationwide concern since the very beginning.

Since the early 1600s the death penalty has been a crime-fighting tactic employed within the United States. The constitutionality of the death penalty has been disputed since the early-modern period when the first wave of abolitionist fought for the eradication of the punishment as it was said to violate an individual's 8th and 14th amendments (Boehm, 1999; Garland, 2010).

Under the 8th amendment, American citizens are protected from any cruel and unusual punishment imposed upon them from the law (Stein, 2017). Early cases challenged the methods of execution and how they were implemented to be in violation of the 8th amendment. For example, cases such as *Wilkerson v. Utah*, (99 U.S. 130 1878) and *In re Kemmler*, (136 U.S. 436 1890) argued that their means of execution violated their 8th amendment protective rights. In the case of *Wilkerson v. Utah*, (99 U.S. 130 1878), the court ruled that the firing squad was an appropriate punishment for murder (Dow, 2019).

Despite the court disagreeing with the defendant, this case led to the development of a limiting principle: punishment of torture and unnecessary cruelty (Boehm, 1999). Examples of torture or unnecessary cruelty punishments provided by the Courts included disemboweling, stoning and burning at the stake are unconstitutional (Garland, 2010).

In the case of *In re Kemmler*, (136 U.S. 436 1890), the legality of electrocution was challenged as a cruel and unusual punishment. Yet again, the court dismissed the claims, stating that the newest method was not unconstitutional per se (Garland, 2010). Results from this case led the court to develop another limiting principle, lingering death. This principle established that if the method did not extend past a mere extinguishment of life, then it was constitutional

(Boehm,1999). Although the previous cases established limiting principles to redefine future cases, later landmark cases changed the trajectory leading to the modern death penalty of today.

In the early stages of the abolitionist movement, the courts began to instill more defined procedures as the movement progressed. In 1910, the case of *Weems v. United States* (217 U.S. 349 1910) established the automatic proportionality review which guaranteed defendants to a case review that if ruled in favor of the defendant, would state their punishment as cruelly disproportionate to the offense (Garland, 2010).

The precedent case of *Trop vs Dulles* (356 U.S. 86 1958), the defendant was a U.S Army soldier charged with desertion during WW2 and was sentenced with years of hard labor, a loss of pay as well as being denationalized (Bohem, 1999). During his appeals, *Trop* argued that his punishment violated his constitutional right under the 8th amendment to which the Supreme Court agreed, leading to a reduction in his sentencing (Death Penalty Information Center, 2019). During this case, the courts established the evolving standards of decency test and dignity of man test (Death penalty Information Center, 2019; Garland, 2010). As Chief Justice Warren stated, the 8th amendment should not be implied as a fixed standard, but instead as a marker for an evolving standard that marked the progression of a maturing society (Garland, 2010).

Under the 14th amendment, deprivation of due process and equal protections is deemed unconstitutional (Garland, 2010). Cases that challenged 14th amendment violations were consumed with jury implication, and trial proceedings (Garland, 2010). Prior to any landmark cases, juries who were openly opposed the death penalty were immediately dismissed, and jurors were provided minimal sentencing guidelines. Meaning, the decision of guilt was often consolidated with the decision to impose the death penalty (Bohem, 1999; Garland, 2010).

In 1968, *Witherspoon v. Illinois* (391 U.S. 510) challenged the imposition of the death penalty on the grounds of 14th amendment violations. Arguing that jurors who showed mere reservations, or open opposition towards the death penalty were removed from jury selection was in direct violation of the amendment. The court refrained stating that the empirical evidence presented was not sufficient to rule in favor of the defendant (Benard & Dwyer, 1984). Despite their dismissal of empirical data, the court did uphold the constitutionality of the statute which allowed jurors to be dismissed from selection if they hesitated to impose a death sentence. (Benard & Dwyer, 1984).

In following years, more defendants challenged the 14th amendment like in the case of *McGautha v. California*, 402 U.S. 183 (1971). Here the defendant challenged the practice of unguided discretion of juries. Stating that unguided discretion procedures resulted in arbitrary and capricious sentencing, violating their due process and equal protection clauses (Garland, 2010; Death Penalty Information Center, 2019). In a similar manner, the case of *Crampton v. Ohio* (consolidated under 402 U.S. 183) argued that establishing guilt and recommending a sentence within the same proceeding was in direct violation of the 14th amendment (Boehm, 1999; Garland, 2010; Death Penalty Information Center, 2019). Despite their best efforts, the courts rejected such claims, leading them to continue the practice of unguided discretion as well as a consolidated deliberation meeting for the jurors (Death Penalty Information Center, 2019).

Cases which challenged the constitutionality of the death penalty increased, until 1972 where the case of *Furman V Georgia* (408 U.S. 238) led to the brief moratorium of the death penalty (Boehm, 1999; Garland, 2010). Defendant William Furman argued that applying the death penalty within the current manner violated his 8th and 14th amendments (Boehm, 1999; Stein, 2017). Throughout his trial, *Furman* (408 U.S. 238) highlighted the racially driven motives

stemming from the jury panel constituted as unfair punishment. In a five-to-four decision, the Supreme Court sided with the defendant, acknowledging the injustice that was served. Comparatively, in the past the Supreme Court rarely sides with the defendant (see *In re Kemmler*, (136 U.S. 436 1890); *McGautha v. California*, 402 U.S. 183 (1971)), therefore making this case notable. Another implication of this case came about when all nine justices wrote dissents on the case, examining the legal affairs while stating their opinion on the matter (Bohm, 1999, Garland, 2010).

A result of the case led to a national de facto moratorium on the use of the death penalty throughout the country. Due to the disqualifications of executions, an estimated 40 states overturned nearly 600 death sentences which were then commuted to life without the possibility of parole. For what appears to be the first time in history, the Court undoubtedly acknowledged the moral and legal concerns surrounding the death penalty, reducing their confidence in the effectiveness of the punishment (Bohem, 1999). Despite the brief intermission of death sentences, the Court allowed individual states to reinstate the punishment of death if they reconstructed their legislation to appear more defined.

In the following years, plenty of states began to reconstruct their statutes, aimlessly awaiting to be approved by the Supreme Court. However, the court hesitated to rule on the validity of statutes until 1976 during case of *Gregg Vs Georgia* 428 U.S. 153 (1976). Among the states that redefined their statutes, common corrections were made in terms of unguided discretion given to jurors and the bifurcation of trials (Boehm, 1999). Under the guided discretion statutes, jurors were provided with factors (e.g., aggravating and mitigating) to consider during deliberation. During the bifurcated trials, juries will first deliberate if they find the defendant to be guilty of the crime and then will have a secondary deliberation for the

punishment (Bohm, 1999). The trials of *Gregg Vs Georgia* 428 U.S. 153 (1976), *Jurek v. Texas*, 428 U.S. 262 (1976) and *Proffitt v. Florida*, 428 U.S. 242 (1976) (i.e. consolidated cases) provided sufficient reconstruction of death penalty statutes, allowing the reinstatement of the death penalty (Bohem, 1999; Garland, 2010, Stein, 2017). Thus, the reinstatement of the death penalty with newer modification paved way for the death penalty that is utilized today.

Public Opinion

A plethora of factors (e.g. gender, victim race, and the defendant's involvement with the crime) can contribute to an individual's choice to either support or oppose the death penalty. Despite overall support, researchers have concluded that statistical facts such as exoneration numbers may influence individual's away from the death penalty, however, specific crimes when paired together may affirm a death sentence (Norris and Mullinix, 2019). Illustrating this concept, researchers Burgason and Pazzano (2014) examined how individuals would proceed with a sentencing recommendation when pairing murder alongside theft, and results showed a significant decrease in support for the death penalty. However, when they paired more violent crimes together (e.g rape and murder) support for the death penalty increased overall.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Research questions

The goal of the current study is to understand whether individuals if given the opportunity to justify their opinion on the death penalty will utilize moral disengagement techniques (e.g. dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling). For proper assessment, participants will answer a multiple-choice survey where their knowledge on current death penalty policies will be tested, followed by a secondary survey. The latter survey will probe moral disengagement techniques over a range of questions in various formats (e.g. free response, multiple choice, and Likert scale).

Hypotheses

Previous research has examined the extent in which moral disengagement techniques were utilized by individuals who work directly with the death penalty. This research provided a foundational understanding for the current study (Ofosky, 2005). Research on the theory of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; 1994; Ososky, 2005; Tillman et al, 2018; Walter, 2020) has properly prepared this study by providing guidelines to test these techniques within various circumstances, however for the purpose of this study, it will be applied in the context of public opinion on capital punishment.

1.) Do individuals use moral disengagement when facilitating their opinion on the death penalty, regardless of proposition or opposition of the policy?

Here, researchers hypothesized that individuals, regardless of their stance, will utilize the above-mentioned techniques of moral disengagement when presented with controversial questions regarding capital punishment. However, the level of reliance on moral disengagement is unknown due to the novelty of the study.

2.) When concerned with the techniques of dehumanization, is there a common theme of wording used to express their opinion as it is related to individuals who receive capital punishment? Furthermore, will individuals use more sanitized language when asked about methods of the death penalty in contrast to how individuals speak about the individuals on death row?

When discussing the process of dehumanization, researchers anticipate that there will be a common route among supporters when justifying their opinion. Commonality of the themes to describe those faced with capital charges is unknown, however, researchers suspect higher levels of moral disengagement within the dehumanization measures by examining the harshness of the terms used.

While discussing the methods of execution in the process of simultaneously justifying their opinion with harsher language, researchers expect to see higher preference of sanitized language when facilitating their opinion. This stems from the anticipated feeling of uncomfortability when reading explicit descriptions of how the lethal injection and execution process unfolds.

- 3.) When comparing the mechanisms of the death penalty to the actions of court room actors such as prosecutors, will individuals be more inclined to utilize advantageous comparison as a mode of disengagement when facilitating their opinion?

Anticipation for increased levels of advantageous comparison stems from the comparison of what the public deems to be good (e.g. the law) to those who are the “worst of the worst” (Boehm, 1999). Within this context, the public sees the law as mainly a positive environment that strives to make society a safer environment in comparison to those who are currently being charged with a capital offense. Therefore, engaging in advantageous comparison techniques to decrease the sense of guilt to support the death penalty.

- 4.) What is the relationship between education level and confidence on the level of knowledge pertaining to the death penalty?

Researchers here suspect that individuals who hold a higher status of education will have a lower self-evaluation in terms of confidence related to death penalty knowledge. While those who lack educational status will have an inflated sense of confidence on death penalty knowledge. Researchers here are interested in the relationship between education status and confidence level as it relates to the individuals overall score provided following the first survey.

Data and Methods

The current study aimed to examine how supporters of the death penalty potentially utilized moral disengagement techniques (e.g., dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling) when discussing their support for the death penalty.

The study is informed by data collected from two samples. The first sample consists of 70 students from the University of Alabama. These participants were located and recruited using a convenience sampling strategy. All participants were recruited by the lead researcher from

various criminology courses during the fall semester of 2023. Recruitment was aided by the offer of extra credit for participation by the instructors of record of the respective courses. To participate in the study, participants in the first sample had to be at least 18 years of age and legally allowed to vote within the United States.

The second sample consists of 55 individuals who were recruited through Prolific in the fall of 2023. Prolific is an online research platform that assists researchers with recruitment and management of participants for individuals' surveys (Prolific, 2024). Participants in this sample were selected using a convenience sampling strategy. Specifically, the sample is composed of all the registered Prolific users who met the research criteria, signed up for the study from October 24th to November 7th, and completed both sections of the study. To participate in the study, Prolific users had to be at least 22 years old and legally allowed to vote in the United States. The second sample was rewarded with financial compensation for full completion of both surveys. Across the two surveys, individuals were paid roughly \$11.00 per hour they spent on completing each survey.

Because the initial sample was overwhelmingly composed of individuals under the age of 22, and many demographics (e.g., education level, and current residence) lacked variability, the second sample allowed for an increase in diversity among the total participant pool.

Demographics

The total number of participants in the study was 125 individuals, with 70 individuals in the student sample and 55 in the Prolific sample. The student sample ranged in age from 18 to 54 with an estimated 95% (n=67) of participants being 23 years or younger. The Prolific sample ranged in age from 18 to 68 with approximately 92% (n=51) being older than 23.

Both samples were predominately female (n = 90), with the student sample including only 14 males and the Prolific sample including 21 males. Only the Prolific sample included one individual who identified as non-binary. Regarding current residence, the student sample primarily resided in the South (81.4%) with the remaining participants residing in the Midwest (11.4%), Northeast (5.7%), and West (1.4%) In contrast, the Prolific sample primarily resided in the South (42.9%), with remaining participants residing in the Midwest (23.2%), Northeast (16.1%) and West (16.1%).

A total 82.9% of the student sample had completed high school as their highest education level. Approximately 8.6% of this sample had previously obtained an associate degree, 4.3% obtained a GED/Equivalent degree, 2.9% obtained a bachelor's degree and 1.4% held a degree higher than a bachelor's. In the Prolific sample 41.1% currently had a bachelor's degree, 23.2% held degrees higher than a bachelors, 19.6% only obtaining a high school diploma, 8.9% held an associate degree and the remaining 5.4% holding a GED/Equivalent degree.

Political affiliation was also accounted for the current study. In the student sample, most students, 40% were conservative, 25.7% indicated being moderate, 24.3% were liberal, 8.6% chose 'other' and the remaining 1.4% were considered socialist. In the Prolific sample, 55.4% indicated being liberal, 23.2% were affiliated as moderates, 8.9% were conservative, 8.9% were socialist and the remaining 1.8% were considered 'other.'

Data Collection

Data for the current research was collected through a two-part survey questionnaire that was provided over a two-week period. A high priority for the current study was to ensure anonymity for each participant. Students were instructed to email an encrypted email (e.g., proton) address with proof of survey completion. Choice in utilizing Proton as the sole

communication tool was to ensure anonymity and security throughout the recruitment process. Prolific users were recruited through the platform itself, and in a similar manner, they were provided a link to the first survey. Recruitment through Prolific was on a first come first serve basis and recruitment ceased once 100 respondents were recorded.

Participants were given the second survey two weeks following the initial survey. Again, to ensure anonymity of the student sample, the two parts of the survey were linked through a self-generated ID code. For the self-generated ID, each survey contained of an additional 10 questions which were converted to numerical values to create an identification code. Surveys were linked together when 8 out of the 10 digits were an identical match. If codes had less than an 80% match, they were discarded from the survey altogether.

The questions generating the code would be measuring constant variables such as their “Favorite Color” or “Political Party” to ensure higher retention rate among the student sample. Individuals recruited through Prolific were provided an identification code through Prolific which stayed consistent between the two surveys. The researcher had no access to personal information regarding the code provided to this sample. All communication to these participants was strictly anonymous and occurred via Prolific.

Design of the study

Both surveys were distributed to participants using Qualtrics, a survey generator. The first survey focused on examining the level of knowledge participants had regarding the death penalty. It included measures of their perceptions of economic cost, methods of execution, and sentencing procedures involved with death penalty policies. The first survey also included additional measures of participants’ support for the death penalty and their level of confidence about their knowledge. The first survey included various forms of survey measures, including

multiple choice, Likert scales, select all that apply, and free response to decrease responding fatigue.

Primary focus on the second survey was to capture participants' potential disengagement techniques. Specifically measuring dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling. Data on the measures were collected through questions and probes that explicitly or implicitly referred to how they may have felt about the questions or statements they interacted with throughout the survey.

Comprehension questions were also put in place to ensure mindful responding among both samples. Individuals who did not respond correctly to the comprehension check were removed from the sample. Other disqualifying precautions for the first survey included overall lack of responding (e.g., left more than 2 answers blank, failed to answer self-identifying questions, and failed to answer support measures).

Analysis Plan

Participants' responses to the two surveys were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative analysis examined free responses through a thematic content analysis approach to understand how individuals might morally disengage while justifying their stance on the death penalty. The thematic content analysis was completed using NVivo 14 as an organizational tool. To start the analysis, the lead researcher began by reading through responses from both surveys, separating responses based on moral disengagement techniques being measured (e.g., dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling), and support for the death penalty. Measures that included follow up responses were then categorized based on their initial response. For example, if a free response question was

based on a previous Likert scaled item (i.e., if a respondent agreed, disagreed, or felt neutral), responses were grouped together based on the similarity of the response.

Once responses were grouped into these domains, the responses were then separated into subdomains based on their similarities or dissimilarities. For example, the responses comprising the dehumanization domain were distinguished based on whether the language used had an animalistic tone or mechanistic tone (Haslam, 2006). The responses comprising the advantageous comparison and euphemistic labeling domains were sorted based on whether the language used suggested emotional or logical reasoning (Bandura, 1999). Other variables of interest included the overall tone used by participants who support the death penalty and how often participants appeared to turn the question back on the surveyor.

Individuals who support the death penalty showed levels of moral disengagement across all domains. Dehumanization tactics were not only used within its respected items, but a reoccurring theme throughout the latter domains (e.g., advantageous comparison and euphemistic labeling). Individuals would often refer those who committed crimes as “evil” or “criminal.” Findings showed that supporters of the death penalty used more of a mechanistic tone throughout the survey. Advantageous comparison was also seen throughout its respected domain as well as the euphemistic labeling section. Often times supporters rested on the idea that any courthouse actor was deemed as “good,” and the offender was automatically seen as “bad.” Findings revealed those who support the death penalty used more logical reasoning rather than emotional when justifying their support. Lastly, euphemistic labeling was measured, and findings showed that supporters of the death penalty were either indifferent to the sanitized language or understood the reasoning behind the sanitized language. Throughout these measures, supporters

of the death penalty relied on emotional reasoning for their justification rather than logical reasoning.

The quantitative analysis consisted of running a linear regression in efforts to examine the use of advantageous comparison among respondents as well as understand the relationship between completed education level and support of death penalty knowledge in comparison to confidence levels that were measured. Within this analysis, the sample included both supporters and non-supporters.

Results from the linear regressions showed that supporters were more likely to use advantageous comparison when rationalizing their opinions on the death penalty. Further analysis also indicated that education level and support of the death penalty were strong predictors of confidence in knowledge regarding information on the death penalty.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

Qualitative analysis Support Measure

First, researchers were interested to understand the justifications provided by supporters to understand the basis of their support for the death penalty. The support measure was recorded among both samples and was included within both sections of the survey. The current themes are for the supporters only. Non-supporters were not included in the qualitative analysis as their reasoning often agreed with the statement provided, and rarely expressed that their reasoning aided in the opposition of the death penalty, unlike supporters of the death penalty.

For the first survey, supporters justified their reasoning through two main domains: limited use and just deserts. Other domains included a slight deterrent aspect and cost efficiency, however in total this was only represented in 4 cases.

Limited use

Under the justification of limited use, supporters reasoned their support by stating that they believe the death penalty should be used but only in a limited manner. Arguing for limited use, supporters either mentioned that the death penalty should be used only when necessary or they provided specific crimes in which they believe to sufficient for the death penalty (e.g., murder, rape, or mass shootings).

In total there were 36 remarks about limited use, with 22 instances of non-generalized limitations and 14 comments where specific crimes were provided. Common phrases associated with supporters proving non-specific crimes included, “heinous crimes,” “some crimes are just beyond correction,” and “I support the death penalty to certain point.” Hinting at support of the death penalty, however, in very limited manner. In contrast, supporters who accept the use of the death penalty in a limited use gave specific crimes they feel best fits the criteria for the punishment.

Appearing about 14 times, respondents condoned the use of the punishment when faced with crimes associated with “children/sexual assault,” “first degree murder,” “serial killers,” and “brutal crimes against children or adults.” Moral disengagement was assumed to be low within this category as individuals appeared to be providing external reasoning (i.e., crimes) that are deemed brutal enough for the death penalty. However, it was also noted that there is still a possibility for moral disengagement because of the subjectivity of what crimes are “heinous” enough for the death penalty.

Just Deserts

The next domain that was prominent was titled “*Just deserts*” as a result of supporters expressing a retributive mindset in context of the death penalty. Occurring about 14 times participants stated, “In some cases, I feel it is only best for the system to use an eye for an eye type of judgement, so I do support the death penalty.” Another respondent expressed,

People who commit crimes that are to the point of receiving the death penalty do not deserve to live amongst the rest of the beautiful people of the planet we call earth. They should never be able to walk in this planet and if they took the lives of innocent people, they don’t deserve to live for that.

The provided response above does a great job at hinting at the tone most used within individuals who support the death penalty. Often throughout the survey many supporters would

refer to someone on receiving a death sentence as a despicable human, assumed that the victim was innocent and presumed the crime was intensely brutal. As a result, these assumptions (i.e., heuristics about those on death row) were seen as aids in moral disengagement techniques.

The second survey also measured support among the participants. The results from this measure resembled those from the measure in the first survey. The supporters expressed their reasoning with limited use and just deserts. However, there were few remarks made about deterrence, cost, and a sense of providing justice in context of the death penalty. Again, more remarks indicated non-specific crimes (22) that proved eligible for the death penalty than specific crimes (14). Aligning with the first survey, most respondents felt comfortable with the death penalty against those who committed crimes against children, murdered someone, or committed acts of assault.

However, some variability was shown when supporters mentioned deterrence, cost, and a sense of justice. An example of reasoning by deterrence included “I also believe the death penalty serves somewhat of a deterrent while it’s a punishment” or again one respondent mentioned “I think it is a great crime deterrence method.” Although this may be seen as a justification for some supports, past research and analysis has concluded that the death penalty lacks deterrent qualities (Garland,2010; Anthony, 2020, Jouet, 2022).

Another form of justification used by supporters referred to the “effective” cost of the death penalty. This was indicated in statements such as “It is also expensive to pay for people to rot in jail when we could just easily get rid of them quicker and cheaper.” Again, hinting at the economic cost, one individual said, “instead of eating away at the country’s resources, should just be put to death.” Due to the literature which denounces the cost saving aspects of the death

penalty, researchers here assumed that individuals utilizing these factually incorrect statements engage in some form of moral disengagement (Garland, 2010; Vollum, 2010 Jouet, 2022).

Moral Disengagement measures

The first analysis of the current study consisted of a thematic content analysis aimed at understanding how individuals utilize moral disengagement techniques when justifying their opinion on the death penalty. Specifically, the current study was interested in examining how individuals use dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling to do so. To explore these aspects of moral disengagement, the study included measures of various topics such as methods of execution, death sentences, and how courtroom actors influence overall death penalty sentences. Questions were presented to participants in varying formats including Likert scales, multiple choice, and free response.

Dehumanization

Measures for dehumanization included two sets of questions that aimed to understand how individuals commonly refer to those on death row. The first measure (items 53 & 54) asked participants to list the first three words that came to mind when thinking of someone on death row. A follow up question prompted respondents to further explain characteristics they believe someone on death would possess. The second measure asked individuals if they think those on death row deserve inhumane treatment (refer to item 55). Next, respondents were asked to explain their reasoning for the level of inhumane treatment.

Responses for items (53 & 54) were categorized into one of the following subdomains: negative or gloomy wording. Responses within the negative wording subdomain consisted of wording such as “murderer” “criminal” or “psychopath.” Whereas those who fell within the gloomy category reference these individuals as “hopeless,” “depressed,” or “remorseful.”

Supporters for the death penalty appeared to use negative wording more rather than gloomy wording. Negative wording occurred roughly 49 times throughout the measure inquiring about the first three words, whereas gloomy wording was estimated to be 26 instances. When respondents were encouraged to provide more characteristics, they believe someone on death row would have, descriptions of crime occurred 52 times, and 16 instances of physical descriptions were presented.

An example of a crime descriptions provided is “A person who has committed particularly heinous crimes such as murder of a child or the use of torture while killing another.” Many references of crime descriptions included crimes committed against children, murder and offenses that are “heinous.” Physical descriptions presented as “unable or apathetic towards rehabilitating,” “A character might be ill, psychotics, and crazy” or descriptions of gender and race also occurred.

However, for the purpose of understanding the level of potential disengagement, this section was further analyzed using the dual factors model originally developed by Haslam (2006). Responses were either coded as animalistic or mechanistic to allude to disengagement levels.

According to the dual model (Haslam, 2006), when individuals engage in animalistic connotation, they deprive individuals of human unique qualities (e.g., rationality, moral sensitive, civility) (Haslam, 2006; Vaes et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2022). Responses were classified to have an animalistic tone when they referenced similar words such as “evil,” “violent,” or “vicious.” Additionally, animalistic phrases were coded when descriptions of “heinous” or “violent” crimes were provided. Utilizing this language was assumed to strip individuals of such human qualities.

The second aspect to the dual model to Haslam (2006) is where individuals may deprive others of their human nature qualities, referred to as mechanistic dehumanization (Vaes et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2022). Common instances of mechanistic dehumanization were inferred when supporters vilified individuals to their crime (i.e., someone who committed murder is called a murderer) or when individuals vilified mental illnesses (e.g., psychopath, sociopath). Phrases that were deemed to be mechanistic occurred when a respondent mentioned lack of remorse, rehabilitation, or explicitly stated they do not deserve to live. Reasoning for this analysis indicated that mentions of mental illness or the incapability to show remorse inferred lack of human nature qualities which closely aligns with mechanistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006).

Overall, it appears that supporters of the death penalty had adopted a mechanistic tone more often in comparison to an animalistic tone. Animalistic references accounted for (33.3%) of total dehumanization measures. Whereas mechanistic reference accounted for (66.7%) of dehumanization measures. These findings reveal that individuals who support the death penalty may morally disengage to support the death penalty by reducing and individuals' capacity for possessing human nature qualities. Instead, they expressed their distaste for individuals sentenced to death by referring to them with mechanistic language.

Next, participants were asked if individuals on death row deserve inhumane treatment, refer to item(s)(55 & 56). Under this set of questioning, the following domains included, still humans, operational reasoning and just deserts.

Still humans

There were an estimated 33 instances where supporters indicated that people facing the death penalty do not deserve inhumane treatment due to them still being humans despite their

current incarceration status. Variation in their reasoning ranged from already receiving prison treatment to the death penalty being their sentence. For an example, one participant expressed “They are still a human” and another individual made the remark that “I don’t necessarily believe that they deserve inhumane treatment while they are on death row. They already have a severe punishment coming towards them.” Many respondents acknowledged the insufficient treatment that incarcerated individuals face, and despite this, supporters feel that they are deserving of such treatment because of the crime they committed. One respondent stated:

I do not see anyone deserving inhumane treatment, no matter what they have done. They do deserve to be locked up, having limited number of visitors and hours of free time. But they do not deserve to be treated differently then any other inmate. They did their crime that put them where they are, no matter the severity of the crime it is not a guard or other inmates’ decision to punish them further. Their sentence is handling their punishment enough, other people do not need to step in.

It appears that despite their support of the death penalty, many still acknowledge that individuals facing the death penalty are still human and therefore deserve adequate treatment. Many participants also provided other limitations they believe seem fit for someone on death row, to include, tolerable living conditions, limited visitors, and should receive the bare minimum for food accessibility (i.e., food quality should be bare minimum besides their last meal).

Operational

Other justification for supporters of the death penalty aligned with operational benefits of the criminal justice system and correctional facilities. Here respondents recognized that stooping to the defendant’s level will only create operational issues. This domain was associated with measure (56). For example, one respondent mentioned:

They deserve human treatment because that is the way our legal system is set up and it is [t]he ethical way to deal with crimes. It provides order and organization as well to know what procedures will be followed according to law and not emotion.

Others within the operational subdomain, stated the lack of efficiency of “stooping” to their level. These respondents made comments such as “No sense in becoming the monster to fight the monster.” Some indicated that, for operational purposes, the punishment should be carried out faster with an “execute judgement and move on” mentality. It appears that individuals here may not be morally disengaging to a large extent due to their logic of their justification and view those on death row as still humans, therefore expressing excessive inhumane treatment should not be condoned.

Just Deserts

In a similar manner to the support measure, those who support the death penalty may rest on a “just deserts” mindset. A total of 19 instances occurred where individuals justified the support of inhumane treatment against those who are currently on death row in this way. Again, the domain was apparent in the participants’ responses to item (56). One respondent said, “because they are inhumane with what they had done” or “I agree I think what they did was inhumane, so they deserve the same back onto them.” It appears that those who are in support for the death penalty believe these individuals are deserving of inhumane treatment due to the nature of their crimes. Other justifications occurred with the statement “an eye for an eye,” indicating a just deserts mindset (Garland, 2010). This domain itself may speak to the mentality driving the use of the death penalty today. Rather than assuming that those who receive the death penalty are inherently horrible individuals, it may be a result of how the committed crime was perceived.

Advantageous comparison

The next variable at interest was advantageous comparison to understand how individuals may morally disengage when reasoning with their support of the death penalty. Questions here

rested on the comparison of what society deems to be socially acceptable to what is unacceptable. For example, item (49) compares the mentality of prosecutors who utilize the death penalty to promote a tough on crime agenda to individuals who commit murder to boost their street credibility. Other measures (44, 45, 51 & 52) probed at the similarities of first-degree murder to the death penalty and how as a result from the death penalty, a life is taken even though a life being lost is the reason an individual is facing the death penalty.

Under the advantageous comparison measures, prominent domains included: job status, justice, legality, guilt, intention and peer validation. Further analysis was conducted to understand if those who utilized the technique of advantageous comparison approach their reasoning with an emotional or logical reasoning.

Job Status

Many respondents (n=21) expressed their support for the death penalty on the comparison that the prosecutor is completing a job, therefore it is appearing to be socially acceptable. Whereas someone who performs the act of murder to increase their street creditability is not socially acceptable. For example, one respondent said “A prosecutor’s job is to deal with crime. Street creditability is an issue of personal gain.” Another participant furthered this point by stating:

A prosecutor who is looking to use and enforce laws that are set in place by our government to build his agenda is very different that[n] the common citizen killing an innocent person to achieve street cred. Just because both situations may end on the death of a person, the scenarios are vastly different. One person is upholding the law (the prosecutor) and the other is breaking the law (criminal).

Despite the acknowledgement of the result (i.e., the death of a person) supporters seem to rely on the job status of the prosecutor when presented with the comparison of a socially acceptable procedure to a socially unacceptable act. This justification was most prominent in responses to item (49).

Justice

Next, supporters (n =10) expressed their support for the death penalty under the justification of justice. Most prominent within measures (49 & 50) supporters of the death penalty utilized advantageous comparison when describing the intent of each act. For example, “Sentencing someone to death based on being convicted of crimes is justified.” Extending this point, another respondent expressed: “its difference because one is for good, and the other is for bad.”

Indication of moral disengagement stemmed from supporters relying on the notion that one is simply a job, or it serves the purpose to provide justice, despite the outcomes of the statement being almost identical. Another reason this domain was assumed to be a route of moral disengagement is due to the inference of what justice means to others. As a society, we have deemed someone being sentenced to death as a form of justice, yet we fail to take into consideration the reason someone would commit capital murder in the first place. In the eyes of the individual on death row, the initial murder could’ve been done as a form of personal justice, however it lacks the shield of the law, therefore murder itself is punished through a legal form of murder (e.g., the death penalty).

Legality

Another avenue of advantageous comparison can be used by supporters to justify their stance on the basis that sentencing someone with a capital punishment is legal, and therefore acceptable. The legality domain was apparent in multiple measures. First appearing in items (44 & 45) as a justification and again in items (51 & 52) as reasoning for support of the death penalty as well. Often resorting to “unlawful” or “government sanctioned” terminology, there were overall 57 instances of this occurring. Detailing this belief, one participant stated:

Same as the last question. Capital punishment is taking a criminal and punishing them for a crime they committed with an available punishment. Prosecutors aren't out there sentencing people to death for shoplifting, there are guidelines to what punishment fits what crime. If you are sentenced to capital punishment you did a very bad crime and you need to pay for that crime. Murder is murder.

Like the job status domain, supporters here acknowledged that when the government sentences someone to death, it is a result of a previous crime that they committed. One participant mentioned, "one is a punishment for heinous crimes, the other is unlawfully taking a life." Another supporter stated that "one is against the law – murder. The other is carrying the law and punishment to its conclusions – death penalty." Once again, relying on the legal status of a death penalty sentence as a way to further overall support for the death penalty.

It is inferred that individuals under this domain engaged in higher levels of moral disengagement due to masking one type of murder (e.g., the death penalty) as positive, and 1st degree murder as negative. Despite the similar result of death of an individual in both situations, one is deemed acceptable due to the legal process that must be carried out prior to execution.

Guilt

Many respondents (n=19) justified their support of the death penalty through advantageous comparison by stating that those who are being sentenced to death are sentenced as the result of a previous crime. This domain only appeared in 19 instances within the measures (51 & 52). For example, the statement "Capital punishment is a result of the courts finding someone guilty, while the murder is a result of more personal motives" highlights the condemnation of someone who is potentially sentenced to death. Again, phrases such as "A murderer takes an innocent life, while the death sentence takes a guilty life" and "different motives" were used by respondents as justification.

It appears that supporters of the death penalty might morally disengage when faced with a comparison of socially acceptable concepts or unacceptable concepts. There is also a tendency to

rely on the status of the law and the guilt of an individual to proceed with support for the death penalty.

Intention

For this domain, there were 10 instances of individuals denouncing the similarity between the two acts due to the intention behind them in response to items (44 & 45). For example, one participant stated, “they didn’t irrationally just go out to kill the person that’s under the death penalty. Unlike the person that committed the crime” when asked to explain their reasoning. Another respondent said, “[the death penalty] should only occur if the criminal has murdered somebody.” Again, showcasing the difference in the intention between sentencing someone to the death penalty and someone who commits 1st degree murder. There were only 3 instances of supporters who appeared neutral about the statement but referenced the punishment aspect, stating that one is a punishment (e.g., death penalty), and one is considered bad (randomly taking a life). Therefore, supporters may morally disengage by relying on the intention for taking a life despite both scenarios which result in the loss of a life.

Peer Validation

The next domain revealed that when comparing ill-intentions of a prosecutor and an individual taking a life for personal reasons, supporters acknowledged the similarities. Stating that in both situations, individuals are striving to boost peer validation. In total there were 16 instances, in items (49 & 50) where individuals expressed the statements to be similar under the theme of peer validation. For example, one respondent stated:

I do think feel as if that is true because the reasoning behind the sentence isn’t true. The prosecutor doesn’t truly believe that the criminal deserves the death penalty, therefore, they are murdering someone for no reason but personal gain which is the same as the person killing for street credibility.

Others acknowledge the similarities through “popularity” or “promoting themselves.” Within this measure, it is assumed that supporters promoted a peer validation mindset, slightly exhibited advantageous comparison due to them exonerating prosecutors from any harm due to the socially acceptable outlook.

Emotional reasoning

For a statement to be categorized as an emotional reasoning response, researchers looked responses with a matter-of-fact tone. Here, emotional reasoning was assumed when respondents use their morals to drive their justification or used statements inferring a “that’s just the way things are” mentality. This included individuals who provided little critical thinking (i.e., explaining why within their answer) when justifying their reasoning. For example, statements like, “I do agree with this. Ego and personal gain should not be factors when it comes to issues like this” or “I think this is true to an extent because if you take someone s life shouldn’t you be punished by death also?” highlights assumption-based reasoning. The previous statements seem to indicate more of an emotional explanation for their answers rather than using logical reasoning in advance. In total, emotional reasoning seemed to occur roughly 40 times throughout the advantageous comparison measures.

Logical reasoning

In contrast, a logical statement was coded when individuals used examples, or rational thinking when justifying their responses. This occurred roughly 122 times when individuals used reasoning such as legality, guilt, intention, peer validation or providing justice for the use of the death penalty. Showing a more logical explanation, one respondent stated

Again, capital punishment is sanctioned by law and carried out by the state. And it is in response for the person being put to death very likely being guilty of terrible crimes and that is not usually the case in the instance of murder.

The logical reasoning seems to rely on a cause an effect mentality, whereas the emotional reasoning is pronounced through “I feel” or “that is just the way it goes” mentality. Out of the supporters, it appears most of them may overall lack moral disengagement seeing that more individuals use a logical reason to justify their support. However smaller instances of disengagement may appear when individualized statement are examined due to relying on their heuristics about the law or punishment as examined in previous measures.

Euphemistic labeling

To explore whether individuals morally disengaged by using euphemistic labeling tactics when justifying their stance on the death penalty the study employed 6 measures. Here, the focus was how questions were presented to respondents (i.e., the language being used). Topics of the questioning centered on execution methods, new death sentences, and functions of the death penalty.

Sounds better

Supporters may engage in euphemistic labeling when referencing specific phrases surrounding the death penalty. Many supporters (n=34) expressed that more sanitized language sounded better, when referring to measure (39 & 40). One respondent expressed “it sounds better just in general.” Through euphemistic labeling, sanitizing language around heavier concepts allows people to avoid anticipated feeling of guilt (Bandura, 1999; Corgan et al., 2008). Another supporter mentioned “I think lethal injection sounds less harsh and might be easier to say when talking openly about the death penalty and the method used.” Other observations included respondents speaking on the harshness of the latter option, expressing, “sounds more ethical,” “sounds medically more correct, “or “less pejorative.”

Shorter & Not Specific

Another way supporters (n=9) justified the use of more sanitized language, occurred where the shortness and lack of specificity of a phrase allowed supporters to feel comfortable with the terminology. In reference to measures (39 & 40), a respondent made the comment stating, “lethal injection is a shortcut way to say exactly what you call an overdose.” Hinting at the euphemism, one respondent stated that a term like lethal injection bypasses the harsh reality stating the phrase is “general enough that it does not discuss the specific physical reaction the body has.” Overtly stating that reasoning included shortness of the statement and lack of detail may make individuals feel more comfortable with the verbiage being used. Some supporters indicated that they wouldn’t mind using the harsher phrases explain their stance. Stating that “I don’t mind using the proper terminology of what is being done” and “why not use the correct term.” It has been assumed that use of more sanitized language allows individuals to morally disengage through language when navigating conversations surrounding the death penalty. Although some supporters stated they didn’t have a preference to the wording, they were inferred to disengage less than those who prefer more sanitized language.

No Difference

Many supporters (n=54) expressed they felt no difference when probed with the euphemisms on different topics about the death penalty. This was indicated in their responses to items 39 & 40. For example, a few respondents who lacked preference with verbiage emphasized “same result different name” and a “either name works” mentality. Some supporters expressed that lethal injection “is less words to say,” “more direct,” and “is more efficient” than an alternative such as “heart stopping sedative.”

Furthering this ideology of not see a difference in terminology, one supporter wrote, “It doesn’t make me feel bad or concerned because I believe that means more gruesome crimes are being committed and those people are still deserving to pay for what they did.” Some supporters even highlighted a “deserving” or a result of their crime as not having a change in opinion regarding item (34).

Showing this mentality across multiple questions, measures (31 & 32) explicitly showcases the harsher side of the electric chair. One participant responded by stating:

“I’m completely OK with using the electric chair as punishment. I did not learn anything new about these methods of execution because I’ve seen successful and unsuccessful uses of electric chairs recreated in movies and it aligns perfectly with the text above.”

As a result of the crime committed, those receiving the electric chair are “deserving” or it is “not the worst” method, which allows supporters to feel no difference even after reading gruesome details of the electric chair.

Reference of movies were also common among supporters within the euphemistic labeling measures. For example, for item (32) individuals may accept this form of the death penalty due to having seen a visual representation of the procedure. However, this mindset may be dangerous as the emotional response elicited from a movie may not transfer if the observation was in person (Bandura, 1999). Another common justification within the “no difference” domain aligns with previous justifications of “just deserts” and as a result since the individual is seen as deserving it, why should individuals care about sanitizing their language.

Some individuals pointed out “They in the end both mean the same thing, but one is purposely used to make it sound really bad,” hinting at the euphemism involved with the questions. It has been inferred through the current study that instances of more sanitized language, supporters are engaging in moral disengagement tactics.

Lack of sympathy

Under this domain, supporters would express their opinion with a tone what lacked sympathy, or emphasized that they do not care for the individual receiving the death penalty. This domain was most common when supporters expressed their opinion for measure (28) and was observed 10 times. For example, one supporter stated, “I really don’t care if a lethal injection is done wrong and causes a lot of pain.” Variation of these statement included “I feel like it doesn’t really matter who inject them” or “I do not care is the person feels anything like pain.”

There appeared to only be one instance where and individual made a comment referring to the language used in the sentence. Stating, “seeing it that way does make me slightly less comfortable even though that is technically what is happening” in reference to measure (28). Despite, the slight uncomfortable feeling, overall, this supporter appears to be comfortable with the idea due to them only thinking about how “it is the number one form of execution.” Under this domain, one respondent appeared to encapsulate words from every respondent when answering item (28) stating:

I find it difficult to feel sympathy for a person that committed a crime serious enough to be sentenced to death. I strongly suspect that criminal’s victims were shown no mercy and probably died a terrible death. Why should I feel badly about the criminal having a similar experience?

Other common variations of the above quote from other respondents made remarks about “if they are sorry enough to do the crime, they deserve every bit” and “it’s on them if they got sentenced a little suffering is a small payback.” During analysis, it was assumed that these two domains show potential indication of moral disengagement. With a “don’t care” mentality or “lack of sympathy” point of view, supporters may rely on the lack of feelings towards the person who is receiving a death sentence. Arguably, those who portray the “lack of sympathy” mindset

may have a heightened sense of moral disengagement by assuming the individual on death row provided meniscal sympathy to their victims. Adopting the “don’t care” mentality may help supporters disengage due to the lack of emotional ties which in hindsight reduces anticipated guilt associated with their actions (Bandura, 1999).

Cruel

Despite their support for the death penalty, supporters in response to measure (31) agree that the electric chair may not be the best route of executions. Occurring 31 times, supporters of the death penalty expressed disdain in using the electric chair, stating “sounds like an awful way to die” and “I have never agreed with his method.” Mentioned by one participant,

Yeah, I knew about the electric chair there’s nothing new about the electric chair. If I’m being completely honest, I think this is a horrible way to carry out the death penalty and that opinion comes solely from watching a movie that had a botch electrocution.

Some participants highlighted the “cruel and unnecessary” aspect of the electric chair and slightly hinted at preference for an alternative route of execution. Once again, it appears that when the euphemisms of methods such as the electric chair is removed, an empathic emotional response is elicited (Bandura, 1999) from supporters and despite their overall support of the death penalty may have some hesitation with specific methods of the death penalty.

Lower than anticipated.

When responding to item (34), 27 different responses appeared and showed comfort due to the number of new death sentences per year. As seen by one response, “It makes me feel like they truly are careful with death penalty and I’m going to give it to the most deserving people which is a good thing because it shouldn’t be taken lightly at all or given lightly.” Furthering this point, another respondent concluded, “however I feel that 26.6 is a little low and shows that the death penalty isn’t being used much anymore.” Other responses provided less detail but

mentioned being “surprised that the number is that low” and “I believed that this number would certainly be higher.”

It appears individuals are using a comparative method to justify their support of the death penalty. A few respondents echoed this observation with their statement, “I don’t think this is a large number given the number of criminal proceedings that go on each year.”

Deterrence

Under this domain, supporters relied on the term deterrence to reason their support in regards to measure (23). Although deterrence was mentioned 27 different times, supporters either acknowledged that the death penalty either promotes deterrence or lacked deterrence. The difference appeared to rely on how respondents read measure (28). If supporters read the question in context to the death penalty, they appeared to agree with the statement furthering their support for the death penalty. However, when this was taken out of the context of the death penalty, supporters instead denounced the effectiveness.

It appears that supporters rely on the mindset of deterring others from committing crimes to justify their support of the death penalty. There were a total of 13 such instances. As one participant concisely stated, “There are so some people who have committed such atrocities that they cannot be reintegrated back into society. Also executing someone would most definitely prevent them from committing crimes in the future.” Simply put by another individual, “true if their dead they cannot do another crime.” Even with the direct comparison of the act of murdering someone through the means of the law, it appears supporters morally disengage because the death penalty acts a deterrence towards criminal behavior, therefore potentially providing a sense of safety.

In even few instances, supporters for the death penalty appeared to justify their comfortability with a “just deserts” mindset. Participants expressed this demeanor in various ways, however, the phrase “an eye for an eye” was observed a few times throughout supporters’ responses. Respondents here also appeared to focus on the “depraved” nature of the crime which must be committed prior to being convicted of the death penalty. One respondent seemed to combine these mindsets by saying:

They are guilty of doing something depraved and awful and they deserve to face the death penalty. The death penalty absolutely prevents individual’s criminals (who are killed) from engaging in criminal behavior ever again.

Here the response tapped into the deterrence, depraved, and just deserts mindset that was observed to be common among supporters of the death penalty. Adopting mindsets such as these when presented with a direct reflection of the crime in which the death penalty is in place to prevent (Death Penalty Information Center, 2017), is assumed to be a form of moral disengagement.

Under measure (28), supporters of the death penalty that denounced the credibility of deterrence and questioned the validity of the statement itself. For example, one individual who questioned the logic of the statement mentioned “I don’t believe murdering someone will stop murders in the future.” Even better put, one participant said, “I am uncomfortable with this statement because crime will never stop, deliberately killing someone is unacceptable and will not change others minds on crime.” It is unknown from the survey if supporters here did not understand the objective of the statement, or if they believe that this approach to handle crime is inappropriate. On participant did reference the legality of the situation,

Murder is an unlawful killing, the death penalty is considered lawful. So, murdering anyone is not a good way to prevent future criminal behavior. I don’t think the death penalty necessarily is either, but I think it should be used for the purpose of the punishment.

It can be inferred that those supporters of the death penalty who believed this statement is illogical may be presenting a form of moral disengagement by not acknowledging the statement's similarities to that of the death penalty. Another reason may be because some supporters do not believe in the deterrence aspect of the punishment. In fact, only 4 instances occurred where individuals acknowledge the deterrent by stating "I do believe it is an effective way to prevent future criminal behavior." Overall, within the uncomfortable domain, individuals appeared to rely on a "lack of deterrent" mindset during their justification.

Judgement

Supporters (n= 21) may also engage in euphemistic labeling when hinting at the bias that may occur during some death penalty sentences. Individuals who reference a "judgement" mindset in response to measure (35) seemed to rely on process that must occur for a death sentence. Individuals did so by hinting at the job status and legal discretion that court room actors (e.g., prosecutors) possess in context to the death penalty. For example, one individual said, "I think this because prosecutors usually have the best stance and feeling on whether the individual truly deserves the death penalty and I think that is best for them to make the decision rather than other randoms." Furthering the point that it requires an intensive process to sentence someone to the death penalty, one respondent stated "Because the prosecutors try and prove certain aggravated factors were in the case and that should warrant the death penalty for the individual. I think in their mind that means they deserve it."

The current research assumed that those who believe that prosecutors are pursuing death penalty sentences in good faith are morally disengaging. Explanation for this assumption stems from research by Foley & Powell (1982) as well as Peterson (2016) which explicitly show the biases that can influence prosecutors' choice in sentencing. Submitting to this mindset, without

acknowledging the opportunity for biased sentencing, was inferred as moral disengagement for the present study.

Not the final say

Only happening sparsely (i.e., 6 times), supporters in response to measure (35) expressed that “prosecutors do not make this decision” and “the prosecutors do hold all the power in deciding what the individual’s sentence is.” Although this measure was interested in the euphemism associated with the statement, it appears that individuals are diffusing the responsibility (i.e., another technique of moral disengagement) away from the prosecutors solely. Another respondent made the remark “The prosecutor is the one bringing the case against the suspect and should not be the one to decide a life-or-death penalty. There is not enough objectivity.” The present study inferred that moral disengagement occurred within this domain due to diffusing the responsibility of prosecutors regardless of their unfettered discretion (Foley & Powell, 1982).

Although most statements were in support of actors of the court, some supporters acknowledged the “human error” or “corruption” that may occur. For example, one respondent said “That depends on the prosecutor. As human being[s] we all have differing feelings and intentioned so this would vary quite a lot.” Lastly, one participant while mentioning variation, focused on the crime saying “I believe that is should be more based on the crime, severity, and the law then how the prosecutor feel about. I think that it can play a small part, but it is important to not use your emotions as the main factor for a decision.” Slight moral disengagement can be inferred within this domain; however, researchers of the current study do not believe it is of significance levels.

Prefers alternative

One domain that showed a lack of euphemistic labeling occurred when supporters (n=42) did not agree with the use of harsher language. However, these justifications appeared to stem from a cause-and-effect relationship when referencing items (30 & 32). These items presented different methods of execution in the rawest form, highlighting the brutal reality that encompasses methods used today. Although they supported the death penalty, when faced with harsher wording regarding the processes, supporters seemed to disagree with current procedures, calling for alternatives.

When justifying explanations to items (28 & 29), supporters expressed a need for better protocols with lethal injection procedures. One individual stated, “it should be done by a professional who knows what they are doing” or they should “not be inexperienced.” A respondent compared an inexperienced technician to a form of murder by stating:

If it’s an inexperienced [technician] I feel like that is basically someone free reign murdering someone. If there is a license medical person who know professionally and can write off killing the person on a death sentence, then the experienced one should be one to do the injective and not someone who is inexperienced.

One supporter even expressed that someone who isn’t as experienced performing such procedures “is awful” and it should “be handled by a professional.” The same pattern of reasoning occurred in item (30). When pressed with the negative outcomes of the electric chair, on supports expressed, “I don’t think the electric chair is the best method of execution due to the harm it can cause to the individual during botched attempts.” An example of preferred alternative can be seen through one participant who said, “I feel like the electric chair is in the past and lethal injection is the human way.” Inferred from the study, supporters who expressed a negative tone within these measures may not morally disengage seeing that they have an emotional

response to the statement indicating the method is not acceptable. Therefore, indicating a boundary for their support of the death penalty.

Finally, the secondary analysis of euphemistic language occurred where researchers examined the logical or emotional reasoning among supporters. Qualification for both domains were consistent throughout the research study. Logical reasoning was dependent on pulling in external “facts” or assumptions for justification and emotional reasoning was reliant on “I feel” statements.

Emotional Reasoning

Overall, it appeared that emotional reasoning was highest among supporters throughout the euphemistic labeling measures. Occurring about 59 times, supporters engaged in an emotional justification, using phrases such as “I think it’s good. They deserve any of these punishments” and “I don’t care which term is used.” Often response within this domain were lacking external substance to help support their justifications. Some respondents would reference personal assumptions to support their rebuttal, like one participant here said “im all for lethal injection.. if they are sorry enough to do the crime, they deserve every bit of what’s coming for them.” Then again, another individual mentioned “they stick with what is deserved.”

Logical reasoning occurred roughly 36 times, which most participants utilize comparative language, and the law as justification in presence of euphemistic labeling. An example of comparative language within the domain of logical reasoning can be seen in here, “The[y] both describe the same thing, but the second is more direct” as well as “Lethal injection sounds better and stronger for the criminal that is deserving of this method.” Here participants are seen applying a more logistical response in comparison to a statement based on feelings. Other logical reasoning presented itself through statement such as “If someone is dead the[y] cannot make

further crimes. But again, this has not larger context, so it is hard to be really for or against the statement with any real conviction.” This participant acknowledged the point of the statement, if they are dead then they are incapable of committing future crimes, but also recognized the lack of context, therefore hindering their ability to possess a full opinion on the statement. Instances of this appeared to utilize a logical reason for their justification rather than emotional response.

Turning

Another interesting way that individuals who supported the death penalty appeared to morally disengage by turning the focus back onto the survey measure itself. Rather than adopting an emotional or logical response for advantageous comparison and euphemistic labeling, or an animalistic versus mechanistic approach, the answer reflected the survey measure. For example, when responding to a euphemistic measure, a respondent said, “I think that the statement uses extremely polarized and emotional language that doesn’t acknowledge the nuance that is crucial when considering the argument.” Another mentioned “I think the way the sentence is worded doesn’t do justice to the point that is trying to come out of the death penalty.” In total, this turning notion occurred about 20 times throughout responses from those who support the death penalty.

Very few instances where the respondent turned the focus back to the surveyor for those who oppose the death penalty. Whereas there may have been a hint at euphemisms, it was primarily apparent with supporters. The current study inferred this type of reasoning to hint at moral disengagement. Stating that individuals may disengage by not wanting to acknowledge the question at hand and instead defer their focus elsewhere.

The current research aimed at investigating whether individuals utilized moral disengagement techniques (i.e., dehumanization, advantageous comparison, euphemistic

labeling) while rationalizing their stance on the death penalty under varying topics. Another interest of the current study is the inverse relationship between education level and self-indicated confidence regarding death penalty policies.

Quantitative findings

The current study had a total of 125 participants. The analysis included multiple linear regressions along with cross-tabulations. It is hypothesized that, those who would be more likely to support the death penalty would include individuals who were male, conservative, lived in the South, had English as their first language, and only had a high school diploma. For non-supporters, it was hypothesized that individuals who were female, liberal, lived in the northeast, spoke English as their first language, and had higher levels of education. For the Advantageous Comparison measures, it was hypothesized that we would see higher levels of disengagement among supporters of the death penalty. Lastly, it is anticipated that those with more education would identify as less confident in their knowledge of the death penalty than those with less education. It is also hypothesized that individuals who support the death penalty will rank themselves at a higher confidence in knowledge of the death penalty. Lastly, it is hypothesized that death penalty support and education level will be a predictor for confidence in the death penalty.

Turning first to the demographic findings for those more likely to support the death penalty, unexpectedly, females were more likely than males to show support (N=47). Although this finding goes against previous literature, it should be noted that there were more female participants (N=89) than male participants (N=35) in the study. Supporters were also more likely to be Conservative (N=29), reside within the South (N=56), have English as their first language (N=66), and have a high level of completed education (N=44).

In comparison, those who were more likely to oppose the death penalty were females (N=42), were liberal (N=32), also currently lived within the south (N=35), spoke English as their first language (N=58), and only had a high school diploma as their highest level of completed education. Non-supporters overall had a higher number of individuals who had higher-level degrees than those in high school (N=30) compared to supporters having higher education (N=20).

Advantageous comparison

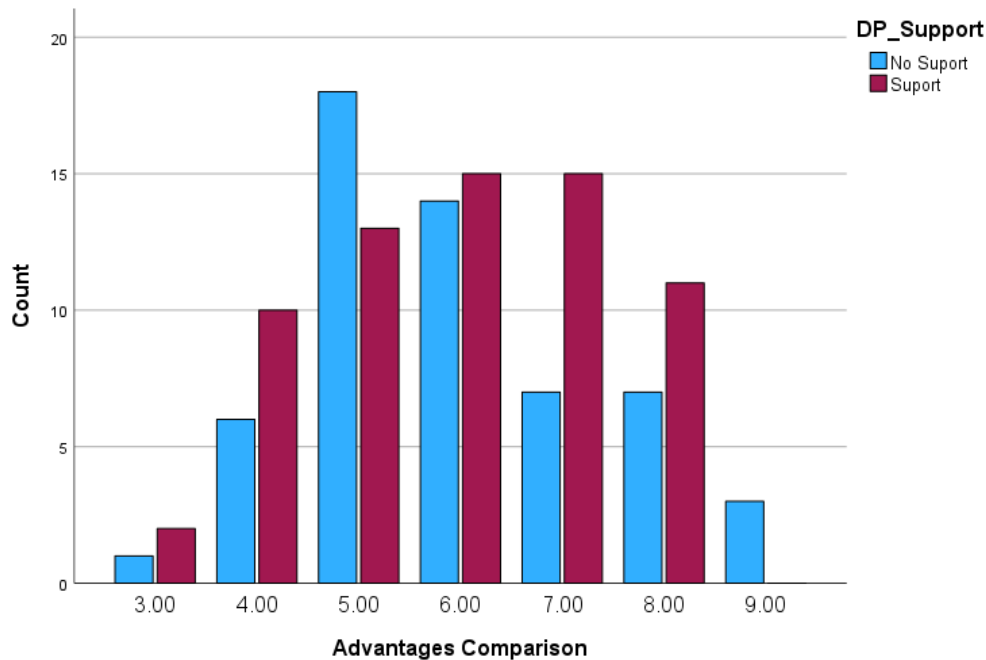
The relationship between engaging in advantageous comparison and participants' demographics was examined using an OLS regression model. The model found certain demographics to be significant. The advantageous comparison variable was computed by directly probing participants' comfortability with questions, aiming to examine their level of advantageous comparison. In total, there were three measures testing advantageous comparison, all of which were answered using a Likert scale (see items 44, 49, and 51). Lower numbers on the Likert scale (e.g., 1 and 2) were least likely to engage with the advantageous comparison mechanisms. In comparison, larger numbers (e.g., 4 and 5) are more likely to engage with the mechanism. The other items were measured via true or false questions with true equating to the number (1) and false equating to the number (2) (e.g., respondents who answered measures with false, were inferred to disengage more than those who didn't). The advantageous comparison levels ranged from 3 to 9 to show engagement with the mechanism. Therefore, higher numbers for the combination of measures assume the participants are more likely to engage with the mechanism.

First, gender was examined to understand which gender was more likely to engage with the advantageous comparison mechanism. Within gender identity, Females were found to engage

with advantageous comparison significantly at level 6 ($p=.287$) and least likely to engage with the mechanism at level 9 ($p=0.11$). Males were more likely to engage in advantageous comparison at level 8 ($p=0.257$) and least likely to at level 1 ($p=0.029$). In the study, there was one participant who was non-binary, and they were proven to be significant at level 5 with ($p=1$).

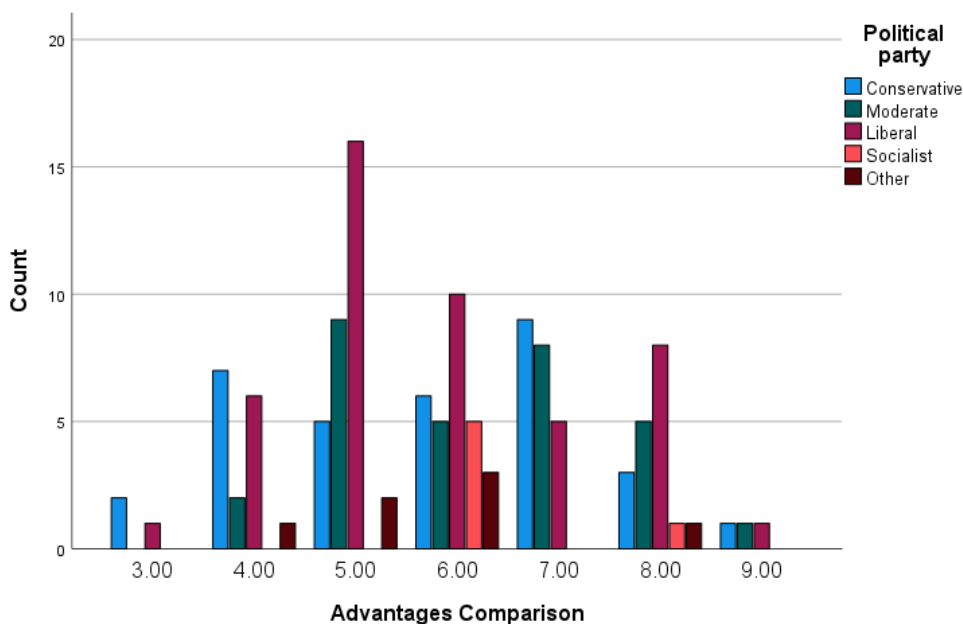
Individuals who are proponents of the death penalty were more likely to engage in advantageous comparison a majority of the time (54.1%), whereas non-supporters engaged with the mechanism 45.9% of the time. However, a breakdown of each level is as follows (see figure 1). Supporters engaged with the mechanism at higher rates within levels 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. Non-supporters had higher levels of engagement at levels 5 and 9, whereas level 9 only had a total of three participants, the lowest of the categories (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Note: Increase in numerical values equates to increased use of advantageous comparison.



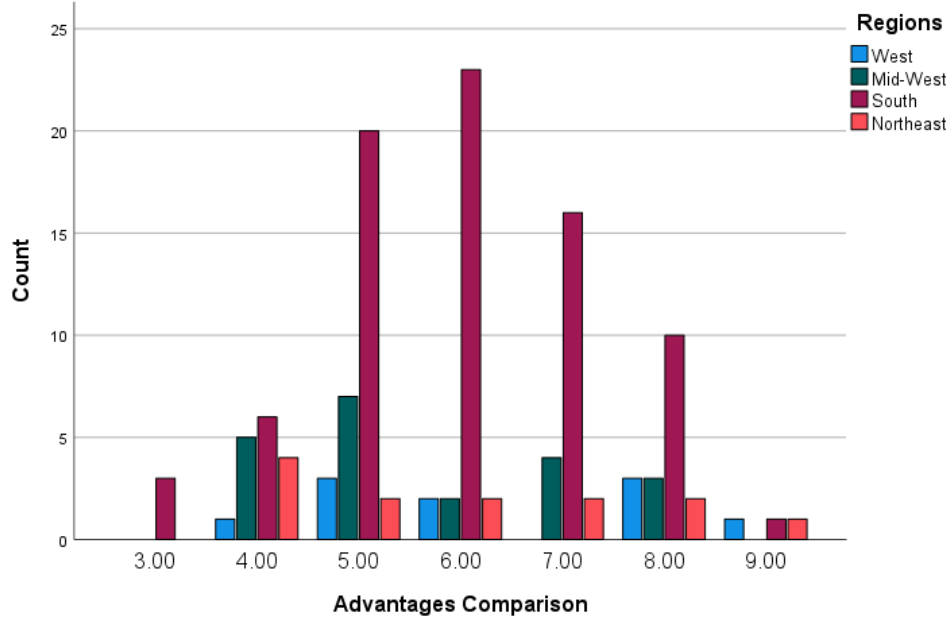
For political parties, conservatives were most likely to engage in advantageous comparison tendencies at level 7 ($p=0.270$), next, socialists ($p=0.830$), and those considered to be “other” ($p=0.420$) disengaged at level 6, and lastly, Moderates ($p=0.300$) and Liberals ($p=0.340$) were least likely to disengage at level 5 (see figure 2).

Figure 2 Political parties utilizing advantageous comparison.



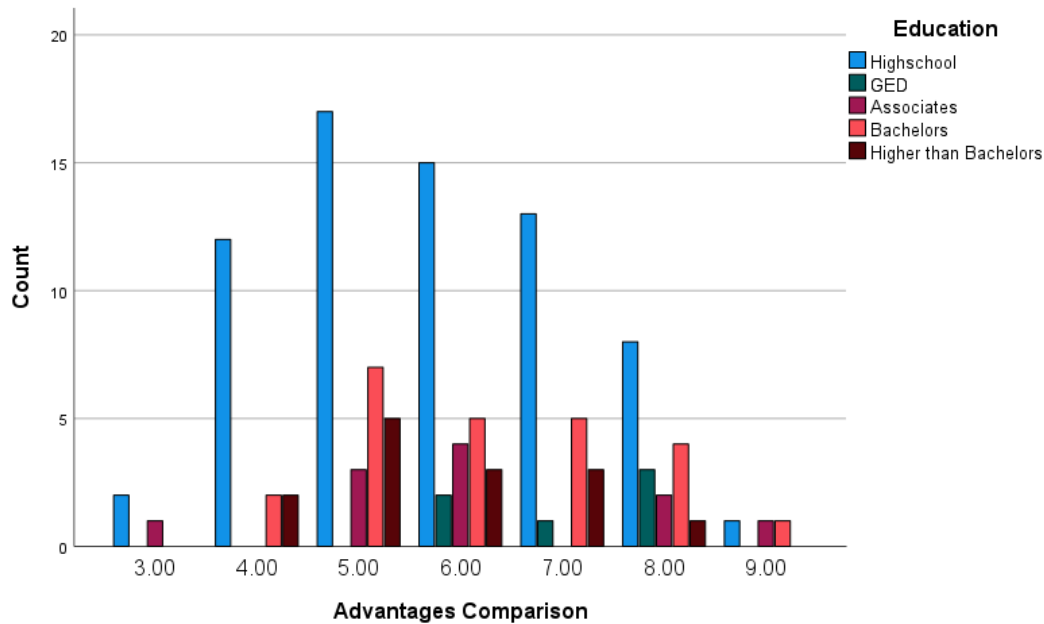
The next demographic under examination was current residents and the highest disengagement at level 8 was in the South ($p= 0.290$). The least likely to disengage came from those residing in the Midwest ($p=0.33$) and Northeast ($p = 0.260$). An interesting effect that was examined was with individuals living in the West. They were seen to disengage at levels 5 and 8 ($p=0.300$). This may be a result of the smaller number of individuals ($N= 10$) in total who were from the West who participated in the study (see figure 3).

Figure 3 Regions vs Advantageous comparison.



With regards to the first language, those who spoke Spanish (n=1) disengaged at the highest level 7, and those who spoke English disengaged at the highest level 5 (p=0.262). The last demographic that was investigated was education level. The highest level of disengagement, at level 6, was apparent in those who had only obtained a GED (p=0.330) and higher than a bachelor's degree (p=0.214). At level 5, those who have only obtained a high school diploma (p=0.250), those with an associate degree (p=0.270), and a bachelor's degree (0.290). Originally, it was hypothesized that those who held a lesser degree of education were anticipated to engage within the mechanism at a higher level than those with higher education (see figure 4).

Figure 4 Education vs Advantageous Comparison



When testing to see who was most likely to morally disengage through advantageous comparison, results showed that those who were male, conservative, currently residing in the south and Midwest, individuals who obtained a GED and higher than a bachelor's, spoke non-English were most likely to morally disengage. However, it should be noted that some of these numbers may be a result of the lack of diversity among the participant pool regarding education level, first language, and current residence.

Confidence in knowledge

The relationship between confidence in knowledge of death penalty policies and overall support and education level was examined using an OLS linear regression model (see figure 5). For education level, those who held only a high school diploma, the highest ranked category was somewhat knowledgeable (N=32). Following both categories, neutral (n=15) and somewhat not knowledgeable (n=15) were the second highest categories, with very knowledgeable (n=3) and

not knowledgeable (n=2) following. Those who had obtained a GED had their leading category as somewhat knowledgeable (n=4), with neutral (n=1) and somewhat not knowledgeable (n=1) as the secondary categories. Participants who held an associate degree had their leading category to be somewhat knowledgeable (n=5), followed by neutral (n=4) and somewhat not knowledgeable (n=3). For individuals who held a bachelor’s degree, again, the leading category was somewhat knowledgeable (n=14), followed by neutral (n=6), and lastly, somewhat not knowledgeable (n=3). Lastly, those who held higher than a bachelor’s degree had the highest category of somewhat knowledgeable (n=8), neutral (n=3), somewhat not knowledgeable (n=2), and very knowledgeable (n=1).

Figure 5 Note: 2 participants were removed due to lack of response.

Crosstab

Count

		Confidence of Knowledge				Total
		Very Knowledgeable	Neutral	Somewhat not knowledgeable	No Knowledge	
Education	Highschool	3	15	15	2	67
	GED	0	1	1	0	6
	Associates	0	4	3	0	12
	Bachelors	1	6	3	0	24
	Higher than Bachelors	1	3	2	0	14
Total		5	29	24	2	123

Overall, 50.8% of individuals who ranked themselves as somewhat confident were those who had a high school diploma, 22.22% were those who held a bachelor’s degree, 12.7% obtained higher than a bachelor’s, and less than 1% had either a GED or an associate degree. However, it should be noted that those who held a high school diploma constituted 53.6% of the total participants.

For overall support of the death penalty, those opposed to the death penalty ranked themselves as the following: somewhat knowledgeable (n=32), neutral (n=11), somewhat not knowledgeable (n=11), very knowledgeable (n=2), and not very knowledgeable (n=2). For those who support the death penalty had the highest category as somewhat knowledgeable (n=31), neutral (n=18), somewhat not knowledgeable (n=13) and very knowledgeable (n=3). Between the two groups, somewhat knowledgeable was the leading category, with supporters constituting 49.2% and the remaining 50.7% being individuals who opposed the death penalty (see figure below).

Figure 6 Support with Confidence of Knowledge

Crosstab

Count

		M_Confident of Knowledge					Total
		Very Knowledgeable	Somewhat Knowledgeable	Neutral	Somewhat not Knowledgeable	No Knowledge	
Death penalty support	No Support	2	32	11	11	2	58
	Support	3	31	18	13	0	65
Total		5	63	29	24	2	123

Lastly, a linear regression was conducted to determine the significance of education level and support as predictors of support (see figure 7). Overall, those who engaged in advantageous comparison at higher rates were supporters, females, and individuals who viewed themselves as conservatives, resided in the South, and had a GED as their highest education level. When measuring confidence levels, it appeared that education level and support of the death penalty were high predictors of confidence in the death penalty.

Figure 7 Regression of Confidence of Knowledge, Support and Education

Correlations

		Confidence of Knowledge	Death Penalty Support	Education
Pearson Correlation	Confidence of Knowledge	1.000	-.004	-.119
	Death Penalty Support	-.004	1.000	-.217
	Education	-.119	-.217	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	Confidence of Knowledge	.	.483	.094
	Death Penalty Support	.483	.	.008
	Education	.094	.008	.
N	Confidence of Knowledge	123	123	123
	Death Penalty Support	123	123	123
	Education	123	123	123

CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSION

Discussion

Throughout the study supporters of the death penalty were more inclined to utilize dehumanization within a mechanistic tone rather than an animalistic tone. Most accomplished through referencing those on death row to as a “murderer,” “criminal,” or “psychopath.” As well as insinuating “lack of remorse” or “lack to be rehabilitated” diminishing human nature qualities to other individuals (Bandura, 1999). Thus, supporters can perceive individuals on death row to be different than themselves. Which may result in a decrease for the lack of emotional response (i.e., which is normally activated through social obligation) and harsher reactions are then permitted (McHugo Smith and Lanzetta, 1982; Bandura, 1986;1999).

Next the current study was interested in how supporters of the death penalty may morally disengage through the process of advantageous comparison. Relying on emotional or logical responses, here, the current the study evaluated how supporters of the death penalty utilized an emotional or logical response. For emotional reasoning, respondents commonly relied on what they felt was correct, rather than pulling external facts to support their justification. In total, there were 40 instances of emotionally driven statements. Justifying their stance through emotional reasoning it was inferred by researchers to indicate higher levels of moral disengagement. This type of reasoning may allow individuals to decrease their lack of empathetic emotional response (Bandura, 1999) which allows for disengagement techniques to flourish among supporters of the death penalty.

In total there were an estimated 122 logical responses from supporters of the death penalty. Responses here include individuals who reference legal fact (i.e., capital punishment is sanctioned by the government) or expressed the job status of prosecutors. However, it should be noted that although these were classified as logical, many justifications still rely on heuristics when expressing their opinion.

Although appearing to morally disengage the least through advantageous comparison, reliance on legal heuristics, and anticipated levels of intention or guilt may prove that individuals may morally disengage to an extent within the current study.

Another possible route of a moral disengagement technique that supporters of the death penalty is using euphemistic labeling. This process includes sanitizing language, so it becomes more socially acceptable (Bandura, 1999). The current study measured this with 6 measures ranging topics from methods of execution, new death sentences to the function of the death penalty. When probing statements with disturbing details of the process of execution, supporters' preference cleaner language because it sounds better, shorter & not specific. This may hint at an activation of disengagement via euphemistic labeling. Which serves the purpose to sanitize language to avoid responsibility for actions (Bandura, 1999).

Euphemistic labeling appeared to have higher levels of moral disengagement based on the preference of more sanitized language and increase in emotional reasoning rather than logic reasoning. The current study identifies emotional reasoning to potentially be an indicator of moral disengagement, however, even under logical reasoning, many supporters relied on personal heuristics. As a result these heuristics can lead to systematic errors such as legality references, or acknowledgement of the lack of deterrence, yet still support the death penalty overall (Sunstein, 2005).

In total, emotional reasoning occurred approximately 59 times and commonly included phrases such as “I think it’s good. They deserve the punishments.” Here it may be noted that assumption on the “deservingness” of an individual is subjective therefore indicating a more emotional response. Whereas logical reasoning occurred close to 36 times where participants justified their response by comparing the linguistics used within the questioning. Despite many respondents engaging in logical reasoning, most supporters and their responses aligned closer to an emotional response. Indicating potential moral disengagement through euphemistic labeling.

Lastly, a novel approach to moral disengagement was observed within the current study. Across supporters of the death penalty, instances of turning the question back onto the surveyor was observed. More instances of this appeared within the advantageous comparison and euphemistic measures. Specifically, when the procedure of the death penalty and outcome of 1st degree murder were compared to each other. For example, phrases such as “extremely polarized” or “I think the way the sentence is worded...” may showcase potential route of moral disengagement by completely disregarding the question and instead faulting the question for such comparison. This may allow an individual to neutralize their potential feelings of the question to aid in support for the death penalty.

Findings from the study may suggest that through dehumanization, advantageous comparison and euphemistic labeling, individuals may morally disengage, therefore promoting support for the death penalty. It appeared to be common for individuals to minimize their empathetic emotional response to the death penalty, allowing for the punitive measure to still be utilized today. Conversations around the death penalty may differ if individuals instead used person first language rather than a demeaning vocabulary (i.e., animalistic, or mechanistic language).

Past literature has examined moral disengagement in various situations to include workplace environment, education settings, shopping malls or political debates (Bandura, 1999; Stinglhamber et al., 2022). Research by Ofofokun (2005) examined moral disengagement among executioners associated with capital punishment. Findings there reveals that executioners were more likely to morally disengage with moral, social, and dehumanizing tactics, which is consistent with findings from the current research.

When examining the different demographics of individuals who either supported or opposed the death penalty, findings revealed consistent patterns among political parties and geographical regions of residence. Regarding gender, results here indicated that more females not only supported the death penalty, but also opposed the death penalty. Whereas past research has discovered that men are more likely to support the death penalty (Eisenberg, 2001; Stack, 2004; Cochran and Chamlin, 2006; Borg, 1997; Anderson et al, 2017; Jones, 2018). Reasoning for this may be due to the unproportionate number of female respondents in comparison to male respondents. Additionally, previous research has also concluded that females are more likely to participate in social science research, especially surveys (Nuzzo, 2021). This may explain the difference in support among genders within this survey as compared to previous literature.

Another important note regarding support among the genders is that despite the higher number of females who supported and opposed the death penalty, the rate among support for males was higher. For example, within the sample, 52.8% of the female population supported the death penalty (N=47) whereas 57.14% of the male population (N=20) showed support.

Supporters within the study were also more likely to engage in moral disengagement techniques like advantageous comparison when compared to non-supporters. Overall supporters here were females, individuals who identified as conservative, lived within the south, spoke

Spanish as their first language, and held a GED were also most likely to engage with the advantageous comparison mechanism. Again, groups such as gender and first language may be a result of the lack of diversity among the participant pool, rather than the tendency to morally disengage. Lastly, the confidence of knowledge measure showed that support of the death penalty along with education status proved to be a significant predictor of confidence in death penalty knowledge. The leading category of knowledge among both supporters and non-supporters was “somewhat knowledgeable” where supporters constituted 49.2% and the remaining 50.7% was comprised of non-supporters.

Limitations

As with all studies, the current study also faces some limitations. Although the study reached statistical significance with participant numbers (n=125), 70 participants were recruited from the criminology department at the University of Alabama and therefore produced a more homogenous mixture of respondents. An overwhelming number of participants were recruited from a freshman-level class, which explains the educational factor. Another fault of the participant pool is the overwhelming amount of individuals who were between the ages of 18 – 22 and were recruited from criminology classes. Therefore, the sample may not be generalizable to other populations and explain some of the findings that do not align with previous research. In addition, future research should aim at expanding the participant pool with age, and we as knowledge on criminal justice as a result from the majority (N=70) of participants are currently on track to obtain a criminal justice Bachelor’s degree.

Future research should include more a more diverse participant pool to fulfill a representative sample. Next the research may be limited because due to the self-generated id codes. Since variations in response may have hindered 100% correct matching between the first

survey and second survey for students, there may a small margin of error with the findings. Again, future research should promote a better sense of anonymity for a more soundproof finding. Lastly, and because of the novelty that is moral disengagement, there were no standardize questioning which infers higher suggestively within the survey's responses. For the future, developing standardized measures to measure moral disengagement techniques may assist in increasing the validity of disengagement techniques to fully investigate the rate of disengagement among individuals who support the death penalty.

Conclusion

The current study aimed in understanding how individuals who support the death penalty engage in moral disengagement techniques such as dehumanization, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling. Participants for the study were recruited in two samples. The first were comprised of criminology students at the University of Alabama and the second sample was recruited through prolific, an online survey distribution tool. Over the course of two surveys, participants were questioned on their support of the death penalty, knowledge about past and current policies on the death penalty and execution methods. The second survey focused on probing participants and their disengagement levels regarding the death penalty. Additionally, the current research study examined whether or not education and support for the death penalty predicted as participants level of confidence in death penalty knowledge.

Results show that supporters relied on moral disengagement techniques such as dehumanization, advantageous comparison and euphemistic labeling when justifying their opinion on the death penalty. Often the mechanism of dehumanization was utilized throughout the entire survey, not just within its respected domain. Advantageous comparison was also heavily used among supporters' when comparing court room actors (e.g., prosecutors) to those

who were associated with committing capital crimes. Lastly, euphemistic labeling was the least among supporters, however, there were few instances where the lack of sanitized language appeared to disturb some supporters during the survey.

Regarding overall support for the death penalty, individuals who were female, were conservative, lived within the south, spoke English as their first language and had a high school education were most likely to support the death penalty. The quantitative analysis of the study supported the use of advantageous comparison among supporters as well as showing that factors such as education level and support for the death penalty predict confidence levels among supporters. In conclusion, moral disengagement techniques are utilized by individuals when expressing their proposition of the death penalty and factors such as gender identity, education level, political party, and geographical region may influence the degree in which someone relies on disengagement tactics.

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APPENDIX A
SURVEY PART ONE

Part 1 – CHECK INS

1. Are you 18 years of age?
 - No
 - Yes
2. Are you able to legally vote within the United States of America?
 - No
 - Yes
3. Do you wish to continue with the current study?
 - No
 - Yes

Part 2 – SELF IDENTIFIABLE QUESTIONS

1. Please choose your favorite color from the following.
 - Red
 - Pink
 - Blue
 - Green
 - Black
 - Purple
2. Please choose your favorite genre of music from the following
 - Classical
 - Pop
 - Rock
 - Country
 - Rap
 - Jazz

3. Please choose your favorite type of desert from the following
 - Chocolate Cake
 - Pie
 - Vanilla Ice Cream
 - Pudding
 - Cookies
 - Brownies
4. Please choose your favorite subject from the following
 - Math
 - Science
 - English
 - History
 - Gym
 - Art
5. Please choose your favorite movie genre from the following
 - Romance
 - Comedy
 - Action
 - Mystery
 - Science Fiction
 - Historical/biographical

Part 3 – LEADING QUESTIONS

6. Have you ever served as a jury member?
 - No
 - Yes
7. Have you ever been arrested?
 - No
 - Yes

Part 5 – CONFIDENCE OF KNOWLEDGE

8. How confident do you feel regarding your level of knowledge on current death penalty policies?

	1 = Very Knowledgeable	2 = Somewhat Knowledgeable	3 = Neutral	4 = Not Really Knowledgeable	5 = No Knowledge
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Have you ever been arrested?

- No
- Yes

10. Please explain your support level of the death penalty. Be detailed as possible!

Part 6 – VIGNETTE

***Read the following scenario and then answer the following questions. ***

A 22 year old male was arrested for allegedly assaulting and murdering a young child. The arrest was made on the basis of an anonymous call stating that they had seen the individual with the victim that day. During his trial, 5 different witnesses testified saying they also saw the individual with the victim the day of the crime. However, two of these individuals could not identify the individual within a line up. There was no physical evidence to place him at the crime scene.

11. Using the scenario above, which punishment would feel the most comfortable recommending?

- The Death Penalty
- Life without the possibility of Parole
- Not comfortable with any sentence
- 20 years with parole

12. Please explain your reasoning for that specific recommendation! Use as many details as possible.

13. How realistic do you think the scenario was?

	1 = Realistic	2 = Neutral	3 = Unrealistic
Please choose one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. Please choose your favorite type of desert from the following

- Miami Dolphins
- Tampa Bay Lightning
- Kansas City Chiefs
- Cincinnati Bengals

Part 7 --- KNOWLEDGE CHECK

15. The Death Penalty is on average less expensive than life without the possibility of parole?

- a. True
- b. False

16. Select all that apply: Which methods of execution have been used within the United States

- a. Hanging
- b. Firing Squads
- c. Lethal Gas
- d. Lethal Injection
- e. Electric Chair
- f. Mutilation

17. The death penalty is the only punishment that is considered a form of capital punishment.

- a. True
- b. False

18. All states in the US have the death penalty?

- a. True
- b. False

19. Which states has the highest number of executions?
- a. True
 - b. False
20. How many members serve in a capital jury panel?
- a. 6
 - b. 10
 - c. 12
 - d. 14
21. The death penalty has shown to lower crimes rates out of fear for the punishment?
- a. True
 - b. False
22. What are the two phases in a capital trial?
- a. Guilty phase and informative phase
 - b. Guilty phase and penalty phase
 - c. Punishment phase and trial phase
 - d. Sentencing phases and relocation phase
23. Select all crimes that are eligible for the death penalty.
- a. Voluntary Manslaughter
 - b. Treason
 - c. Felony Murder
 - d. First Degree Murder
 - e. Genocide

24. Have you heard about the Furman V Georgia Case of 1972?

- a. No
- b. Yes

25. If yes, please select the one you feel describes it best.

- a. The death penalty was ruled unconstitutional.
- b. Lethal injection was ruled as an unconstitutional method of execution.
- c. No major changes occurred from the case.
- d. No state was allowed to use the death penalty as a punishment until given permission from the Supreme Court.

Part 8 ----- CONTROL QUESTIONS

26. Have you ever served as a jury member?

- a. Yes
- b. No

27. Have you ever been arrested?

- a. No
- b. Yes

Part 10 – Self Identifiable questions

1. Please select your gender identity.

- Male
- Female
- Non – Binary/ Third Gender

2. Please select your highest level of completed education.
- Lower than 8th grade.
 - 8th grade
 - Highschool
 - GED/Equivalent
 - Associate degree
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Higher than Bachelors
2. Please select the geographical region where you currently reside.
- West
 - Midwest
 - Northeast
 - South
3. Please select which political group you identify with the MOST.
- Conservative
 - Moderate
 - Liberal
 - Socialist
 - Other
4. Please select your first language from the following choices.
- English
 - Spanish
 - French
 - Arabic
 - Chinese
 - Other

APPENDIX B
SURVEY PART TWO

Part 1 – CHECK INS

2. Are you 18 years of age?
 - No
 - Yes
3. Are you able to legally vote within the United States of America?
 - No
 - Yes
4. Do you wish to continue with the current study?
 - No
 - Yes

Part 2 – SELF IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONS

5. Please choose your favorite color from the following.
 - Red
 - Pink
 - Blue
 - Green
 - Black
 - Purple
6. Please choose your favorite genre of music from the following
 - Classical
 - Pop
 - Rock
 - Country
 - Rap

- Jazz
7. Please choose your favorite type of desert from the following
- Chocolate Cake
 - Pie
 - Vanilla Ice Cream
 - Pudding
 - Cookies
 - Brownies
8. Please choose your favorite subject from the following
- Math
 - Science
 - English
 - History
 - Gym
 - Art
9. Please choose your favorite movie genre from the following
- Romance
 - Comedy
 - Action
 - Mystery
 - Science Fiction
 - Historical/biographical

Part 3 – LEADING QUESTIONS

10. Have you ever served as a jury member?
- No
 - Yes
11. Have you ever been arrested?
- No

- Yes

Part 4 – OPINION CHANGE

12. Do you support the death penalty?

- No
- Yes

13. Please explain why you either support or do not support the death penalty. You are encouraged to write as much as possible!

14. Has your opinion on the death penalty changed since the first survey?

- Yes
- No

15. In the box below please explain why your opinion has either changed or stayed the same.

Part 5 – CONFIDENCE OF KNOWLEDGE

16. After the previous survey, did you look into the death penalty on your own time?

- Yes
- No

17. If selected yes, please indicate where you found your information?

Part 6 – VIGNETTE

***Read the following scenario and then answer the following questions. ***

In North Carolina, August 1st 1983, there was a house party that took place on a farm which was locally referred to as the "Dawson Farm." A result of this party was the death of 100 year old Adah Dawson. A majority of the individuals who attended this house party were mutual friends and could therefore identify most of the people at this party. During the party, one witness told authorities that he recognized an individual, Williams, who appeared to be walking in the direction of the victim's home. Later, Williams would be identified by authorities and asked about the night before. In the initial contact with authorities, Williams stated that he was indeed at the party but was very intoxicated. Furthering this point, he told the cops that he drank a pint of vodka and was openly taking pills. He told cops he left the premises around 1:30am but returned shortly thereafter and stayed at the party until 3:00am when he left to go home. He denied ever approaching the victim's residence.

A few hours after providing the statement to the authorities, they asked for Williams tennis shoes for comparison. After the cops ran the comparison test, they returned to Williams' house and proceeded to read him his rights and took him to the Sheriff's office. After further interrogation by the authorities, Williams proceeded to confess to the murder and sexual assault of the victim. Later in court the only evidence which linked Williams to the victim's residence were the shoe prints, a checkbook in which the handwriting was analyzed, and fingerprints which were also analyzed.

18. Using the scenario above, which punishment would feel the most comfortable recommending?

- The Death Penalty
- Life without the possibility of Parole
- Not comfortable with any sentence
- 20 years with parole

19. In detail below, please explain why you would recommend your previous sentence with the scenario.

20. How realistic do you think the scenario was?

	1 = Realistic	2 = Neutral	3 = Unrealistic
Please choose one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Part 7 – RETENTION QUESTIONS

21. The death penalty is on average less expensive than life without the possibility of parole?

- True
- False

22. The Death penalty is the only punishment that is considered a form of capital punishment?

- True
- False

23. Have you heard about the Furman V Georgia Case of 1972

- Yes
- No

24. If yes, please indicate what you know about the case below.

Part 8 – MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

23. Deliberately murdering someone is a good way to prevent future criminal behavior?

How comfortable are you with the sentence above?

	1 = Extremely Comfortable	2 = Somewhat Comfortable	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat Uncomfortable	5 = Extremely Uncomfortable
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

24. Please describe why you are either comfortable or uncomfortable with the sentence above?

25. Most individuals who are sentenced to death have committed crime with extreme malice?

How much do you agree or disagree with the statement above?

	1 = Strongly agree	2 = Somewhat agree	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat disagree	5 = Extremely disagree
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

26. Capital Crimes (those with the death sentence) are often personal crimes and committed towards an innocent individual?

How much do you agree with the statement above?

	1 = Extremely agree	2 = Somewhat agree	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat disagree	5 = Extremely disagree
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

27. Why do you agree or disagree with the previous question?

28. How confident are you having an inexperienced technician overdosing individuals with a sedative with who has been sentenced to death?

	1 = Extremely comfortable	2 = Somewhat comfortable	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat uncomfortable	5 = Extremely uncomfortable
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

29. In the previous questions, which method of execution do you believe this was describing?

- Hanging
- Lethal Injection
- Gas Chamber
- Lobotomy

30. How do you feel about comparing the two previous questions? Feel free to use as much detail as possible!

31. "After being shaved completely and strapped to a chair with belts restraining their chest, legs, and arms, a metal skullcap is attached to the scalp and forehead. Once they are blindfolded, he warden gives permission to move forward, a jolt of 500 to 2000 volts is given for about 30 seconds. Once the first electric shock is provided, the body appears to relax back into the chair where doctors wait about 30 seconds to check the heartbeat due to the temperature of the body post electric shock. This process is repeated until the individual is pronounced dead. Botched executions can leave the individual to grip the chair or move violently which can result in dislocation or fracturing of the limbs." (Death penalty information center; Hillman, 1992)

31. Which method of execution do you believe this closely resembles the example above?

- Firing Squad
- Hanging
- Mutilation
- Electric Chair

32. After reading the example above, how does this make you feel about the use of the electric chair as punishment? Do you feel like you learned something new about this method of execution? Feel free to use as much description as possible!

33. Do you believe the death penalty is being used in a reasonable manner towards those who most deserve it?

- False
- True

34. Recent studies show on average there are 26.6 new death sentences per year (Death penalty information center)

After learning the average number of new sentences per year, how does this make you feel?

35. Prosecutors choose to have someone killed by using the death penalty when they feel the individuals truly deserves it?

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement above?

	1 = Extremely agree	2 = Somewhat agree	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat disagree	5 = Extremely disagree
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

36. Why do you think this is?

37. I would trust a group of jury members to decide if I should be sentenced to the death penalty or not.

Please select how comfortable you are with the statement above?

	1 = Extremely Comfortable	2 = Somewhat Comfortable	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat Uncomfortable	5 = Extremely Uncomfortable
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

38. Please explain why you are comfortable/uncomfortable with the statement above?

39. I feel more comfortable using the terms such as “lethal injection” rather than “heart stopping sedative overdose” when talking about execution methods.

	1 = Extremely Comfortable	2 = Somewhat Comfortable	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat Uncomfortable	5 = Extremely Uncomfortable
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

40. Please explain why you choose the answer above.

41. Which term best described the definition below.

“The unlawful killing of an individual done intentionally while also being conducted with premeditation and deliberation.”

- 1st Degree Murder
- The Death Penalty
- Felony Murder
- Involuntary Manslaughter

42. Which terms best describes the definition below.

“The lawful killing of an individual done intentionally while also being conducted with premeditation and deliberation.”

- 1st Degree Murder
- The Death Penalty
- Felony Murder
- Involuntary Manslaughter

43. Out of the 5 personality traits listed below, please choose the one that best describes you?

- Open to new things
- Conscientiousness
- Extroverted
- Agreeable
- Neuroticism

44. On a scale of 1 to 5, how similar do you find 1st degree murder and the functionality of the death penalty?

	1 = The same thing	2 = Somewhat the same thing	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat different	5 = Very different
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

45. Please explain why you find the death penalty and 1st degree murder to be either the same thing or different?

46. On a scale of 1 to 5 how likely are you to commit a crime like the one described above?

	1 = Extremely likely	2 = Somewhat likely	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat unlikely	5 = Extremely unlikely
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

47. On a scale of 1 to 5 how much do you agree with the statement below?

“The death penalty is an easy way out of what a murderer did?”

	1 = Extremely comfortable	2 = Somewhat comfortable	3 = Neutral/Unsure	4 = Somewhat uncomfortable	5 = Extremely uncomfortable
Please select one of the following	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

48. Please explain your level of comfort with the previous question.

49. A prosecutor sentencing someone to death in order to have a “tough on crime” agenda is the same as someone who murdered an individual to increase their street creditability?

- True
- False

50. If you picked true, why do you think they are the same. If you picked false, why do you think they are difference. Please use as much detail as possible to explain your reasoning.

51. Sentencing someone to death through capital punishment is the same as a murderer taking a life?

- True
- False

52. Please explain the differences or similarities between the two. (Capital punishment vs Murder)

53. Please write down the first 3 words that come to mind when you think of someone who is on death row.

54. Please describe in detail some characteristics of an individual who you deem as more deserving of the death penalty. (Feel free to write down physical descriptions, details of specific crimes etc.)

55. Individuals who are considered murderers facing the death penalty deserve inhumane treatment?

- True
- False

56. Please explain your reasoning to why you think they do or do not deserve inhumane treatment.

Part 9– LEADING QUESTIONS

57. Have you ever been arrested?

- No
- Yes

58. Have you ever served as a jury member?

- No
- Yes

Part 10 – Self Identifiable questions

5. Please select your gender identity.

- Male
- Female
- Non – Binary/ Third Gender

6. Please select your highest level of completed education.

- Lower than 8th grade.
- 8th grade
- Highschool
- GED/Equivalent
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Higher than Bachelors

7. Please select the geographical region where you currently reside.

- West
- Midwest
- Northeast
- South

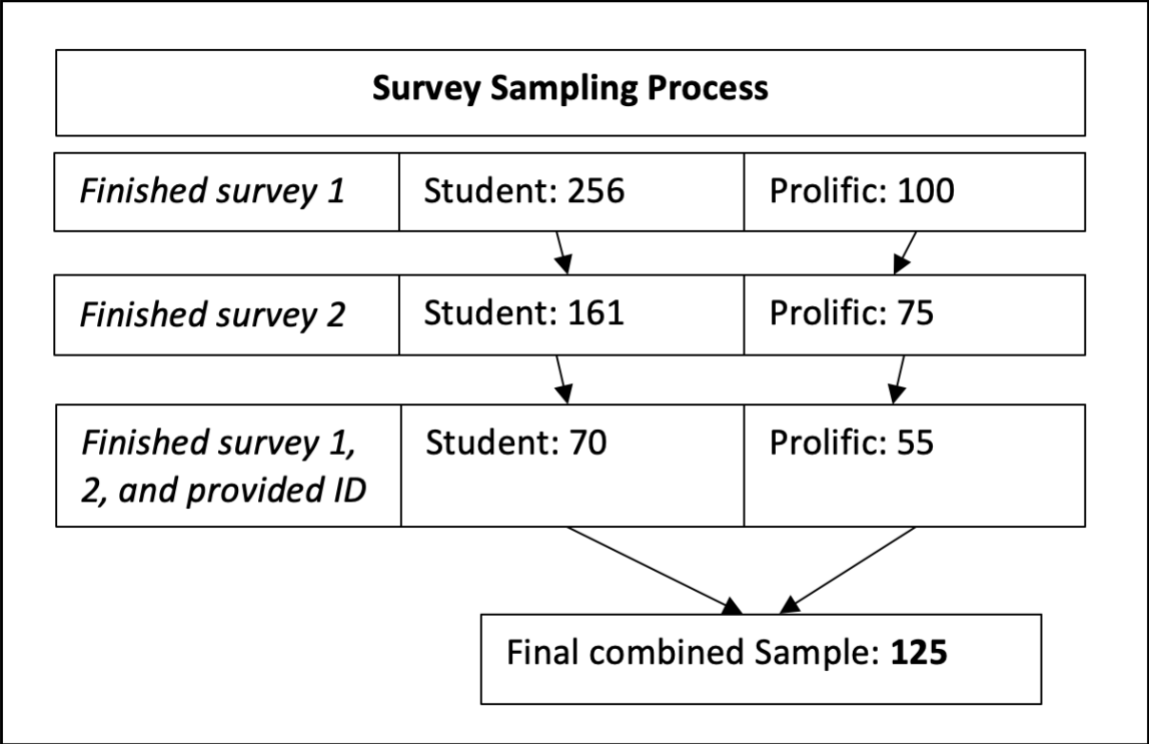
8. Please select which political group you identify with the MOST.

- Conservative
- Moderate
- Liberal
- Socialist
- Other

9. Please select your first language from the following choices.

- English
- Spanish
- French
- Arabic
- Chinese
- Other

Figure 1 Attrition Rate



APPENDIX C
IRB APPROVAL



December 19, 2022

To: Christine Poole
Department of Criminal Justice
College of Arts & Sciences
The University of Alabama
Box 870348

From: Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer

Re: **Notice of Approval**
IRB Application #: e-Protocol 22-09-5945
Project Title: "Public Perception of Capital Punishment"
Submission Type: New
Approval Date: December 19, 2022
Expiration Date: December 18, 2023
Funding Source: None
Review Category: EXEMPT
Approved Documents: Waiver of Written Consent, Recruitment Email

Dear Ms. Poole:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research. Therefore, your application has been approved according to 45 CFR part 46 as outlined below:

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111 (a)(7).

The approval for your application will lapse, as noted above. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the Continuing Review to the IRB as University policy requires before the lapse. Please note any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

All the best with your research.

166 Rose Administration | Box 870127 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127 | 205-348-8461
Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-3066 | rscompliance@research.ua.edu

University of Alabama (UA) Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

Protocol Title: Public perception of the Death Penalty

Principal Investigator: Christine Poole, B.A, B.S

UA: Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice

In this consent form, "you" always means the study subject. If you are a legally authorized representative, please remember that "you" refers to the study subject.

Consent Form Key Information:

- o Initial questionnaire will ask question pertaining to demographics, Criminal Justice System relationships and the Death Penalty.
- o There will be two phases of research. The first questionnaire, and then a follow up survey or interview (of your choosing) will take place within the following two months.
- o No information that directly identifies you will be noted, and an encrypted email server Proton will be utilized to secure all information.
- o No survey or interview will be longer than 30 minutes total.

Introduction

You are being asked to take part voluntarily in the research project described below. You are encouraged to take your time in making your decision. It is important that you read the information that describes the study. Please ask the study researcher to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

Why is this study being done?

This is a study about the use of the death penalty in the United States. The primary purposes of the study are to examine how knowledgeable the public is on the death penalty and further understand why individuals either support or oppose the death penalty. Additional interests include various demographic groups and their level of support for capital punishment

You are being asked to be in the study because the researcher has determined that you are over 18 years old and are eligible to vote within the United States of America.

UAIRB (11/2022)

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 12/19/22
EXPIRATION DATE: 12/18/23