Mock Jurors’ Judicial Instruction Comprehension in a “Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity” Case: A Qualitative Exploration

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PROBLEM STATEMENT:

- Previous research suggests that roughly 50% of deliberating jurors misuse judicial instructions regarding statements defining “beyond a reasonable doubt.”
- “Jurors’” comprehension, especially of judge’s instructions, is generally poor. Performance varies depending on the subject matter and test format, but figures under 50% are not uncommon.
- Researchers generally find no significant differences among the various insanity tests (e.g., M'Naughten, ALI, and the Durham test), nor between test instruction and no test instruction conditions.

RESPONSE EXAMPLES:

12) Results found that many jurors were unclear of instructions or meanings of important legal terms.

12. Describe in your own words, what does reasonable doubt mean?

49% "More WRONG than Right"

"Having evidence that puts you right at the scene"
"Without any doubt that he is guilty"
"Reason to doubt him guilty"

12% Answered: "I Don't Know"

39% "More RIGHT than Wrong"

"There is enough doubt to believe that the defendant is not guilty"
"More uncertain than certain"
"Common knowledge allows you to logically reason that there is doubt"
"If you have a reason to doubt the verdict"
"If you have enough reason and evidence to doubt the defendant was guilty"

IMPLICATIONS:

- The vast majority of mock jurors across groups self-rated their comprehension between 80%-100%.
- However, results showed that:
  - Results replicated and extended prior findings that mock jurors rely on a low comprehension level when making case decisions.
  - They suggest that deliberation fails to protect against and may even exacerbate reliance on impaired understanding of juror role and case-specific legal standards.
  - The use of jurors in criminal proceedings involving NGRI pleas should be examined in light of these and similar findings.
  - Future research should examine potentially more effective methods to clarify phrase, and educate jurors among NGRI legal standards and burdens of proof.