

ABSTRACT

The Role of Perceived Warmth and Competence in Civil Trials with Corporate Litigants

by

Alexander Charles Vukoica Jay

Advisor: Charles B. Stone

Corporations are involved in approximately 40% of all civil litigation (Langton & Cohen, 2008), yet there is much to be learned concerning how jurors make decisions in trials involving corporate litigants. Mock juror research suggests that for-profit corporations are treated more harshly than other defendants, such as non-profit corporations and individuals (e.g., Hans, 1998). This discrepant treatment of for-profit corporate defendants might be linked to unmitigated stereotypical perceptions of them being low in warmth (i.e., likely to have immoral intentions) but high in competence (i.e., likely to be capable of acting on those intentions; Aaker et al., 2010). Research shows that stereotypical low warmth predicts various negative reactions in perceivers that might explain jurors' harsher treatment of for-profit corporations (Fiske et al., 2002). For example, research examining Fiske and colleague's Stereotype Content Model demonstrates that low warmth predicts negative dispositional causal attributions, negative affective reactions, and negative behavioral reactions (Cuddy et al., 2008). Importantly, both negative dispositional causal attributions and negative affective reactions such as anger are known to bias jurors in their decision-making (e.g., Feigenson, 2016; Sommers, & Ellsworth, 2000). Thus, for-profit corporations might be at a disadvantage in a civil trial as the result of a perception-attribution/affect-behavior process.

This dissertation research was comprised by three pilot studies and one main experimental study. The pilot studies helped develop the stimuli for the follow up experimental study, as well pre-test measures of jurors' causal attributions, affective reactions, verdicts, and damage awards. The Main Experiment tested the hypothesized perception-attribution/affect-behavior parallel mediation model. assessed whether perceptions of litigants' warmth and competence can be adjusted at the outset of a trial, and what effects such intentional adjustments have on perceptions, affective reactions, causal attributions, and verdicts and damage awards. The hypotheses were generally supported, as results showed that litigant warmth, and to a lesser extent litigant competence, are important variables in civil jurors' decision-making process, predicting affective reactions, causal attributions, verdicts, and damage awards. More specifically, being high (vs. low) warmth predicted more favorable verdicts and damage awards for both the plaintiff and the defendant, and these effects were explained by jurors' making more (vs. less) favorable causal attributions toward the high (vs. low) warmth litigants.