Can Law Students Be Used to Study Judicial Decision-Making Experimentally?

Holger Spamann* Lars Klöhn♠

Abstract: Experimental research on judicial decision-making is hampered by the difficulty of recruiting judges as experimental participants. Can students be used in judges’ stead? Unfortunately, no. We ran the same 2×2 factorial experiment with 32 U.S. federal judges and 94 U.S. elite law students, and obtained diametrically opposed results. Judges’ decisions were strongly associated with one factor (sympathy, i.e., bias) but not the other (law). Results for students were the opposite. Equality of the two effects in the two groups is strongly rejected. What is true for decisions is also true for decision-making: equality of document-view patterns is also strongly rejected.

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* Lawrence R. Grove Professor of law, Harvard Law School. hspamann@law.harvard.edu.
♠ Professor of law, Humboldt-University Berlin. lars.kloehn@rewi.hu-berlin.de.
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