

Twelve Angry Men

The legal system in the United States of America grants one the right to a bench trial, where a judge determines the verdict, or a jury trial where, in most cases, where a panel of twelve United States citizens are sworn in to hear a case and then deliberate, after receiving instruction by the judge, to determine the guilt or innocence of the defendant. In the movie, Twelve Angry Men, the selected group of jurors was to decide the verdict of a murder case where a young man was accused of killing his father. Although we did not get to see the trial, we did get to see the jury receive instructions from the judge in regards to the law and how there needed to be a unanimous verdict to convict the accused. After the jurors received their instructions from the judge, the jury was sent off to deliberate. This was when the true colors of the jury deliberation process were revealed.

When the twelve jurors entered the room to deliberate, eleven out of the twelve began with a verdict of guilty without even discussing any of the evidence. This raises an important question; the jury was instructed to deliberate, so how can they reach a verdict without recapping the trial? If it were not for the one juror, Henry Fonda, who openly admitted that he did not know if the young man was guilty or innocent, the jury would have found a guilty verdict strictly based on opinion, bias, and prejudice. Since it was because of this one lonely juror who spoke up, what typically occurs in a jury deliberation was revealed. Not only was the case discussed, but also the jurors went into great detail to express what should not be allowed in a jury deliberation.

As Mark Nunez said in his evaluation of the movie, "It is argued that the jury system works against justice; a jury is not trained the same way a lawyer or judge is trained" (1). This is a very interesting and accurate statement he makes because as one can see many men of the jury, yes all men (the first flaw); bring their personal life to the table. For example, one man has anger built up in regards to his son that he has not talked to in three years. He expressed his anger through his harsh feelings towards the defendant. Since the case was about a young man accused

of killing his father, this one juror saw how it related to his life where as another juror had a prejudice towards Puerto Ricans because he automatically assumed that they are all from the “slums” because of his experience as a youth. He automatically presumed that the boy on trial was nothing but a troublemaker. So, the belief that a jury is to consist of one’s peers could be found false because every man that served on the jury for this young man was middle aged and older. There was not one juror who was the same age or near the same age as the defendant. Also, right from the start there was hostility towards the defendant for no apparent reason. The jurors’ aggression was generated from their personal lives which had no significant relevance in reaching a verdict, therefore what may currently be going on in the life a juror should not be allowed to be included in a jury deliberation. When a jury is instructed to deliberate, it is not time for the jury to reveal their personal life and get to know the history of the other jurors. It is the time that is allotted to the jury to decide if the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

In regards to the role of a jury foreman, it is an essential duty of the jury deliberation process. The foreman is the person that should be instructed to keep all personal opinions, beliefs, morals, and prejudices out of the deliberation. If this was to be a part of the legal system, it is to be known to all of the jurors what the foreman’s duties would entail. This could be told to the jury when the judge gives the instruction to the jury before they are sent off to deliberate.

Although the jury or foreman has no legal experience, it would just be another instruction that would have to be followed. The foreman could act as if he/she were a judge to make sure that if another juror were to express some sort of bias or personal belief that it would not be used to help re-cap the case. This, of course, raises the question that Mark Nunez asked, “Is it possible for human beings to check their lived experience at the door?” (1). As one may know, all lawyers and judges are forbidden to represent or monitor a case based on their personal experience. Can we say this does not happen, no; but they practice the law and that is what is represented in court. A jury’s job, as members of the court, is to reach a guilty or not guilty verdict based on evidence beyond a reasonable doubt, not based on personal reflection. By having a jury foreman

monitoring the jury it would “force us to reevaluate our thinking before hastily reaching the conclusion that the system does not work or that it amounts to nothing more than a mere joke” (Nunez 1). The legal system could then be more effective.

The jury foreman would not only monitor the jury, but he/she would also make sure, as in this case, that the entire jury knows what “the proper definition of murder is and what it entails” (2). This, of course, is told to the jury by the judge, but as Nunez says, “we never see the jury review or discuss a single jury instruction” (2). This is where the jury foremen would make sure the rest of the jury is clear about the charge and stays focused instead of allowing the jury to be induced by their own tragedies.

Not only is there a heavy responsibility placed on the jury but also the jury should not determine the entire case. Yes, the jury does listen to the state and the defendant’s lawyer present their case, but sometimes the lawyers purposely or unintentionally do not present certain evidence, theories, or possibilities, thus leaving it up to the jury to reveal all possibilities. The defendant’s lawyer does everything in his/her power, abiding by the law, to represent their client and the state does what it can to convict the defendant, but sometimes there is crucial information that could be used for or against the defendant that is left out. In this case, certain evidence, such as the knife used to kill the father and whether or not there was a replica, was not revealed until the Henry Fonda did some research himself. Henry should not have had to find out if there was a replica of the knife. That is something that should have been brought up by the defense. By having the jury deliberate, secluded from the rest of society, it gave them a chance to evaluate both sides of the case and it also served as an opportunity for things that some of the jurors may have missed to be brought to their attention.

Based on how the jury reacted to the defendant, the personal feelings revealed, and the different backgrounds each juror came from, it is safe to say that the final verdict of the case was the right one. By having that one lonely juror speak up in regards to the possibility that the defendant was innocent, he was able to show the rest of the jury how there was reasonable doubt.

Based on what occurred in the deliberation, the case was not clearly presented to the jury where they had any reason to convict the defendant. The stories of the witnesses were not very reliable because there was the possibility, based on their physical ability, that what they claimed they saw or heard was inaccurate. With such uncertainty or suspicion, the jury could not possibly make a definite ruling that the young man killed his father because there was reasonable doubt. That is why, in a jury deliberation, one's gut instinct should not be a factor in reaching a verdict. Like the one particular juror who voted in favor of convicting the defendant from the start, he was certain that the boy did it, but when he was "challenged he could not admit that he did not know why he thought the accused was guilty. This shows how a man's character is used as a vehicle to expose a serious flaw in the system" (Nunez 1).

So, is it safe to say that the legal system is flawless, of course not, but can justice still be attained? Yes. By having a jury deliberation it does allow outsiders to be selected to serve as a jury and evaluate a case based on the facts, but sometimes it takes that one person to assess all aspects of the case and make sure the accused can be convicted beyond reasonable doubt. One can only wish that every juror would do the same, but sometimes "the truth has to be brought to the eyes of the blind" (2).

Works Cited

Nunez, Mark. *Twelve Angry Men*. Apr. 2000. <<http://www.usfca.edu/pj/tam-nunez.htm>>.