

RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIANISM AND ATTITUDES TOWARD TORTURE

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I examined the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and attitudes toward torture. The results from 2 studies with U.S. students and citizens, respectively, demonstrated that not only was there a significant positive relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and their attitudes toward torture, but, more specifically, there was a significant positive relationship between authoritarian aggression and attitudes toward torture. The findings are discussed within the context of theoretical models of authoritarianism and human aggression.

Keywords: right-wing authoritarianism, authoritarian aggression, attitude, torture, human aggression.

In recent years, interest has increased in the study of the correlates and predictors of attitudes toward violence and human rights abuses (see, e.g., Anderson, Benjamin, Wood, & Bonacci, 2006; Benjamin, 2006, 2014; Crowson, Debacker, & Thoma, 2006; Swami et al., 2012), including attitudes toward torture (e.g., Crandall, Eidelman, Skitka, & Morgan, 2009; Larsson, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2012). Political science researchers have suggested that North Americans' attitudes toward torture are generally ambivalent (Gronke et al., 2010) and that if individuals are aware of international law regarding the prohibition of torture, this influences their attitude toward torture (Wallace, 2013). Outside of research on individual differences, there is a body of social psychological research in which it has been suggested that the manner in which torture is framed in mass media can influence individuals' attitudes toward

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torture in favorable or unfavorable directions (see, e.g., Benjamin & Oelke, in press; Crandall et al., 2009).

The present study bears some similarity to that of Larsson et al. (2012), in that in both my study and the research conducted by Larsson et al. right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is utilized as a predictor of attitudes toward torture. Unlike Larsson et al., I have examined RWA in isolation, rather than in combination with social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), and have examined more systematically than did Larsson et al. which of the three RWA dimensions specified by Altemeyer (1996) is significantly related to attitudes toward torture.

To the extent that attitudes toward torture bear some similarity to other social attitudes toward violence that have been found to correlate significantly with RWA (e.g., Benjamin, 2006, 2014), I expected that RWA would be significantly related to attitudes toward torture. Therefore, I predicted that there would be a positive relationship between RWA and attitudes toward torture. Furthermore, to the extent that it has been postulated that individual differences in aggression-related attitudes are antecedents to a variety of aggression-related cognitions and appraisals (see, e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002), I predicted that *authoritarian aggression*—that is, the tendency to accept and engage in harm toward others as long as such harm has been sanctioned by accepted authority figures (see, e.g., Altemeyer, 1996)—would be positively related to attitudes toward torture, whereas the other two dimensions of RWA (see also Altemeyer, 1996)—that is, the tendency to show strong acceptance and adherence to social conventions (*conventionalism*) and general willingness to accept the statements and actions of authority figures and to comply with the demands made by authority (*authoritarian submission*)—would not be positively related to attitudes toward torture.

Study 1

On the basis of previous research (Altemeyer, 1996; Benjamin, 2006, 2014; Larsson et al., 2012), I designed the first study to further establish that there is a positive relationship between RWA and attitudes toward torture, utilizing a North American sample. I predicted that higher levels of authoritarianism would be associated with more favorable attitudes toward torture.

Method

Participants were 87 students (42 women, 41 men, and four who declined to specify gender) at Oklahoma Panhandle State University. They ranged in age from 18 to 55 years ($M = 23.49$). After reading and signing the informed consent

statement, participants read a brief statement in which a variety of enhanced interrogation methods were described, followed by a battery of questionnaires, including the Attitudes Toward Torture Questionnaire (Crandall et al., 2009) and the 34-item RWA Scale (Altemeyer, 1996). The Attitudes Toward Torture Questionnaire consists of seven items that are designed to assess individuals' opinions about the use of the interrogation techniques described in the stimulus materials (e.g., "These methods are an effective way of getting information"). Higher scores indicate more favorable attitudes toward torture. Items in the RWA are designed to measure conventionalism, submission to authority, and authoritarian aggression (e.g., "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn" and "Laws have to be strictly enforced if we are going to preserve our way of life"), with higher scores indicating higher levels of authoritarianism. All items in each questionnaire are scored on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants also provided demographic information. Participants were debriefed and thanked at the end of the study, which took no longer than 15 minutes.

Results and Discussion

There was a significant positive relationship between scores on the RWA Scale and on the Attitudes Toward Torture Questionnaire, $r = .23$, $p < .03$. This finding is consistent with those reported in previous research on authoritarianism and attitudes toward various forms of violence (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Benjamin, 2006, 2014; Larsson et al., 2012). Although the scope of Study 1 was considerably more limited than that of similar research conducted by Larsson et al. (2012), the finding with regard to the relationship of RWA and attitudes toward torture is similar to that of Larsson et al. When examined in isolation, RWA appears to be significantly related to individuals' attitudes toward torture.

Study 2

According to Altemeyer's (1996) theory, RWA is composed of the three distinct dimensions of authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and conventionalism. However, the presence of double- and triple-barrel items in Altemeyer's RWA Scale makes it difficult to detect which of those dimensions influences specific attitudes and behavior (Funke, 2005). With regard to attitudes toward torture, a theoretical case, based on the General Aggression Model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) could be made that, because higher levels of authoritarian aggression should be associated with greater acceptance of torture, the individual's attitude toward torture is predicted primarily by the degree of authoritarian aggression. However, Altemeyer's RWA Scale does not

allow for the measurement of that assertion. Funke (2005) developed a 12-item questionnaire, based on Altemeyer's theoretical construct that consists of three subscales to enable researchers to test more directly hypotheses regarding specific dimensions of RWA that might influence attitudinal and behavioral responses. In my second study, I used Funke's (2005) RWA Scale to test the hypothesis that it is not authoritarian submission or conventionalism, but rather authoritarian aggression, that predicts attitudes toward torture.

Method

Participants were 215 individuals from the Northwestern Arkansas region (144 women, 70 men, 1 who declined to specify gender). Average age of the participants was 30.4 years, with ages ranging from 18 to 75 years. Participants were recruited through emails and messages posted on social media websites that contained a link to the study on the website www.instant.ly. After reading and explicitly agreeing to the informed consent statement, participants completed Funke's (2005) 12-item RWA Scale, and the intolerance subscale from the Conservatism/Liberalism Scale (Weems, Ross, & Aman, 2012), which includes an item specifically addressing support for the use of torture. All items in these questionnaires are scored on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Finally, participants completed a demographics questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaires, participants read a debriefing statement describing the purpose of the study and thanking them for their participation. The study took from approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

Results and Discussion

As was the case with Study 1, the overall RWA score was significantly correlated with the attitudes-toward-torture item in the intolerance subscale (Weems et al., 2012), $r = .32, p < .001$. As the subscales for Funke's (2005) RWA Scale were highly intercorrelated, partial correlations were computed between each subscale and the attitude-toward-torture item in the intolerance subscale. Doing this enabled me to measure the level of significance of the relationship between attitudes toward torture and each subscale of the RWA Scale, with the other subscales held constant. The result of this partial correlation analysis demonstrated that the RWA authoritarian aggression subscale was significantly correlated with attitudes toward torture, $r = .22, p < .001$. Neither authoritarian submission ($r = .06, p = .35$) nor conventionalism ($r = .04, p = .58$) was correlated with attitudes toward torture. These results supported my hypothesis that it would be authoritarian aggression, rather than authoritarian submission and con-

ventionalism, that would be related to variation in attitudes toward torture, and this finding can be viewed as lending support for a three-dimensional model of authoritarianism (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Funke, 2005; Van Hiel, Cornelis, Roets, & De Clercq, 2007). The findings are also consistent with theoretical frameworks of aggression, such as the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), according to which it is postulated that there are significant relationships between preexisting social attitudes toward aggressive and violent behavior (in this case, authoritarian aggression) and other aggression-related appraisals, such as attitudes toward torture.

General Discussion

Overall, my findings offer support for the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between authoritarian attitudes and attitudes toward torture. Individuals who have more strongly authoritarian attitudes than other people have appear to be more favorably disposed toward using torture against real or perceived enemies. More important, the findings demonstrate that it is specifically the dimension of authoritarian aggression (Altemeyer, 1996; Funke, 2005) that is significantly related to attitudes toward torture.

Although these findings were intriguing for me, there are some obvious limitations to the two studies reported here. In both studies, only RWA was considered as a correlate with attitudes toward torture. However, RWA is but one of a number of variables that may predict political attitudes, including attitudes toward torture, and the predictive power of RWA on attitudes toward torture may, indeed, be limited when included with other variables, such as SDO (Larsson et al., 2012). However, whether or not the same would be true for authoritarian aggression, specifically, remains untested. Furthermore, the extent to which RWA or authoritarian aggression might interact with situational antecedents to attitudes toward torture, such as status quo framing (e.g., Crandall et al., 2009) and effectiveness framing (e.g., Benjamin & Oelke, in press), is yet to be examined.

Altemeyer first conceptualized RWA as a three-dimensional construct in a work published in 1981. However, until relatively recently RWA has been measured in a unidimensional manner, as is the case with Altemeyer's own RWA Scale. Efforts to develop instruments that allow for each dimension to be independently measured are more recent (e.g., Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010; Funke, 2005). Although the questionnaire developed by Funke (2005) that I utilized in Study 2 has been criticized for being developed in an ad hoc manner and as being potentially lacking in sufficient systematic validation (Duckitt et al., 2010), in my view it does appear to measure the same dimensions that are measured by the questionnaire that Duckitt et al. (2010) developed. Funke's RWA questionnaire does have the advantages of brevity. Additionally, there is no evidence thus far to

suggest that Funke's RWA questionnaire is not a valid and reliable instrument. In 2007, Van Hiel et al. published a study in which they compared a number of what were then recently developed multidimensional RWA scales, including the one developed by Funke, and noted that each of the instruments performed similarly in predicting a number of theoretically relevant dependent variables. Although it could be argued that Funke's RWA Scale that I utilized in Study 2 is a less ideal operationalization of authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and conventionalism than is the case with other more recently developed instruments, such as that of Duckitt et al., to do so would require some direct comparative evidence along the lines of that presented by Van Hiel et al.

Although there is ongoing discussion regarding the extent to which RWA is a personality variable or a social attitude (Duckitt et al., 2010), the two studies I have reported here were not designed to address that particular debate. That said, in my studies I have treated RWA and its three dimensions as individual difference variables. There is a theoretical precedent for treating social attitudes as individual difference variables, to the extent that those attitudes show stability over time and across situations. In the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), for example, it is postulated that individual variations in social attitudes related to violence can serve as antecedents to aggressive affect, cognition, and behavior. In that regard, in the present research I have offered some tentative evidence that RWA in general, and authoritarian aggression in particular, are potential antecedents to people's attitudes toward torture.

With the above concerns duly noted, the findings provide support for the contention that RWA and, specifically, authoritarian aggression are potential predictors of attitudes toward torture. These are findings that would be expected based not only on various theoretical models of authoritarianism (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Duckitt et al., 2010), but also on theories of aggression, such as the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The extent to which authoritarian aggression predicts attitudes toward torture when other relevant predictors, such as SDO, are included is yet to be addressed. I believe that research similar to that of Larsson et al. (2012) would provide a good starting point. In addition, there is a paucity of research in which scholars have examined the potential interaction effects of authoritarian aggression and various situational antecedents that have been shown to influence attitudes toward torture (see, e.g., Benjamin & Oelke, in press; Crandall et al., 2009). For example, an examination of the extent to which authoritarian aggression might moderate the effects of status quo framing (Crandall et al., 2009) or effectiveness framing (Benjamin & Oelke, in press) on attitudes toward torture would provide some insight into how preexisting social and political attitudes augment or ameliorate the impact of mass media portrayals of torture on individuals' support for its use.

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