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FRAMING EFFECTS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD TORTURE

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Abstract

The purpose of the present research is to focus on one facet of media portrayals of torture, namely how different approaches to framing the use of torture influence readers' attitudes toward torture. Experiment 1 examined the influence of effectiveness framing on attitudes toward torture, and Experiment 2 examined framing in terms of in-group/out-group biases. Findings from Experiment 1 demonstrated that participants had more favorable attitudes toward torture when torture was portrayed to be effective than when portrayed to be ineffective. Findings from Experiment 2 showed that when interrogators were framed as out-group members and detainees as in-group members, respondents showed less favorable attitudes toward torture than when the in-group/out-group designations of interrogators and detainees were reversed. Implications of these findings with regard to the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) and mass media influences on attitudes toward torture are examined.

Most contemporary research on torture has concentrated on the psychological effects of torture on its victims (e.g., Biderman & Zimmer, 1961; Melamad, Melamad, & Bouhoustos, 1990; Engdahl & Eberly, 1990) and its perpetrators (e.g., Fanon, 1961; Milgram, 1974), as well as the factors that facilitate its practice (e.g., Haritos-Fatouros, 2003; Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, & Zimbardo, 2002). Although such work is clearly important, it is crucial to bear in mind that the practice of torture does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, the extent to which torture is facilitated or suppressed depends upon the extent to which the social context allows for its use (see, e.g., Benjamin, 2006). A portion of that social context includes how torture is presented in the mass media (see, e.g., Benjamin, 2008).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the issue of torture has received considerable attention in various mass media outlets (see, e.g., McCoy, 2006), from articles and editorials found on newspapers and websites, to televised news coverage (e.g., Abu Ghraib scandal, the interrogations leading to the location of Osama bin Laden), and in television series and film portrayals (e.g., *24*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Homeland*). Although to a casual observer it would be sensible to conclude that these media portrayals would influence readers' and viewers' perceptions of torture, depending on how torture is framed, relatively little research on framing effects on attitudes toward torture has been conducted to date.

One theoretical model for understanding how attitudes toward torture might be influenced is the General Aggression Model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Anderson & Carnagey, 2004). According to the GAM, numerous antecedent variables can influence both appraisal processes (the focus of the current series of experiments) and behavioral outcomes. Of particular interest for the purposes of the present experiments, the GAM specifies that situational stimuli, such as violent media serve as primes for three routes to aggression (cognitive, affective, and arousal) which then influence how events are appraised (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002). In discussing media coverage of torture specifically, Benjamin (2008) noted that efforts in the media to frame torture in a favorable light have the potential to enhance public support of its use, hence facilitating the likelihood of its occurrence by interrogators. Conversely, media portraying torture negatively should serve to diminish public support of its use, thus potentially inhibiting its likelihood of occurrence.

In terms of current attitudes toward torture, recent research indicates that Americans are generally ambivalent about the use of torture (see, e.g.,

Gronke, Rejali, Drenguis, Hicks, Miller, & Nakamura, 2010). However, recent social psychological research suggests that attitudes toward torture may be changed in a more or less favorable direction, depending upon how torture is framed (e.g., Crandall, Eidelman, Skitka, & Newman, 2009). In an experiment by Crandall et al. (2009) participants were randomly assigned to read a passage describing interrogation methods used by US military personnel that have been classified as torture under the *Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Punishment or Treatment* (United Nations, 1985). Each passage framed torture either as part of the status quo or as a novel development tied to the recent War on Terror. When torture was framed as part of the status quo, participants showed more favorable attitudes towards its use than when torture was framed as novel. The results suggest that when torture is presented as “business as usual” otherwise ambivalent American readers will show increased support for its use (Crandall et al., 2009). The two experiments reported herein will expand upon the previous research on framing effects and attitudes toward torture, by examining manipulations of the perceived effectiveness of torture, as well as manipulations of the in-group and out-group status of the interrogators involved in torture and their detainees.

Experiment 1

As noted earlier, Gronke, et al. (2010) recently published an article showing that although most Americans during the previous decade were ambivalent about torture, they showed some willingness to support its use if it they believed that by doing so, future terrorist attacks would be thwarted. Taken together with the research of Crandall et al. (2009) on framing effects, Americans should show more favorable attitudes toward torture if they are exposed to media portrayals of torture in which its use is effective than if they are exposed to media portrayals of torture as ineffective. The primary hypothesis of Experiment 1 is that when participants are exposed to a written message in which torture leads to the achievement of a national security objective, such as the location of Osama bin Laden (in other words, when torture is framed as effective), participants will show more favorable attitudes towards its use. On the other hand, if torture is framed as ineffective, participants will show less favorable attitudes towards its use.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 81 students (54 women, 26 men, and 1 who declined to specify) recruited from sections of an introductory psychology course at University of Arkansas-Fort Smith. Participants ranged in age from 18-54, with an average age of 21.37.

Materials

The Attitudes toward Torture Questionnaire (Crandall et al., 2009) consisted of seven items assessing 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."). All items were scored on a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated more favorable attitudes toward torture. As in the original Crandall et al. (2009) experiment, the questionnaire showed high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .84.

Procedure

After reading and signing an informed consent statement, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two brief statements describing the effectiveness of enhanced interrogation techniques performed by US forces (effectiveness frame manipulation). The description of torture was adapted from several news sources covering the operation that led to the successful location of Osama bin Laden. The Effective Frame version read:

In recent news, the heroic raid by US forces that led to the location and death of terrorist Osama Bin Laden was reported. In order to gather this information, specially trained US forces used enhanced interrogation methods that were deemed necessary for the successful location of the wanted terrorist. These methods included actions such as strapping detainees to a board and dunking them underwater, stuffing detainees face-first into a sleeping bag, and long periods of hanging detainees by ropes in painful positions. In addition, years later, these same detainees were conventionally interrogated (using rapport-building and routine questioning). However, it was under conditions of enhanced interrogation

that the needed information was obtained for the mission to be successfully carried out. In other words, it appears that the enhanced interrogation methods were effective in obtaining the information necessary to locate Osama bin Laden.

The passage used in the Ineffective Frame condition was similar to the original passage except in terms of its emphasis of the use of traditional interrogation methods:

In recent news, the heroic raid by US forces that led to the location and death of terrorist Osama Bin Laden was reported. In order to gather this information, specially trained US forces used enhanced interrogation methods that were deemed necessary for the successful location of the wanted terrorist. These methods included actions such as strapping detainees to a board and dunking them underwater, stuffing detainees face-first into a sleeping bag, and long periods of hanging detainees by ropes in painful positions. Although these enhanced interrogation methods were used, it was not until years later when these same detainees were conventionally interrogated (using building rapport and routine questioning) that the needed information was obtained and the mission was successfully carried out. In other words, it appears that the enhanced interrogation methods were not effective in obtaining the information necessary to locate Osama bin Laden.

Once participants had finished reading the passage, they responded to the items on the Attitudes toward Torture Questionnaire (Crandall et al., 2009), and then completed some background demographic information. Upon completion, participants were debriefed and thanked. Total participation time was less than ten minutes.

Results and Discussion

A simple one-way analysis of variance showed a significant effect for type of interrogator, $F(1, 79) = 28.71, p < .0001$. Participants showed significantly lower favorability toward torture when torture was framed as ineffective ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.25$) than when torture was framed as effective ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.20$).

The findings of Experiment 1 confirmed the hypothesis. It does appear that when torture is framed as effective, participants will have more favorable (albeit ambivalent) attitudes towards it than when it is framed as ineffective. These findings are consistent with previous political science

research (Gronke et al., 2010) and with previous social psychological research on framing effects on attitudes toward torture (Crandall et al., 2009).

Experiment 2

Research on Social Identity Theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that individuals are motivated to respond positively to members of their in-groups and negatively to out-group members. One potential consequence of this in-group favorability bias is the motivation to harm members of out-groups, including showing a willingness to behave aggressively toward out-group members (e.g., Struch & Schwartz, 1989). Left unanswered is the question of what happens when out-group members engage in the same aggressive activities against in-group members.

To answer the question, a variation of the original Crandall et al. (2009) experiment was conducted to test how attitudes toward torture are influenced by variations of the in-group/out-group status of interrogators and detainees. In the original Crandall et al. (2009) experiment, interrogators in each scenario were portrayed as in-group members (US forces) and detainees were described as out-group members (Middle Eastern military prisoners). The present experiment will test the hypothesis that when the interrogators are portrayed as out-group members (i.e., Middle Eastern forces) and the detainees are portrayed as in-group members (US military prisoners) attitudes will be less favorable than when interrogators are portrayed as in-group members (US forces) and detainees are portrayed as out-group members (Middle Eastern military prisoners).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 98 students (54 women and 44 men) recruited from sections of an introductory psychology course at University of Arkansas-Fort Smith. Participants ranged in age from 18-45, with an average age of 21.12.

Materials

The Attitudes toward Torture Questionnaire consisted of seven items, modified from Crandall et al. (2009). One item in the questionnaire was modified from “I consider these techniques to be un-American” to “I consider these techniques to be inappropriate” in order to better fit the context of the stimulus materials used in the experiment. As in Experiment 1, all items were scored on a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating more favorable attitudes toward torture. Consistent with Experiment 1, the questionnaire showed high internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .85.

Procedure

After reading and signing an informed consent statement, participants were randomly assigned to read a brief statement describing enhanced interrogation techniques performed by either American troops against Middle Eastern prisoners (In-Group Interrogator condition) or Middle Eastern troops against American prisoners (Out-Group Interrogator condition). The passage used in the In-Group Interrogator condition was identical to the Status Quo passage used by Crandall et al. (2009). The passage used in the Out-Group Interrogator condition differed only in terms of the characterization of the interrogators and prisoners. Participants subsequently responded to the items on the revised Attitudes toward Torture Questionnaire, and then completed some background demographic information. Upon completion, participants were debriefed and thanked. Total participation time was less than ten minutes.

Results and Discussion

A simple one-way analysis of variance showed a significant effect for type of interrogator, $F(1, 96) = 4.50, p < .04$. Participants showed significantly lower favorability toward torture when the interrogators were members of an out-group ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.08$) than when interrogators were members of an in-group ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.51$).

As expected, varying the in-group/out-group status of torturers and detainees influenced individuals’ attitudes toward torture. Although consistent with the work of Gronke et al. (2010), participants were generally ambivalent about the use of torture when it used by members of

their own in-groups against out-group members, when torture was portrayed as used by out-group members against members of their own in-group, participants' attitudes toward torture trended in a significantly negative direction.

General Discussion

To summarize, in both experiments, the main hypothesis was confirmed. How torture is framed influences readers' attitudes towards its use. When torture is framed as effective, individuals will have more favorable attitudes towards it than when torture is framed as ineffective. When torture is framed as involving out-group members as interrogators and in-group members as detainees, attitudes towards its use become significantly more negative. The above findings are consistent with previous political science research on attitudes toward torture (Gronke, et al., 2010) as well as the recent research on framing effects and attitudes toward torture by Crandall et al., (2009).

One implication of the above experiments is that the way torture is portrayed in the mass media will have a potentially profound impact on how readers and viewers perceive its desirability, which is of both theoretical and practical importance. The findings from the two experiments are consistent with various theories of aggression, such as the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), which would predict that the way media violence is presented will influence appraisal processes, such as attitudes. The findings from Experiment 2 are consistent with Terror Management Theory with regard to in-group favoritism effects (see, e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Rosenblatt, Veeder, Kirkland, & Lyon, 1990). In the present research, readers' already ambivalent attitudes toward torture became more negative when presented with a scenario in which out-group members, with which the US was at war at the time, used torture on in-group members. It is quite conceivable that individuals can hold somewhat contradictory attitudes regarding torture depending upon the in-group/out-group status of those utilizing such methods, with minimal cognitive dissonance.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that at least on a very short-term basis, the way information regarding torture's use is framed to an audience will shape that audience's appraisals of the issue of torture. Hence, it is important for audiences to be aware of the editorial slant of various news outlets when consuming news information in which torture

is reported. Furthermore, as Benjamin (2008) contended, the extent to which torture is framed as a desirable practice has the potential to enhance its use in the name of national security, a possibility alluded to by Carnagey and Anderson (2007) in their discussion of increases in favorability of attitudes toward war and violent treatment of penal offenders that occurred in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

The samples utilized in both experiments were relatively small compared to the sample available to Crandall et al. (2009), and was composed of students enrolled in introductory psychology courses. Although research based upon such samples is sometimes criticized in terms of its generalizability (see, e.g., Sears, 1986, though see also Anderson & Bushman, 1997, for a rejoinder), in the case of the present experiments, the findings appear consistent with similar research utilizing a larger, randomly selected sample (Crandall et al., 2009).

The present experiments were based upon coverage compiled from news articles, and hence the stimuli themselves were intended to mimic the sorts of frames one would encounter in print media. It would be beneficial to examine the extent to which the use of these same frames in televised and film media (in which the portrayal of torture is often more realistic and graphic) influence individuals' attitudes toward torture's use. In addition, the present research focused strictly on short-term framing effects. In everyday life, individuals are exposed to the same framing effects examined in the two experiments reported herein over a much longer period of time. Longitudinal research on media violence shows that such exposure can lead to biases in appraisal, such as an increased perception of the world as a dangerous place (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980). Furthermore, the effects of long-term exposure can linger for decades (Huesmann, 1998). In the case of torture, based on the work of Huesmann (1998) on media violence, long-term exposure to the use of torture in various media could lead to the storage of violent behavioral scripts in long-term memory, which, with repeated rehearsal will become increasingly automatic, increasing various hostile appraisal biases, and strengthening and enhancing favorable attitudes toward torture. Second, exposure to media violence serves to desensitize individuals to violence (e.g., Fanti, Vanman, Henrick, & Avraamides, 2009; Thomas, Horton, Lippincott, & Drabman, 1977), which has a number of consequences (e.g., Bartholow, Bushman, & Sestir, 2006) including inhibiting helping behaviors (e.g., Bushman & Anderson,

2009). In the case of torture, prolonged exposure to its use in mass media could leave individuals less likely to notice its occurrence, along with human rights violations in general, and influence individuals to be less likely to intervene (e.g., in the form of protest, advocacy, etc.) when instances of its use are brought to light (Benjamin, 2008).

Finally, the present research was not designed to examine the potential interactive effects of any of a number of individual difference variables with framing effects on attitudes toward torture. According to the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), any of a number of individual difference variables might have an influence on attitudes toward torture. Of particular interest would be variables related to ideology, such as authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and racial and ethnic resentment (see, e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Larsson, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2012). Furthermore, given how attitudes formed through direct experience tend to be more resistant to persuasive appeals (e.g., Wu & Shaffer, 1987), it would be useful to examine how individual variations in direct experience in combat situations where torture has been known to occur influence attitudes toward torture. Although Gronke et al. (2010) noticed that combat veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq tended to have more negative attitudes toward torture than the general public, it would be of interest to determine if such veterans are similarly affected by how torture is framed as nonveterans, or if veterans are more immune to attitude change when exposed to the sorts of framing effects examined in Experiments 1 and 2 and in the experiment reported in Crandall et al. (2009).

Author Note

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