

BRIEF REPORT

Personal Closeness and Perceived Torture Efficacy: If Torture Will Save Someone I'm Close To, Then it Must Work

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Psychological research on the efficacy of torture frequently excludes an important question: What causes people to *believe* that torture is effective? We investigated whether a factor increasing persons' *desire* for torture to be effective might lead them to *perceive* that it was more effective. Across 2 studies, participants evaluated hypothetical crisis scenarios that varied in the degree of *personal closeness* to the potential victim of the perpetrator in the crisis. They then indicated the degree to which they believed that torture would be effective in the scenario. Findings revealed that personal closeness to the victim led to the belief that using torture would be more effective. Results further suggested that perceived efficacy in part accounted for the effect of personal closeness on torture support in the scenario. These studies help inform our understanding of the psychology of people's perceptions about torture in applied circumstances.

Keywords: torture perceptions, torture efficacy, personal closeness

Torture is one of the most relevant topics in peace psychology today (e.g., [Higson-Smith, 2013](#)), and whether or not torture is effective is

fundamental to this discussion. Yet very little research examines how people *perceive* the effectiveness of torture and what influences those perceptions. The present study aims to fill this gap.

Personal Closeness and Perceived Efficacy

Although much of the discussion about torture efficacy has revolved around facts, in reality, people have sometimes latent motivations that bias their perceptions. For example, increasing persons' *desire* for torture to be effective might lead them to perceive that it actually is more effective. This means that factors not necessarily directly related to effectiveness—but which are related to desire for success—might subtly affect judgments of torture's effectiveness. One such factor is *personal closeness*.

Whereas previous research substantiates the idea that people are more likely to endorse the use of torture in personally relevant scenarios (e.g., when a loved one's life is at stake; see [Houck & Conway, 2013](#)), the present work investigated the less-straightforward idea that personal closeness biases people's perceptions and leads to the belief that torture will in fact be effective in saving a loved one. Two studies

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were conducted to test the idea that a personal-closeness manipulation impacts perceptions of torture efficacy.

Method

Study 1a ($N = 105$) and Study 1b ($N = 157$) followed the same basic design and yielded the same pattern of results. Therefore, we combined data sets and present them together.

Participants

We recruited 262 participants (128 men and 119 women; 15 unreported) through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online survey system.

Design Overview

Participants read a hypothetical scenario describing an imminent crisis (kidnapping or ticking time bomb). All scenarios, adapted from earlier work (Homant & Witkowski, 2011; Houck & Conway, 2013), describe a guilty perpetrator in custody who holds information necessary to prevent the loss of innocent life; participants are told that torturing the suspect for the information is the only viable option.

Primary Manipulation: Personal Closeness

Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of two types of scenarios that varied in personal closeness to the victim in the crisis (see Houck & Conway, 2013). Specifically, some participants evaluated crisis scenarios that described a loved one in imminent danger. Others evaluated parallel crisis scenarios that involved a stranger from another country in imminent danger.¹

Dependent Measures

Support for torture. Participants completed two measures of their support of torture use in the scenario: one, a continuous scale and the other, a dichotomous (yes/no) scale, which were identical to those used in prior work (Houck & Conway, 2013). These measures were converted to z scores and then averaged to produce a single "support for torture" score ($\alpha = .81$).

Perceived torture efficacy. Participants responded to two items that measured the degree

they perceived torture as effective in the scenario. These items were highly correlated and thus were converted to z -scores and averaged into a single "perceived torture efficacy" score ($\alpha = .78$).²

Results

Personal Closeness on Perceived Torture Efficacy

A One-Way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of personal closeness on perceived torture efficacy, $F(1, 257) = 5.42, p = .021$. Compared with those in the stranger condition, people who evaluated personally relevant scenarios perceived torture to be more effective.

Perceived Torture Efficacy as a Mediator

There was a significant main effect of personal closeness on support for torture, such that people in the personally close condition were more likely to support the use of torture than people in the stranger condition, $p = .001$. Using commonly accepted statistical methods to test for mediation (see, e.g., Conway et al., 2011), analyses were conducted to see if perceptions of torture efficacy explained the effect of personal closeness on subsequent torture support in the scenario. The relationship between

¹ For studies 1a and 1b, we originally set out to explore two potential moderating factors of the effect of personal closeness on torture support. In particular, Study 1a also attempted to manipulate the certainty of the perpetrator's guilt/torture effectiveness in the description of the scenario, and Study 1b manipulated the ethnicity of the perpetrator. Though neither manipulation moderated the effect, these null findings do not detract from, or interface at all with, the main findings presented in the present paper.

² These two questions appeared in a list of 16 questions pertaining to participants' views of torture. We performed a factor analysis of these questions. This analysis revealed three primary factors, including a five-item factor containing the two efficacy items used in the present study. In addition to the efficacy items, that factor also included items suggesting that torturing the perpetrator was justified. We combined all items from that factor into a single composite and reran all of the tests reported in the text on this new composite variable, and those analyses revealed a pattern identical, both descriptively and inferentially, to the one reported for the two-item questionnaire. These additional analyses revealed that it is highly unlikely that the pattern reported in the text is due to family-wise error; instead, it likely represents a real effect. We focus the paper on the efficacy items largely for the sake of brevity of reporting.

personal closeness and torture support weakens when controlling for perceived torture efficacy (0-order $B = .36$, $p = .001$; controlling for efficacy, $B = .17$, $p = .056$). A Sobel test suggested that perceived torture efficacy was a significant mediator (Sobel $p = .020$).

Discussion

These results have demonstrated that personal closeness to potential victims causes people to believe that using torture on a potential perpetrator would be effective, and further show that this effect of personal closeness on perceived efficacy accounts, in part, for the effect of personal closeness on torture support. These findings are important, as they suggest that the desire for a favorable outcome may heavily bias perceptions of torture's effectiveness, when in reality, the effectiveness of torturing terrorists, for instance, for information is at best questionable. Given that public attitudes toward torture efficacy surely influence the actual adoption and implementation of policies, these data suggest that it may be constructive to shift the focus

from the debate about torture efficacy to understanding what people think about its effectiveness.

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