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Torture and judgments of guilt

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ABSTRACT

Although torture can establish guilt through confession, how are judgments of guilt made when tortured suspects do not confess? We suggest that perceived guilt is based inappropriately upon how much pain suspects appear to suffer during torture. Two psychological theories provide competing predictions about the link between pain and perceived blame: cognitive dissonance, which links pain to blame, and moral typecasting, which links pain to innocence. We hypothesized that dissonance might characterize the relationship between torture and blame for those close to the torture, while moral typecasting might characterize this relationship for those more distant from it. Accordingly, this experiment placed participants into one of two different roles in which people may be exposed to torture. Participants in the proximal role of prison staffer saw suffering torture victims as relatively more guilty, while participants in the relatively distant role of a radio listener saw suffering victims as more innocent.

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Introduction

Interrogators sometimes attempt to uncover suspects' guilt or innocence by applying torture. Advocates of torture claim that pain is a powerful crucible for determining guilt because the guilty are made to confess (Greenberg & Dratel, 2005). What happens, however, when pain elicits no confession? We suggest that perceived guilt depends inappropriately upon how much pain a suspect appears to suffer during torture.

Psychological theories outline two ways in which suffering could influence perceived guilt. The moral typecasting hypothesis suggests that pain leads to the inference of innocence (Gray & Wegner, 2009). This idea holds that people have a general perceptual tendency to view others as either victims of pain (moral patients) or perpetrators of misdeeds (moral agents), but not both – which should make those in pain seem less capable of wrongdoing. Studies of moral typecasting find that those more sensitive to pain are ascribed less blame for misdeeds – so suspects who suffer more pain in torture should appear more innocent. Conversely, cognitive dissonance suggests that suffering leads to the presumption of guilt (Cialdini, Kenrick, & Hoerig, 1976; Festinger, 1957). People feel uncomfortable when exposed to others suffering and attempt to relieve this discomfort by believing that people in pain deserve their torment (Lerner, 1971). Thus, dissonance predicts that suspects who suffer more pain in torture should appear guiltier.

Although these two theories make opposing predictions about the link between pain and perceived guilt, both may be true

depending on context. We suggest that dissonance will apply for those closely associated with perpetrating the torture, while moral typecasting will apply for those distant from it. Those complicit with questionable deeds often seek to justify them because of the discomfort they create (Zanna & Cooper, 1974), and perceiving those in pain as guilty is an easy way to justify victims' suffering (McCoy, 2006). While this need for justification should be strongest for those actually administering pain, studies suggest that even those nearby instances of harm feel somewhat complicit (Lerner, 1971).

Alternatively, those removed from the torture and without the need to justify can sympathize with victims and hence see pain as evidence of innocence. With no personal involvement, the distress caused by seeing another in pain should be reduced enough to allow moral typecasting to operate, casting torture victims as blameless. If these predictions are true, they could explain why governments may advocate torture while the public disapproves. Seeking to justify its own actions, a complicit government links pain to blame, judging the tortured as guilty and therefore worthy of torture; a distant public links pain to innocence, judging victims as guiltless and therefore undeserving of torture.

To investigate how suffering influences the perceived guilt of those tortured, we conducted a 2 × 2 experiment in which someone suspected of wrongdoing is subjected to a mild form of torture – immersion of a hand in ice water. The “torture victim” expressed either little or substantial suffering, and participants were either relatively detached from the torture (*distant* condition) or closely associated with the torture (*close* condition).

The close and distant conditions were designed to mimic real-life situations in which people may actually be exposed to torture.

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In the distant condition, participants listened to an episode of torture previously conducted, as they might while tuning into a radio program. In the close condition, participants were exposed to torture similar to a prison staff member: they briefly met the torture victim, then listened to the torture while sitting next door. Following dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), we hypothesized that participants in the close condition would judge the victim in substantial pain as relatively more guilty. Following moral type-casting theory (Gray & Wegner, 2009), we expected that participants detached from the torture distant condition would judge the victim in more pain as relatively less guilty.

Method

Participants

Eighty-eight participants (54 females, 32 males, 2 unspecified, $M_{\text{age}} = 24$) were recruited from on-campus sources. Six participants were excluded for suspicion, leaving a total of 82 participants.

Procedure – close condition

In the close condition, participants came into the lab, briefly met another participant (a confederate), and were then escorted to an individual testing room. For ease of explanation, we will call the confederate “Carol,” though she was never explicitly named in the study.

Participants were told that although Carol believed the study was about “Chance and Winning,” we were really interested in moral behavior. Carol’s task was to roll an 8-sided die, and she believed that she and her partner would each receive some amount of money depending on the outcome of the roll. One roll (an 8), was ostensibly best for Carol (receive \$5.50) and worst for her partner (receive \$0). It was described that as no one watched the die-roll, Carol may have been tempted to cheat to win more money for herself. Sure enough, she reported rolling an 8.

It was explained to participants that although there was no way to tell if Carol had lied or had legitimately rolled an 8, people often admit to wrongdoing when placed in stressful situations. To that aim, Carol ostensibly did a cold pressor task after she reported the results of her die-roll, placing her hand in ice water for 80 s. Participants were told that they would listen to Carol being “tortured” and then judge the likelihood that she had cheated. Participants heard her react one of two ways to the cold pressor. In the pain condition, she appeared to feel significant discomfort, whimpering throughout the cold pressor. In the no pain condition, she appeared to feel little discomfort, reacting stoically to the cold.

After listening to the torture session, participants evaluated the likely guilt of the “torture victim” by answering three questions. The first two were, “How likely is it that the ‘torture victim’ had cheated?” and “How likely is it that the ‘torture victim’ is lying?” with responses made on a scale from 1 (“Not at all likely”) to 5 (“Extremely likely”). The third was “How moral or immoral do you perceive the ‘torture victim’ to be?” with responses made on a scale from 1 (“Extremely moral”) to 5 (“Extremely immoral”). As a manipulation check, participants also evaluated how much pain they perceived the “torture victim” to have felt on a scale from 1 (“No pain at all”) to 5 (“Extreme pain”).

Procedure – distant condition

In the distant condition, participants did not meet the confederate. They were told by the experimenter that Carol had previously participated in the study described above, and that although Carol believed the study was about “Chance and Winning,” we were

interested in moral behavior. Participants had the experimental set-up described to them, were told about Carol’s suspicious die-roll and her subsequent “torture.” Participants then listened to a recording of her being “tortured,” in which she evinced either significant (pain condition) or minimal pain (no pain condition). Participants then evaluated Carol’s likely guilt and degree of experienced pain as in the close condition.

Participants in both conditions were extensively debriefed for suspicion using a “funnel-debrief,” as suggested by Bargh and Chartrand (2000). As mentioned earlier, six participants were excluded, but the vast majority believed the experimental set-up.

Results

Manipulation checks

Confirming our manipulation of perceived pain, participants in the pain condition rated the confederate as experiencing more pain ($M = 3.59$) than those in the no pain condition ($M = 1.73$) on a 5-point scale, $t(80) = 10.80$, $p < 0.001$. Confirming our manipulation of distance, 18 independent observers unanimously rated those in the close condition as more “closely associated with the torture,” than those in the distant condition, $\chi^2(1) = 18.00$, $p < 0.001$, and also as more “complicit with the torture”, $\chi^2(1) = 18.00$, $p < 0.001$.

Perceptions of guilt

The three questions assessing guilt were correlated ($\alpha = 0.86$), and so were averaged to form a guilt index. This index was submitted to a 2 (close vs. distant) \times 2 (pain vs. no pain) between subjects ANOVA, which revealed a significant interaction, $F(1,78) = 10.39$, $p < 0.005$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$, and no main effects.

Simple effects tests revealed the predicted effects. Participants in the distant condition rated the confederate as less guilty when evincing more ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.56$) rather than less pain ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.50$), $p < 0.01$, whereas those in the close condition rated the confederate as more guilty when evincing more ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.92$) rather than less pain ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.03$), $p < 0.05$. See Fig. 1.

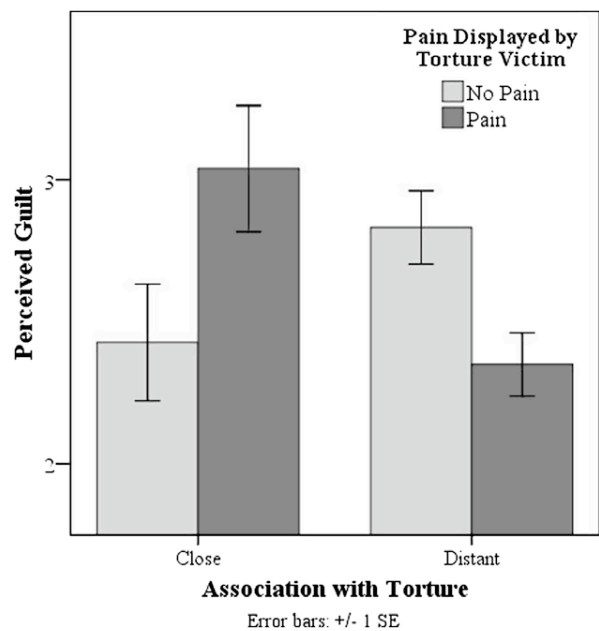


Fig. 1. Judgments of guilt depending on interpersonal distance from torture.

As predicted then, those closer to the torture associated greater pain with greater guilt, while those distant from torture associated greater pain with greater innocence.

Discussion

This study examined how people evaluate the guilt of torture victims depending upon the amount victims suffered during torture. In the distant condition, participants were placed into the kind of role in which the general public might learn of torture, and listened to a recording of a torture episode. In this case, participants saw pain as evidence of innocence, which suggests that for those distant from torture, the theory of moral typecasting holds (Gray & Wegner, 2009). The more Carol became a moral patient by receiving harm, the less she was seen as capable of blame (a moral agent). On the other hand, participants closer to the torture, having assumed roles loosely analogous to prison staff, conformed to what cognitive dissonance theory would predict, and saw Carol's pain as an indication of guilt (Festinger, 1957; Lerner & Simmons, 1966).

These divergent effects help to explain the torture debate. For those closely involved with its administration, torture can be a self-justifying system, as those who are harmed appear guilty and therefore deserving of harm. For the distant public, the pain of torture victims leads to the inference of innocence, and harming innocents is generally believed to be unacceptable. Thus, those close to the torture feel like it is justifiable while those far away from it see it as wrong.

Of course, the debate on torture is more complex, as many in the public do support torture, and many close to torture do reject its methods. Research suggests that other motives are important in evaluations of torture, such as the desire for retribution (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009) or power (Janoff-Bulman, 2007). Importantly, the desire for retribution stems from perceptions of guilt (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009), which these studies find are influenced by the perceived suffering of torture victims. Future research should examine the exact process by which pain is translated into guilt or innocence, and might examine perceptions of the efficacy of torture, beliefs in a just world, and political leanings. For example, those who feel closer to a country's government (e.g., by having voted for its current leader) may have a stronger need to justify its actions. Future studies could also examine the generalizability of these findings, for although this study did use a realistic torture situation, archival studies involving real torture would be useful.

The effects uncovered in these studies suggest that two psychological theories linking blame to pain – dissonance and moral typecasting – apply differently depending on the observer's role. These findings provide an insight into not only torture, but also instances in which we simultaneously observe pain and form judgments of guilt, such as instances of domestic violence, workplace harassment and child abuse. They imply that those close to harms of any kind will blame victims more than those further away. What these data suggest most of all is that pain itself affects judgments of guilt, which means that torture may not uncover guilt as much as lead to its perception.

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