FlashReport

Dehumanization and self-reported proclivity to torture prisoners of war

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HIGHLIGHTS

► We found that dehumanization is related to self-reported willingness to torture.
► Threats moderated the connection between dehumanization and willingness to torture.
► The connection between dehumanization and torture is stronger when threat is high.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Several authors have argued that dehumanization may be the psychological process that underlies people's willingness to torture outgroup members. In the current research, we directly examined this question among Christian participants, with Muslims as the target outgroup. Across two studies, we found that to the extent that Christians dehumanized Muslims, they were more likely to self-report the willingness to torture Muslim prisoners of war. We also found that perceiving Muslims as a threat moderated the relationship between dehumanization and the self-reported proclivity to torture. These findings support the propositions made by previous authors on the role of dehumanization in torture, war and genocide.

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Introduction

The horrifying images of the torture of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq shocked the world (Taguba, 2004). Recent empirical research has shown that people tend to view outgroups as being less human than their ingroup (Leyens et al., 2001). The link between such dehumanization and violence against outgroups has been written about extensively (e.g. Bandura, 1990; Bar-Tal, 1990; Opotow, 1990; Staub, 2005). However, we are not aware of any research that has examined the link between dehumanization and people's willingness to torture outgroup members. The current research was conducted as the first to directly explore this link with empirical data.

Dehumanization and its consequences

Contemporary researchers have conceptualized dehumanization in several ways. Harris and Fiske (2006) identify a biological basis for dehumanization that involves the deactivation of the brain region that is responsible for attributing mental states to other people (i.e. the medial prefrontal cortex). Haslam (2006) identifies two types

of dehumanization; *animalistic dehumanization*, which is the denial of *uniquely human attributes* (e.g. refinement and moral sensibility); and *mechanistic dehumanization*, which is the denial of *human nature* (e.g. interpersonal warmth and cognitive openness). Animalistic dehumanization at the intergroup level resembles *infrahumanization*, which is the attribution of more uniquely human emotions to the ingroup versus the outgroup (Leyens et al., 2001). Viki et al. (2006) also developed a measure of intergroup animalistic dehumanization in which participants assign human-related words (e.g., person, humanity, man), and animal-related words (e.g., pet, creature, feral) to ingroups and outgroups. The words used in this measure were initially equated for valence in a pilot study. Viki et al. (2006) found that human-related words were considered as being more typical for the ingroup than the outgroup.

Researchers have also begun to explore the consequences of dehumanization (e.g. Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006). Cuddy, Rock, and Norton (2007) found that the less people attributed secondary emotions to outgroup victims of Hurricane Katrina, the less willing they were to help them. In Northern Ireland, Tam et al. (2007) found that dehumanization led to decreases in the willingness to forgive outgroup members. Zebel, Zimmermann, Viki, and Doosje (2008) found that to the extent that Dutch people dehumanized Muslims, they were less likely to feel guilty when they read about the negative role Dutch soldiers played in the massacre at Srebrenica. All this research shows

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that dehumanization is related to several negative outcomes for intergroup relations.

The current research

The current studies directly examined the role of dehumanization in Christian participants' self-reported proclivity to torture Muslim prisoners. As noted earlier, the connection between dehumanization and torture has been written about by several authors (e.g. Staub, 2005). These authors have argued that dehumanization may result in the exclusion of certain people from the boundaries of moral treatment (e.g. Opotow, 1990). Such exclusion may make torture seem justified and less emotionally distressing (Harris & Fiske, 2011). Recent research by Waytz and Epley (2012) found that individuals who felt socially connected were more likely to dehumanize distant others and also to recommend the harsh treatment of terrorist detainees. However, Waytz and Epley (2012) did not directly ask participants to indicate their own willingness to engage in abusive behaviour against the terrorist detainees. As far as we are aware, there has been no research that has directly examined this hypothesised connection between dehumanization and the willingness to torture outgroup members.

Our studies were conducted as a first step in making an empirical contribution to this question. In Study 1, we experimentally manipulated the perceived humanity of Muslims (high vs. low). The participants were then presented with images of the Abu Ghraib incident and asked to indicate the likelihood that they would behave like the soldiers. We predicted that the participants in the low (vs. high) humanity condition would report a higher level of proclivity to torture (Hypothesis 1). In Study 2, we measured the participants' own ratings of Muslim humanity and its relationship with the proclivity to torture. We predicted that Christian participants would dehumanize Muslims (Hypothesis 2). We also predicted that the more Christians dehumanized Muslims, the higher the proclivity to torture they would self-report (Hypothesis 3). In this study, we also examined the moderating role of perceiving Muslims as a threat. We expected a significant interaction between dehumanization and threat in predicting the proclivity to torture; such that the connection between dehumanization and the proclivity to torture would be strongest among individuals who perceive Muslims to be a threat (Hypothesis 4).

Study 1

Method

Participants, materials and procedure

Sixty-eight Christian participants took part in this study (36 females; mean age = 21.38 years, SD = 2.92). Some participants took part in exchange for course credit, whereas others participated voluntarily. The participants were randomly assigned to read either a low humanity or high humanity description of Muslims. The vignettes were presented as research completed by social anthropologists on Muslim culture. The first two paragraphs were the same. In the final paragraph, we introduced our manipulation using words that were presented as descriptors of Muslims obtained from the 'research'. In the high-humanity condition, Muslims were described using words strongly associated with human uniqueness and human nature, such as *passion*, *ambitious* and *irresponsible*. In the low-humanity condition, we used words weakly associated with human uniqueness and human nature, such as *unemotional*, *relaxed* and *comfortable*. These stimuli were adapted from previous research by Haslam and Bain (2007) that explores the personality traits associated with different types of humanity.

After reading the vignette, the participants completed the measure of dehumanization by Viki et al. (2006). This measure served as our manipulation check and used a conceptually different set of stimuli from the words in the vignettes. The words used in the vignettes were drawn from personality traits (e.g. *ambitious* and *relaxed*; Haslam &

Bain, 2007). In contrast, the Viki et al. measure uses words that are more directly related to descriptions of humans versus animals. The participants read a list of 20 randomly ordered words (10 human-related; e.g. *humanity*, *person*, *civilian* and 10 animal-related; e.g. *pet*, *wild*, *critter*) and were asked to select 8–10 words they thought best characterized Muslims. This measure of dehumanization is ipsative. As such, our analyses focused only on the number of selected human words.

The participants were then presented with four images of torture from the Abu Ghraib prison. These were selected from the images that had been published when the story broke in 2004 (e.g. The Guardian, 2004). Under each image, the participants were asked to imagine themselves in the same situation as the soldiers and respond on a Likert scale (1 to 7) to the following three questions: "How excited would you have felt in this situation?", "Would you have behaved like this in this situation?", "How much would you have enjoyed having control in this situation?". A single proclivity to torture score was computed across all 12 items ($\alpha = .93$). This measure of proclivity was adapted from Bohner et al. (1998) who developed it as a measure for the proclivity to commit sexual violence (see also Bohner, Siebler, & Schmelcher, 2006; Chiroro, Bohner, Viki, & Jarvis, 2004). After completing the questionnaire the participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results and discussion

The participants selected more human words for Muslims on the Viki et al. (2006) measure in the high-humanity condition ($M = 8.08$, $SD = .71$) than in the low-humanity condition ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 1.93$; $F (1, 66) = 10.16$, $p < .01$, $\eta p^2 = .13$). These findings show that our manipulation successfully affected the perceived humanity of Muslims. In support of *Hypothesis 1*, the participants also reported higher levels of the proclivity to torture Muslim prisoners in the low-humanity condition ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.29$), compared to the high-humanity condition ($M = 1.55$, $SD = .69$; $F (1, 66) = 4.26$, $p < .05$, $\eta p^2 = .06$).

Multiple regression analyses were then performed to test whether the humanity ratings mediated the effects of our manipulation on the proclivity to torture (see Table 1 for correlations and means). As expected, a significant relationship between the experimental condition and the proclivity to torture was obtained, $\beta = .25$, $t = 2.06$, $p < .05$. We also obtained a significant negative relationship between humanity ratings and the proclivity to torture, $\beta = -.59$, $t = 6.01$, $p < .001$, showing that the less the participants attributed human words to Muslims, the more they reported a proclivity to torture Muslim prisoners. Finally, the relationship between our experimental conditions and proclivity to torture was reduced to non-significance when humanity ratings were included in the equation, $\beta = .03$, $t = .31$, $p = .75$; whereas the relationship between humanity ratings and proclivity to torture remained significant, $\beta = -.58$, $t = 2.77$, $p < .01$. Sobel tests indicated that this mediation effect was significant, $Z = 2.75$, $p < .01$. These findings make us confident that the manipulated descriptions of Muslim culture significantly affected self-reports of proclivity to torture prisoners, and that this effect occurred via the perceived humanity of Muslims.

Table 1
The correlations and means for humanity ratings and proclivity to torture in Study 1.

	Experimental condition	Humanity ratings	Means and SD
Experimental condition	–		–
Humanity ratings	.37**	–	7.60 (1.48)
Proclivity to torture	−.25*	−.59**	1.77 (1.03)

Note. * = p < .05; ** = p < .01.