



Torturing personification of chronic pain among torture survivors

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Pain personification
Torturing personification
PTSD
Chronic pain
Torture survivors

ABSTRACT

Background: Consistent with the human tendency to anthropomorphize objects, events, and situations, individuals might ascribe human characteristics to physical symptoms and illnesses. This manuscript presents an examination of chronic pain personification in torture survivors. Specifically, it was hypothesized that torture survivors personify chronic pain as a torturing sensation. It was further hypothesized that PTSD mediates the effect of past torture on torturing pain personification.

Methods: Fifty-nine Israeli ex-prisoners of war (ex-POWs), who experienced severe torture in captivity, and 44 matched controls completed self-administered questionnaires at 18, 30, and 35 years post captivity.

Results: Whereas ex-POWs exhibit higher torturing personification than controls, no differences were found in concrete description of chronic pain. PTSD trajectories were implicated in different levels of torturing personification. Finally, sequential mediation analysis revealed that PTSD at T2 and T3 mediated the association between torture and torturing personification.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that trauma shapes the way individuals relate to and experience their bodily sensations.

1. Introduction

Torture is an intentional infliction of severe physical or mental pain and suffering to a person, for the purpose of obtaining information/confession, or for punishing, intimidating, coercing a person for any discriminating reason (according to the United Nations Convention against Torture [11]). The experience of torture often leaves its mark on the survivors' psyche, commonly manifested in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is observed in 23–57% of survivors [52,57]. Another significant implication of torture is chronic physical pain, which is found among 60–94% of torture survivors ([2,12,64]). These high rates may be caused by the tangible experience of torture and the resulting physical injuries [38,39], or alternatively, associated with the PTSD that emanates from torture. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the hypothesis that ex-prisoners of war (ex-POWs) who underwent severe torture personify their chronic pain in a way that resonates with their past traumatic experience.

1.1. Pain personification

The tendency to anthropomorphize appears to be rooted in human

cognition [21,22]. Anthropomorphizing is conducted by ascribing humanlike characteristics, intentions, motivations, or emotions to non-human agents [21]. People tend to anthropomorphize when they are attempting to understand nonhuman agents, desire social contact [22], and/or when anthropocentric knowledge is accessible to them.

Influenced by this line of inquiry, Shahar and colleagues [45–47] proposed that individuals who live with chronic symptoms, such as pain, tend to ascribe human characteristics to these symptoms (*illness personification*), in a way that is relevant to their self. Thus, it is suggested that as time goes by, pain is transformed from being a sensory attribute, and an external obstacle, into an internal phenomenon, encompassing personal meanings and attributes. Put differently, this theory posits that individuals develop a sort of “relationship” with their chronic medical condition, which reflects the narrative in which self and pain interact.

In support of this theorization, qualitative analyses of interviews have been conducted with women with systemic lupus erythematosus identified that these women construed their illness as a protagonist, or as an internal “object” (framed from an object-relations perspective): “I see the illness as something evil, something demonic, so it's important to try to feel good, be with people, ‘cause the illness can't handle that”

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[46], p. 468). In another qualitative study with chronic low-back patients, Smith and Osborn [49] presented a process by which pain develops a malevolent agency, encompassing a debilitating impact on the sense of self, which is transformed as a new “unwelcomed” self – a “self with pain.” (pp. 527).

According to its transformative nature, in which chronic pain transforms from an external experience to an internal representation, it is suggested that pain personification may become either a risk or resilience factor [47]. That is, the transition in which chronic pain acquires an internal sense of purpose and meaning, regularly interacting with the self, may determine whether and how effective coping may evolve. When pain is personified as a challenge, with the self being experienced as a “soldier” fighting this “battle” or “war”, adaptive illness-related coping that promotes emotional adjustment may potentially transpire [47]. However, when chronic pain is personified as a vicious invader, for example, abusive towards the self, one's aptitude to manage or overcome this chronic stressor is less attainable. Indeed, Schattner and Shahar [45] demonstrated that negative personification is associated with pain intensity, anxiety, depression, and pain related disability, and emerges a risk factor for pain-related depression, when controlling for pain intensity. These effects are consistent with other studies showing that chronic illness sufferers who ascribed a positive meaning to their illness (e.g., challenge, value) reported less depression and anxiety, and a higher quality of life compared to those who ascribed negative meaning to their illness (e.g., enemy, punishment; [19]). From a different, yet related framework, findings demonstrated that “benefit finding”, namely, attributing potential benefits to chronic condition or illness (see [63]) significantly moderated the association between pain severity and activity limitation in rheumatoid arthritis patients [62].

1.2. Pain personification among torture survivors

Herein, it is proposed that the experience of torture shapes the way torture survivors relate to, and personify, their chronic pain. Personification of pain is initiated and formed through the personal history of the individual, in a way that is relevant to his/her self and identity [45,47]. Consuelo Rivera-Fuentes, who was tortured under the Chilean military government, described her pain experiences in torture: “This ache is cutting right through my/self... I am... I am no longer... I dissolve in this pain, this monster is eating me alive...” ([42], p. 655). We propose that individuals who underwent such horrifying experiences of excruciating pain and later confront persistent, sometimes agonizing, chronic pain, may associate these past and current experiences.

We articulate two main sources for torturing personification among torture survivors. First, for individuals who underwent torture, chronic pain may be experienced as a continual reminder of the previous pain of the torture as they share several similarities. Both chronic pain and ongoing inflicted pain in torture are characterized by repeated, ongoing and, most importantly, uncontrollable pain and suffering. The fact that chronic pain originates in the body, and often without any specific medical explanation [65], resembles the lack of control and total dependency of the individual on his torturer, as both represent a deep bonding of self and pain. Rooted within the body, chronic pain may signal the embodiment of torturers' beatings, from which one cannot escape, even many years after the torture is over.

The construction of torturing personification may also be drawn from the unique relationship that is often formed between the captive and his/her captor. This pathological bond entails a combination of intentionally inflicted brutality, together with a profound dependence of the prisoner on his torturer. Like other abusive relationships, a relationship consisting of torture seems to leave its marks on torture survivors' very basic sense of self, and their relational proclivities [27,58]. Later, these alterations in the self and interpersonal capacities are implicated in higher attachment insecurities [35,53], as well as

difficulties in maintaining intimate and close relationships with spouses [69], and offspring [70]. This destructive relationship between a prisoner and captor may be internalized, and subsequently projected onto the “relationship” that is formed between the self and chronic pain.

Torturing personification of chronic pain is thus defined as ascribing human-like attributes to chronic pain symptoms, relating torture characteristics of pain sensations towards the self. Torturing personification may transpire, for example, with chronic pain experienced as vicious, abusive, intentionally inflicted agony upon the self. The self may then be experienced as “captured”, unable to escape, enduring total helplessness in the face of this invasive pain. Torturing personification may transpire among any individual to some extent, even if he or she has never been subjected to torture. However, considering the shattering effect of torture for personal and interpersonal proclivities, it is suspected that different from neutral ideation of pain (e.g. radiating, hot, flashing), torture survivors may tend to articulate their chronic pain as “terrifying,” “beating,” “suffocating,” or “penetrating,” towards the self to a greater extent as compared to individuals who did not encounter torture.

1.3. PTSD and torturing pain personification

PTSD plays a cardinal role in explaining the long lasting ramifications of exposure to trauma, including but not limited to perceived health [28], morbidity [5], premature aging [15] and early mortality [10]. We hypothesize that PTSD, the most common psychiatric sequelae among torture survivors [20,52] will act as an explanatory mechanism in the evolvement of torturing personification of pain among torture survivors.

Studies have shown that torture severity [24], as well as the subjective evaluation of suffering in torture [55], predicts PTSD among the survivors. Thus, torture survivors who were exposed to more severe torture, either objectively or subjectively, are at higher risk of developing long-term PTSD.

In addition to its link with torture severity, PTSD may intensify the evolution of a torturing personification. That is, PTSD is suggested to represent an implicit memory of traumatic events, which - when improperly linked with explicit narration - is manifested in the re-experiencing of somatic instances that correspond to the traumatic memory [43]. These somatic manifestations of PTSD have been conceptualized as the ‘somatic memory’ of trauma [66]. It is thus postulated that in PTSD, in particular following physical suffering such as in torture, bodily information is perceived as an agonizing entity, resembling the traumatic memory. The body may become a juncture for re-living and experiencing the pain that was endured during torture. It is therefore hypothesized that the longer the duration and severity of these experiences, the stronger the tendency of chronic pain to be “colored” by way of the painful experience of torture.

Taken together, it is hypothesized that PTSD will play a mediating role in the association between torture and torturing personification. Furthermore, PTSD has a complex and fluctuating longitudinal course, with symptoms waxing and waning [6]. Research has identified a number of characteristic PTSD trajectories following exposure to trauma: chronic, delayed, recovered and resilient [8,56]. Thus, it is hypothesized that torturing personification will differ in accordance with the PTSD trajectories over time.

1.4. The present study

These hypotheses were examined in a group of Israeli ex-POWs who endured severe torture and matched combatants - all of whom participated in the 1973 War. After falling captive, the ex-POWs were detained in solitary confinement, usually in small spaces under unhygienic conditions, and were subject to harsh physical and psychological torture, including, but not limited to, severe beatings, penetrating injuries, suspension, positional torture, electric shock to

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