Personality and Individual Differences 74 (2015) 72–77

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Demons are everywhere: The effects of belief in pure evil, demonization, and retribution on punishing criminal perpetrators

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 February 2014
Received in revised form 22 September 2014
Accepted 29 September 2014

Keywords:
Pure evil
Attributions
Aggression
Criminal punishment
Death penalty

ABSTRACT

Do preconceived beliefs about evil influence perceptions and punishments of those who harm others? We examined the effects of belief in pure evil (BPE), demonization, and belief in retribution on punishment of a stereotypically (vs. non-stereotypically) evil criminal. Participants punished the stereotypically evil perpetrator more (i.e., greater recommended jail time, opposition to parole, and support for his execution) because of increases in demonization (i.e., greater perceptions of the criminal as wicked, evil, and threatening), but not increases in retributive feelings. However, regardless of the criminal's exhibited stereotypically evil traits, greater BPE predicted harsher punishment of the perpetrator; both greater demonization *and* stronger retributive feelings mediated the relationship between BPE and severe punishments. Further, effect sizes indicated BPE (vs. the evilness manipulation) more strongly predicted demonization and punishment. Thus, some individuals naturally see perpetrators as demons, and retributively punish them, whether or not there is more explicit stereotypic evidence of their evil dispositions.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, humans have committed "senseless" acts of violence. People tend to seek quick explanations that rationalize such harm to help maintain their perception of an orderly and just world (see Lerner, 1980). One simple answer is that violent perpetrators are just *pure evil*: "We recognize the unjust action but provide ourselves with a rule that at least partially restores order and justice and gives us some predictive power concerning those times when the order-and-justice rules are not in effect" (see Darley, 1992, p. 203). This answer is consistent with attribution theories: people are inclined to attribute anti-social behavior to internal factors (Malle, 2006); thus, "Behind *evil* actions must lie *evil* individuals" (Darley, 1992, p. 202; see also Baumeister, 1999, chs. 2–3). History shows that cultures worldwide have developed and maintained a similar "archetype of evil" (Baumeister, 1999). In short, the archetype holds that there are people who fulfill egotistical and sadistic tendencies by intentionally inflicting harm on others, and because evil is unmalleable and is the antithesis of order and peace, we cannot reason with or understand evildoers—rather, evildoers should be eliminated from society (Webster & Saucier, 2013).

It is reasonable, then, that people should more harshly punish perpetrators of violence, especially when harmdoers explicitly evidence purely evil characteristics. We posit that there are two mediating variables that would help rationalize such harsher punishment. First, by seeing perpetrators as personifications of pure evil (i.e., in vilifying or *demonizing* them), people dehumanize perpetrators, that is, rob them of their humanity (Ellard, Miller, Baumle, & Olson, 2002; van Prooijen & van de Veer, 2010). When others are seen as less than human, it is easier to justify or rationalize aggression against them (Bandura, 1999). Further, especially in situations of escalating or reciprocal violence, portraying others as evil makes it appear that one has done nothing to provoke the others' aggression; one is just an innocent victim and *retributive* violence is entirely justified. Squelching evil, even using extreme or preemptive violence, is the only "moral" thing to do (Baumeister, 1999; Campbell & Vollhardt, 2013). In sum, characterizing others as "evil" should increase demonization and feelings of retribution thereby increasing aggression against them. That is, increased demonization and retribution should mediate the relationship between characterizations of evil and increased aggression.

While there appears to be much correlational evidence supporting this hypothesis, hitherto there has been little experimental evidence. In a seminal investigation, van Prooijen and van de Veer (2010) found that participants demonized a criminal perpetrator more when he was portrayed as stereotypically evil (e.g., portrayed as a socially isolated and arrogant individual who took

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.09.041
0191-8869/

pleasure in harm doing), especially when the criminal was a murderer (for similar findings, see Burris & Rempel, 2011; Ellard et al., 2002). However, previous research did not assess retribution or punishment of the criminal perpetrator. Thus, in the current study, we assessed actual recommendations for punishing the criminal given that the public often has a crucial role in recommending punishment via conventional criminal justice systems (Sessar, 1999). Second, we also measured participants' feelings of retribution so we could test the theoretical prediction that people will more harshly punish an evil perpetrator because of increases in demonization *and* feelings of retribution.

Nonetheless, while most people are colloquially aware of the "archetype" of pure evil, there is individual variation in the degree to which people endorse belief in pure evil (Campbell & Vollhardt, 2013; Webster & Saucier, 2013). This seminal research has shown that BPE is a stable and unidimensional attitudinal variable that predicts support for more violent policies to solve foreign and domestic problems. For example, people who scored higher in BPE desired harsher mandatory sentences for a variety of crimes and, in generalities, greater support for using the death penalty (Webster & Saucier, 2013). Such individuals also strongly support violent and even pre-emptive aggression to resolve foreign policy problems (Webster & Saucier, 2013). Further, Campbell and Vollhardt (2013) found that the relationship between greater BPE and favoring more violent policies was wholly or partly mediated by a stronger belief in redemptive violence (i.e., morally justifiable aggression); however, Campbell and Vollhardt (2013) did not manipulate the evilness of perpetrators.

These findings, though, suggest that even when perpetrators do not exhibit stereotypically evil characteristics, people who already have a stronger BPE are more likely to see evil in perpetrators of harm, which will naturally lead to greater demonization, retribution, and—ultimately—greater punishment. That is, we predict that regardless of whether the criminal explicitly displays purely evil characteristics, people who already have developed a stronger belief in pure evil will punish the criminal more because of both greater demonization and greater feelings of retribution. However, we acknowledge that the relationship between BPE and these intervening processes may also be strengthened in the stereotypically evil condition; thus, it was important to examine the test of the interaction between BPE and the evilness manipulation.

In sum, our hypotheses were as follows. First, we hypothesized that participants would punish a stereotypically evil perpetrator more because of greater demonization and retribution (see Fig. 1). Second, we also hypothesized that people who more strongly believe in pure evil would also punish the perpetrator more *regardless of whether he exhibited purely evil characteristics*. Third, increased demonization and greater feelings of retribution should also explain (i.e., mediate) the relationship between BPE and punishment (see Fig. 1).

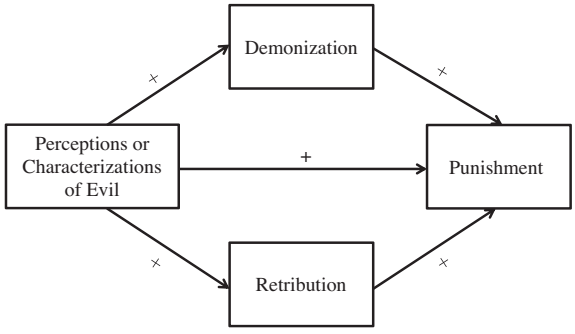

Fig. 1. The hypothesized relationships between perceptions/characterizations of evil, demonization, retribution, and punishment.

Lastly, given the (seemingly) perpetual discussion in psychological science of whether the person or situation is more important in predicting behavior (see Funder, 2010, chap. 4 for a discussion), we examined whether people's preconceived notions about evil or experimentally manipulating evilness contributed more (i.e., exhibited stronger effects) to demonization, retribution, and punishment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In total, 212 (84 men and 128 women; *M* age = 20.01, *SD* = 4.23) general psychology students completed the following materials online to partially fulfill a course requirement. The participants reported the following ethnicities: White/Caucasian (88.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3.8%), Other (2.8%), African American/Black (1.9%), and Hispanic (1.9%); two people (0.9%) did not provide their ethnicity.

2.2. Materials and procedure

This study, including all materials and the procedure, was approved by Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board. Participants first completed our BPE (22 items, α = .92; example items: "*Some people are just pure evil*", "*Evil people 'get off' by being violent and abusive to other human beings*") scale (Webster & Saucier, 2013) in the beginning of the Spring 2012 semester.[1] Later in the semester, these participants were allowed to participate in an ostensibly separate study (minimum 30 days later to help eliminate any demand characteristics) in which they read an allegedly real newspaper article from the Kansas City Star (http://www.kansascity.com/) about a murder that occurred in Kansas City in the past two weeks.

In the stereotypically evil condition, the article described the perpetrator ("Mr. Beatty") as a man who kept to himself and who liked to tease and taunt neighborhood children. In the non-stereotypically evil article, the perpetrator was described as typical family man who was looking forward to going camping soon. In both versions, the perpetrator confessed to the murder to the police (see van Prooijen & van de Veer, 2010).[2]

After reading the newspaper article, we assessed participants' reactions to the perpetrator. Unless noted, participants responded to items on a 1 (*disagree very strongly*) to 9 (*agree very strongly*) Likert-type scale, and all measures were scored as the average response per item with higher mean values reflecting higher levels of the construct of interest. All measures have been specifically validated with undergraduate populations, except where noted.

Demonization. Participants first completed van Prooijen and van de Veer's (2010) demonizing scale (5 items; *alpha* = .87) as well as Burris and Rempel's (2011) nihilistic hate scale (four items; *alpha* = .85). These two scales were highly correlated ($r = .66$, $p < .01$) and thus were aggregated into a single composite, "Demonization" (*alpha* = .80).

Retribution. Participants completed 5 items (*alpha* = .77) about their feelings about retributive punishment (e.g., "Those who hurt others deserve to be hurt in return"; Tyler & Weber, 1982).

[1] Participants also completed our Belief in Pure Good Scale, which assesses people's belief in pure altruism (Webster & Saucier, 2013). Belief in pure good did not predict (alone or in combination with our evilness manipulation or BPE) any of the dependent variables of interest; thus, we do not discuss belief in pure good further.

[2] We also randomly assigned participants to read about a stereotypically virtuous or non-stereotypically virtuous apprehender who helped capture the criminal. This experimental manipulation (alone or in interaction with the evilness manipulation or BPE) did not predict any of the dependent variables of interest; thus, we do not discuss this manipulation further.