



Tortured beliefs: How and when prior support for torture skews the perceived value of coerced information



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HIGHLIGHTS

- US adult judgments of terrorism scenarios were skewed by prior support for torture.
- Those previously supporting torture saw coerced information as more valuable.
- Torture opposers did not show a bias for or against coerced information.
- Results also revealed a “selective efficacy” boundary concerning informant identity.
- Supporters privileged coerced information from outgroup but not ingroup informants.

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of recent revelations about US involvement in torture, and widespread and seemingly-growing support of torture in the US, we consider how people judge the value of information gained from informants under coercion. Drawing on past work on confirmation biases and moral judgments, we predicted, and found, that American torture supporters are more likely than opposers to see coerced information as relatively valuable and necessary in a scenario describing the foiling of an al-Qaeda terrorist attack. Judgments of coerced information value in the scenario also predicted endorsement of using the episode as a “success story” to justify torture in future cases. A second study shed light on an important boundary: Prior general support for torture predicted the perceived value of coerced information when the interrogated informant was an outgroup member (an al-Qaeda informant tortured by US operatives) but not when the informant was an ingroup member (an American soldier tortured by al-Qaeda). Overall, the results suggest that advocates for torture may readily interpret ambiguous evidence as implying the value and necessity of extreme interrogation techniques when used by the ingroup. Our findings also indicate that torture supporters often expect *selective efficacy*, whereby they see torture as more likely to yield valuable information when it is used by “us” compared to “them.”

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1. Introduction

Is torture acceptable? Is it effective? These questions have received renewed interest in the wake of recent disclosures of American involvement in extreme interrogation (Mazzetti, 2014) and polls showing widespread and seemingly-growing acceptance of torture among the American public (Pew Research Center, 2014). A considerable share of people say that their answer to the first question—whether they support torture—follows from their answer to the second one—whether torture yields important information. To these people, distinctly valuable ends can justify the brutal means. But is it possible that, in a meaningful share of cases, this thinking could also flow in the other direction? Might the prior tendency to support torture predispose someone to

see ambiguous information coming from a particular episode of extreme interrogation as being especially valuable? In such cases, pre-existing acceptance of the means—endorsing torture—could skew how positively the ends are judged. If such an effect were true and common, it could have troubling implications: Torture supporters may be inclined to read validation into equivocal results, reaffirming their attitudes and championing a course of action that is not systematically supported by evidence.

The present paper presents two studies examining this possibility. Building on past work, we show that Americans' prior general support for torture shapes their perceptions of the value of coerced information in a given case. We also identify an important boundary that sheds light on the underlying nature of the effect. On balance, American torture supporters seem to possess *selective efficacy* beliefs, expecting coercion to be more likely to yield valuable information when interrogated informants are members of a hostile outgroup (i.e., an al-Qaeda member tortured by US operatives) than when they are ingroup members (i.e., an

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American soldier tortured by al-Qaeda). The overall picture that emerges suggests that people strive for cognitive coherence (Liu & Ditto, 2013) in their perceptions of torture's efficacy and their judgments of torture's acceptability. Prior support for torture positively skews perceptions of coerced information value—but only when it is “us” torturing one of “them.” These results hold implications for scholars interested in aggression and moral judgments and also for the broader public and policymakers as they weigh arguments for and against torture.

2. Background and plan of study

Prior scholarship on confirmation biases across many domains shows that people frequently interpret ambiguous evidence as conforming to their expectations and beliefs (Klayman, 1995; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Nickerson, 1998). In scholarship on moral judgment, recent work argues that people readily use a “consequentialist crutch” to rationalize moral stances and achieve coherence in their perceptions: Those who see something as deontologically moral—as inherently right, consequences aside—also tend to see it as effective and beneficial (Ditto & Liu, 2011). Importantly, Liu and Ditto (2013) showed that those who deemed torture deontologically acceptable also believed it was generally effective. These results are consistent with the effect we posit, but leave open the possibility that broad expectations of torture's effectiveness cause general acceptance of torture. Our initial prediction focuses on the reverse causal sequence: We expect that Americans' prior general support for torture will predict the value they attach to information derived from coercive methods in a specific, novel case. It does not appear that past research has examined perceived coerced information value as a consequence of prior torture support.

Our first study tested for this effect of support on perceived coerced information value. In an online survey with American respondents, we found that torture supporters reading about a thwarted al-Qaeda terrorist attack had positively skewed judgments of coerced information value. In our second study, we examined whether this effect hinged upon the identities of the tortured informant and the torturers. In an online survey with American respondents, we found that torture supporters again judged coerced information to be especially important in the case of an al-Qaeda informant tortured by US operatives but not in the case of a US informant tortured by al-Qaeda operatives.

3. Study 1

Study 1 employed an online survey to gauge American respondents' support for torture and perceptions of a hypothetical episode of a thwarted terrorist attack.

3.1. Method

Three hundred and five US participants (157 males; age $M = 35$ years, $SD = 11.54$) completed an online survey through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk platform (sample size was determined in advance of any analysis based on expected effect sizes). Twenty-four respondents failed at least one attention check question and were excluded from subsequent analyses (final sample $n = 281$; 142 males, age $M = 36$ years, $SD = 11.67$). We captured prior general support for torture with four measures, seeking to test our initial prediction in numerous ways. First, a *general support* measure identical to the National Opinion Research Center's (NORC, Himberger, Gaylin, Tompson, Agiesta, & Kelly, 2011) polling measure of support for torture (“Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose this policy as a way of responding to terrorist threats: Using harsh interrogation techniques against suspected terrorists to seek information about terrorist activities?” with a five-point scale ranging from “Strongly oppose” to “Strongly favor”). Second, a *justification* measure identical to the Pew Research Center's (Pew Research Center, 2011) public polling measure (“Do you think the use of torture against suspected terrorists in order to gain important information can often be justified, sometimes

be justified, rarely be justified, or never be justified?” with the responses coded as 1 through 4, respectively). We also employed Liu and Ditto's (2013) two measures of whether torture is *morally right* (“The use of forceful or harsh interrogation techniques on individuals suspected of terrorist activities is ...,” on a seven-point scale ranging from “Morally acceptable in most or all cases” to “Morally wrong in most or all cases,” reverse coded to indicate moral acceptance) and *deontologically right* (“The use of [...] is morally wrong even if it is effective in getting suspects to talk,” rated on a seven-point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree,” reverse coded to indicate moral acceptance).

Participants reviewed a scenario describing a terrorist plot to detonate an explosive device in downtown Chicago (see Supplementary materials for details). The plot was stopped when a man referred to as Male A (described as having links to al-Qaeda) was apprehended. Participants read about two pieces of information that could have helped foil the plot: 1) Male A used a particular alias and 2) money was being transferred from outside the US to someone using that particular name in the Chicago area. We randomly assigned participants to one of two source conditions. Some read that the alias information was revealed under coercion (provided by a senior al-Qaeda member subjected to extreme interrogation techniques, including being forced to stand in positions that caused tremendous pain) and that the money transfer information was non-coerced (revealed by US operatives monitoring financial transactions). For other participants, these sources were reversed (i.e., the alias information was non-coerced, the money transfer information was coerced). Our critical factor of interest was this within-participant dimension of coerced versus non-coerced. The counterbalancing of information source helped to isolate the effects of source (i.e., coercion) from information content.

Two questions captured perceived information value. First, participants rated how important each piece of information was to “stopping the plot described above” on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“Not very important at all”) to 5 (“Extremely important”). Participants then indicated how likely the plot would have been stopped *without* that information, using a slider with responses ranging from 0 (“Very unlikely to stop the plot without this information”) to 100 (“Very likely to stop the plot without this info”). We subtracted these values from 100 to create an index of the necessity of the information (i.e., 100 = the plot would not have been stopped without that information).

Participants next judged relative importance of the information in stopping the plot, using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“The information that Male A was using that particular alias was vastly more important”) to 5 (“The information that money had been transferred to that name in Chicago was vastly more important”).

Participants then indicated support for continuing to subject the informant to further “harsh and extreme interrogation techniques” (five-point scale ranging from 1 (not supportive at all) to 5 (extremely supportive)) and used the same scale to indicate support for “using this episode as an example—as a kind of success story—to validate and defend the use of harsh and extreme interrogation techniques in future cases.”

The survey concluded with demographic questions. Two attention check questions (e.g., asking participants to select the left-most response) were embedded in the survey.

To address possible order effects, we counterbalanced the order of information presented to participants (i.e., half saw the alias information first) and the order of information-specific measures (i.e., half answered questions about the alias information first).

3.2. Results

Along with subjective ratings of relative information value, we computed two other indices of relative value (*importance difference* subtracted the importance rating for non-coerced information from that for coerced information; *necessity difference* subtracted the necessity value for non-coerced information from that for coerced information).

As shown in Table 1, all four measures of torture support were positively correlated with all three measures of relative information value in

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