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Report

The fine line between interrogation and retribution

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ABSTRACT

The use of harsh interrogation techniques on terrorism suspects is typically justified on utilitarian grounds. The present research suggests, however, that those who support such techniques are fuelled by retributive motives. An experimental study conducted with a broad national sample of US residents found that the desire for harsh interrogation is largely isomorphic with the desire to punish, and that both effects are mediated by the perceived moral status of the target, but not the perceived effectiveness of the interrogation. Results are discussed with regard to retributive justice and the national policy on interrogation and torture.

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In March 2008, President George W. Bush vetoed a bill that would have prohibited the Central Intelligence Agency from using “any treatment or technique of interrogation not authorized by the United States Army Field Manual on Human Intelligence Collector Operations” (H.R. 282, Sec. 327). This bill would have precluded severe interrogation methods such as waterboarding (strapping a detainee face-up on a board while dousing with water to simulate drowning), prolonged exposure to freezing temperatures, forced nudity, sexual humiliation, mock executions, electric shocks, dislocation of limbs, asphyxiation, use of attack dogs, application of lighted cigarettes to ear canals, and withholding of food, water, or medical care.

In a radio address to the nation, the President asserted, “The bill Congress sent me would take away one of the most valuable tools in the war on terror” (3/8/08). Similarly, in his message to the House of Representatives, the President stated: “. . . I cannot sign into law a bill that would prevent me, and future presidents, from authorizing the C.I.A. to conduct a separate, lawful intelligence program, and from taking all lawful actions necessary to protect Americans from attack.” (3/8/08). A few days later, the House of Representatives failed to garner the two-thirds majority of votes required to override the presidential veto of the bill.

As seen here and elsewhere, supporters of severe interrogation techniques have repeatedly invoked a utilitarian defense—suggesting that the risks of terrorist attacks outweigh the moral and practical costs associated with using methods that many people

consider torture. Indeed, they often argue the opposite: It would be immoral to ignore the safety of the many out of concern for the few. However, we know from the earliest studies in social psychology that expressed attitudes often differ markedly from people’s real motivations for behavior (LaPiere, 1934), and people may have little direct introspective access to the cognitive processes underlying their behavior (Carlsmith, 2008; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Researchers across various disciplines agree that utilitarian rationales fail to capture the full picture of why people endorse severe interrogation methods, especially given the strong evidence presented by many military and intelligence experts disputing the usefulness of torture as a means of gathering reliable or fruitful information (Janoff-Bulman, 2007; Parry, 2005; Scheppele, 2005). As Moghaddam (2007, p. 438, 442) notes: “Groups adopting torture might justify the use of this strategy through reference to ‘national security,’ ‘good ends justifying unethical means,’ and the like. . . , but such groups might be unaware of the real reasons they are using torture. . . [s]ome of which are unrelated to the efficacy of torture as an information-gathering strategy. . . Psychologists need to give far more attention to the various reasons why torture interrogation might be used. . .”

The present article empirically examines the motives of ordinary US citizens in their support of severe interrogation techniques. Much of the recent literature on coercive interrogation methods has focused on defining what constitutes torture and debating the legality of such practices (see, e.g., Kreimer, 2005; Levinson, 2005). However, as one legal commentator has noted, “When we try to understand torture, we also have to consider popular

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attitudes about it, including . . . relative indifference toward the excesses abroad in the war on terror.” (Parry, 2005, p. 282). This study seeks to investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying the public’s attitudes.

Researchers have proposed several factors that might account for people’s support of severe interrogation methods, aside from the professed information-gathering justifications. Some argue that torture during interrogation is often used as much, if not more, for the purposes of asserting power and control over the targets than for learning new information (see, e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 2007; Moghaddam, 2007; Parry, 2005). Relatedly, severe interrogation techniques might be employed as an extension of punishment. As Janoff-Bulman (2007, p. 433) suggests: “Efficacy measured in terms of intelligence collected may increasingly play a subordinate role to the desire for vengeance and aggression. People want to harm those who have harmed them and humiliate those who have made them feel vulnerable. . . [F]or many this may satisfy some deep sense of retributive justice.”

This perspective is compatible with the argument that the American public’s seeming inertia toward the use of severe interrogation techniques—as evidenced by the scant attention given during the 2004 presidential election to the Abu Ghraib abuses, as well as the Senate’s confirmation of both an Attorney General and a Secretary of Homeland Security who had been associated with abusive interrogation policies—“need not derive from indifference. . . [but rather,] could be linked to an impression that, although excesses occur, they are. . . almost always visited upon the guilty” (Parry, 2005, p. 283). By having committed prior bad acts, perhaps detainees are seen as having forfeited their right to be treated in a non-abusive manner during interrogation, even though the purpose of interrogation is entirely different from the purpose of punishment. Under this logic, the more “deserving” of punishment that the target is, “the more likely the aim of obtaining reliable information will be seriously tainted by a different goal—that of revenge and punishment for past misdeeds” (Janoff-Bulman, 2007, p. 433).

Research examining the motivations for punishment has found that although people often cite utilitarian justifications for imposing penalties, their behavior is actually guided by retributive principles (Carlsmith, 2008; Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Carlsmith, Monahan, & Evans, 2007). Darley and Pittman (2003) note that the moral outrage generated by an intentional transgression is closely related to the desire for retributive punishment. Thus, retributive factors that determine the moral repugnance of an offense—such as magnitude of harm, wrongdoer’s intention, and mitigating circumstances—are more relevant to punishment than are factors relating to deterrence or incapacitation. People have a preference for seeking retribution information when making decisions about punishment, and they express greater confidence in assigned punishment when they have access to information relating to how “deserving” the punishment is (Carlsmith, 2006).

In sum, the relationship between the actual and expressed motivation for punishment is tenuous, at best. In some cases, what people say and what people do have little in common; in other cases, the reasons people produce are fungible and change according to the situation so as to allow expression of an otherwise unallowable behavior. It is not surprising then that support for the most extreme form of punishment—the death penalty—has been shown to stem more from retributive impulses than from the utilitarian rationales that are often put forth in public debates (Ellsworth & Ross, 1983).

Using support for the death penalty as a proxy for measuring retributiveness, analysis of public opinion about the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars has also uncovered evidence for a moral-punitiveness effect in people’s support for waging war. Liberman (2006, p. 712) found that even after controlling for ideology, partisanship,

trust in government, hierarchy-promoting social values, racism, gender, and instrumental beliefs about the utility of punishment, “[r]etributiveness heightens support for the military punishment of states perceived as criminal or evil,” and death penalty support was related not only to support for invasion, but also to “approval of bombing near civilians, feelings of pride, and indifference to the Iraqi people in 1991.”

We suspected that similar retributive principles might determine how and why people support the use of harsh interrogation techniques. The present study tested the hypothesis that people view severe interrogation methods as an extension of punishment, and are therefore more likely to endorse such techniques when they are used upon a person who “deserves” to be punished. This suggests that people will support harsher treatment of a “guilty” target than an “innocent” target in the context of interrogation, even if the likelihood of both targets possessing useful information is the same. We do not propose that one motive trumps the other; rather, we hypothesized the presence of two independent effects: people will support harsher treatment of a detainee when that person deserves punishment, and also when there is a greater chance of obtaining critical information from him.

Method

Participants

Data were collected through an anonymous on-line survey with a broadly representative sample of adults ($N = 246$), who were offered a chance to win various cash lotteries. The sample came from a panel of participants coordinated by Study Response at Syracuse University. The overall panel ($N = 95,574$) approximates Western countries’ demographics, but the panel membership is not actively controlled and thus shares the skewed composition characteristic of other opt-in on-line panels.

The particular sub-panel of respondents was 51% female, with a median age of 42 years. Approximately half of the participants were employed (30% full-time, 11% part-time, 13% self-employed), one-third were unemployed (20% by choice, 8% by disability, and 7% searching for work), 8% were retired, and 4% were full-time students. Twenty-eight percent had only a high-school diploma, 40% had some college experience, 16% had completed a baccalaureate degree, and 15% had post-baccalaureate experience. All respondents were US residents, and 17% reported that they or an immediate family member had a military affiliation.

Procedure

Participants completed an on-line experimental survey. The first page provided an overview of the study, and subsequent pages provided a case description and a series of questions described below. Data were collected in August, 2007.

Materials

All participants were presented with a fictional case study of Ahmad Farid, a 26-year-old Afghani who had been detained by US and Coalition forces in 2007 on suspicion of terrorist activities. Participants learned that at the time of capture, Farid was making his living by tending a small herd of goats. All participants were told that Farid was being held at a US detention center in Afghanistan and was scheduled for a commission hearing in several weeks.

Participants in the experimental condition were additionally presented with information about Farid’s history of bad acts (the “Guilt” variable), which manipulated the extent to which he

deserved punishment from a retributive perspective. They were told that Farid had been a member of an extremist Muslim group since his early teen years, had supported the Taliban when they were in power, and had been an active member of the insurgency from 2002 to 2005—during which time he set numerous roadside bombs, attacked civilians who cooperated with Coalition forces, and participated in ambushes that killed four US Marines. These participants were further informed that Farid had since withdrawn from the insurgency and had had little or no contact with enemies of the Coalition Forces, but had been captured while tending his goats in close proximity to a camp of Taliban insurgents.

All participants were presented with one of four paragraphs describing the likelihood that Farid was withholding information that might prevent lethal attacks on soldiers and innocent civilians—no chance, a 5% chance, a 60% chance, or a 95% chance. This variable, “Knowledge,” manipulated the perceived likelihood that Farid would be able to provide critical information if interrogated, and was orthogonal to the manipulation of prior bad acts. For example, the 95% certainty condition stated:

Farid claims to have no direct knowledge of the insurgents, their plans, their routes, or anything remotely useful to the Coalition Forces. He has stated this repeatedly, but his questioners feel that he has some useful information. Based on the experience of thousands of prior interrogations, there is a **95%** chance that Farid is actually withholding information that might prevent lethal attacks on soldiers or innocent civilians.

Participants were informed that interrogations can range from very mild (e.g., asking questions) to extremely severe (e.g., “aversive, degrading, painful, and in some cases cause permanent physical and psychological scars”), and asked to use a 13-point scale (from “extremely mild” to “extremely severe”) to recommend an interrogation severity. Next, participants were asked whether or not Farid should be punished (in a dichotomous “yes/no” format) and, if so, how severely he should be punished (on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “extremely”). These were the primary dependent variables.

To measure mediating processes, participants rated Farid’s character using a 7-point scale ranging from “immoral” to “moral,” and completed a 3-item scale ($\alpha = .88$) on interrogation effectiveness. The items included whether the methods “are likely to elicit withheld information,” “can provide useful information,” and ought to be used “when doing so might save lives.”

Participants were also asked to provide additional interrogation severity recommendations for each level of the Knowledge variable—0%, 5%, 60%, and 95%—as a within-subjects measure.

Finally, participants provided demographic information about their gender, age, and country of residence; whether they support the war in Iraq (on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “definitely”); political affiliation; and whether they or an immediate member of their family was affiliated with the military.

Results

Interrogation severity

As hypothesized, the recommended severity of interrogation methods depended on both the amount of relevant knowledge that Farid possessed, and on his history of bad acts. A two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed two main effects, Knowledge: $F(3, 226) = 4.09, p < .01, (\eta^2 = .05)$; Guilt: $F(1, 226) = 24.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$; and no interaction, $F(3, 226) = 0.35, p = .79$. Fig. 1 shows a steady, albeit modest, increase in the recommended interrogation severity as knowledge increased between participants. The effect of prior bad acts is also apparent, indicating that people

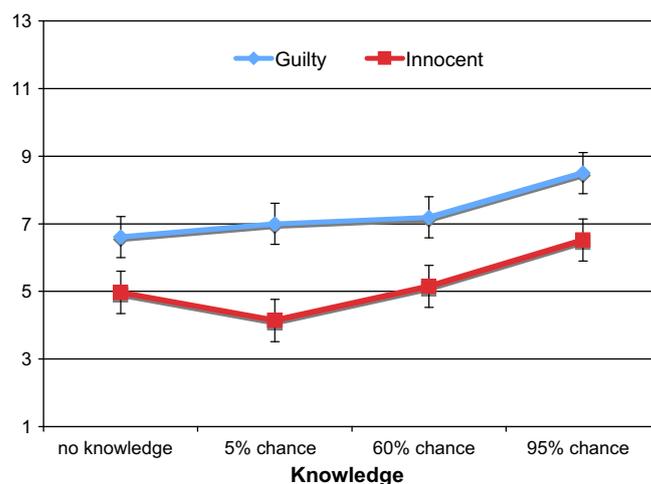


Fig. 1. Recommended interrogation severity by Guilt and Likelihood of Knowledge. Error bars are standard error.

recommended harsher methods when Farid was guilty of those actions ($M = 7.35, SD = 3.33$) than when he was not ($M = 5.21, SD = 3.41$). Follow-up tests confirmed the effect at each level of knowledge (all $p < .06$).

Punishment severity

Respondents did not draw a sharp distinction between the recommended severity of the interrogation and the need for punishment. Indeed, the analysis of punishment was nearly identical to that of interrogation: a two-way ANOVA again revealed two main effects with no interaction. The effect for Knowledge was significant, $F(3, 227) = 3.45, p < .02, \eta^2 = .04$, as was the effect for Guilt, $F(1, 227) = 49.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$. Moreover, recommendations for punishment and interrogation severity correlated strongly with each other, $r(234) = .65, p < .001$. Finally, both dependent measures were entered into a three-way mixed model ANOVA, with Knowledge and Guilt entered as between-subject variables. As predicted, both punishment and interrogation severity revealed main effects for the between-subject variables (Guilt: $F(1, 226) = 41.74, p < .001$; Knowledge: $F(3, 226) = 4.09, p = .003$), but no interactions across any of the variable combinations (all $p > .25$).

Mediating role of target's moral status

The initial results suggest that people use the same system (or systems that achieve identical results) in making decisions about interrogation severity and punishment severity. It is our contention that people rely on the system that is ordinarily used for punishment in making interrogation decisions, rather than vice versa. To bolster this claim, we first examined how people perceive the target. This is important, because prior research has shown that punishment motivations revolve primarily around the moral status of the individual rather than utilitarian outcomes that the punishment will achieve (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008).¹ Accordingly, we found that the manipulation of guilt changed the perception of Farid’s moral status, with “innocent” Farid being rated as more moral than “guilty” Farid, $M = 4.98 (1.64)$ vs. $2.95 (1.59)$, $t(233) = 9.66, p < .001$. Farid’s moral status, in turn, was closely

¹ We measured the moral status of the individual rather than the more common “moral outrage” for a given behavior (see Darley & Pittman, 2003). This approach was necessary because the vignette covered several years, rather than a single behavioral episode.

related to the recommended severity of punishment, $r(234) = -.56$, $p < .001$. Critically, and as one would expect, moral status mediated the relationship between the manipulation of guilt and the recommendation to punish. The top panel of Fig. 2 shows that the direct effect between guilt and punishment ($b = .42$, $p < .001$) is substantially reduced after controlling for moral status in the regression equation ($b = .11$, $p = .06$, Sobel test for mediation, $z = 6.72$, $p < .001$).

As hypothesized, this same mediated relationship exists for recommended interrogation severity. The bottom panel of Fig. 2 shows that the direct effect between guilt and interrogation severity ($b = .30$, $p < .001$) is reduced to zero and no longer significant after the inclusion of moral status in the regression equation ($b = .00$, $p = .98$, Sobel test for mediation, $z = 6.72$, $p < .001$). Thus, it appears that a similar psychological process that determines punishment severity also operates for the determination of interrogation severity.

Mediating role of the effectiveness of harsh interrogation

Given that people justify the use of harsh interrogation techniques on the basis of the value of the desired information, and given that people actually adjust the recommended interrogation severity based on the likelihood of the target having such information, one might reasonably expect this process to be mediated by the respondent's belief in the efficacy of harsh interrogations. However, if the primary motive behind harsh interrogation was to impose on the target his just deserts (as we propose), then it would be only his moral status and not belief in the effectiveness of the interrogation that should matter. And, indeed, we found that the effectiveness measure served no mediating role in the decision to recommend harsh interrogations. The direct effect of Knowledge on interrogation severity, $b = .19$, $p = .003$, was largely unchanged after controlling for perceived effectiveness of the interrogation, $b = .16$, $p = .004$, and the Sobel test of mediation was not significant, $z = 1.03$, $p > .30$. There was likewise no mediating role of effectiveness on punishment severity recommendations. Finally, the effect of Knowledge on interrogation and punishment severity was not mediated by Moral Status. Table 1 shows the relevant zero-order correlations for these analyses.

Repeated measures of knowledge variable

In order to get a more fine-grained understanding of the knowledge variable, we asked participants at the end of the survey to imagine that the probability that Farid had useful knowledge was 0%, 5%, 60%, or 95%, and to give us updated recommendations for

Table 1

Correlations between independent variables, manipulation checks, and dependent variables

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Guilt	—	.02	-.54	.21	.30	.42
2.	Knowledge		—	-.09	.07	.19	.16
3.	Moral status			—	-.46	-.56	-.63
4.	Interrogation effectiveness				—	.58	.47
5.	Interrogation severity					—	.65
6.	Punishment severity						—

Note: $N = 235$, correlations greater than .15 significant at $p < .01$.

interrogation severity under each of those hypothetical conditions. We thus created a new within-subject version of the knowledge variable. As expected, responses increased monotonically across the four conditions (4.15, 4.62, 7.37, 9.03, pooled $SD = 3.23$), and the effect size for the linear contrast ($F(1,234) = 384.69$, $p < .001$) was larger than for the equivalent between-subject contrast, $\eta^2 = .62$ vs. $.05$. Appropriately, original level of the knowledge variable had no effect ($p = .45$) on these subsequent ratings. However, the initial guilt manipulation continued to have a strong effect across each of these ratings, $F(1,227) = 11.48$, $p < .001$. Thus, strengthening the Knowledge manipulation did not weaken the impact of the Guilt manipulation.

Political affiliation and other demographics

Finally, we examined the demographic information in search of factors that might interact with the main findings or serve as covariates. These factors included: gender, military association, race, age, and attitude toward the Iraq war. Although several variables had significant effects on punitive response and interrogation severity, none of them qualified any of the reported analyses above. For example, supporters of the Iraq war generally recommended harsher interrogation techniques, $r(234) = .34$, $p < .001$, but support for the war did not change the relative effect of Knowledge or Guilt.

Political party was an exception to this general finding. Participants self-identified as Democrats (29%), Independents (41%), or Republicans (30%). This factor was included in a 3-way between-subjects ANOVA with Knowledge and Guilt as independent variables and interrogation severity as the dependent variable. The 3-way interaction was marginally significant, $F(6,207) = 2.08$, $p = .06$, as was the main effect of Guilt, $F(1,207) = 28.52$, $p < .001$. No other effects were significant, including, importantly, the effect of Knowledge ($p = .18$).

The nature of the 3-way interaction is shown in Fig. 3: Democrats and Republicans revealed opposing 2-way interaction patterns ($p = .24$, $.13$ respectively). Democrats gave guilty targets more severe interrogations as knowledge increased, but did the opposite for innocent targets. By contrast, the innocent target's knowledge made no appreciable difference to Republicans until certainty reached 95%. At that point the utility of the interrogation seemingly overwhelmed all other considerations, and respondents recommended high and equal interrogation methods for both innocent and guilty targets. The main difference between Democrats and Republicans appeared in the extreme case in which there was an innocent target that almost certainly had critical information (95% chance-of-knowledge). Democrats, perhaps reflecting the values of fairness and protection of civil liberties (Haidt, 2008), recommended against harsh interrogations in this scenario; Republicans, perhaps reflecting the values of protecting the state, recommended for harsh interrogations. The difference between these two cells ($M = 2.0$ vs. 9.8) was significant, $t(13) = 4.47$, $p < .001$, and the difference between interrogation severity for

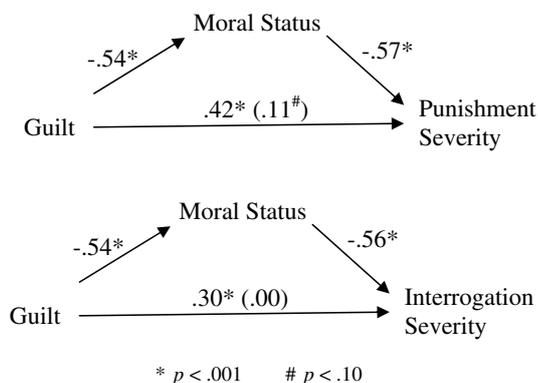


Fig. 2. Mediation analysis for punishment severity (top) and interrogation severity (bottom).

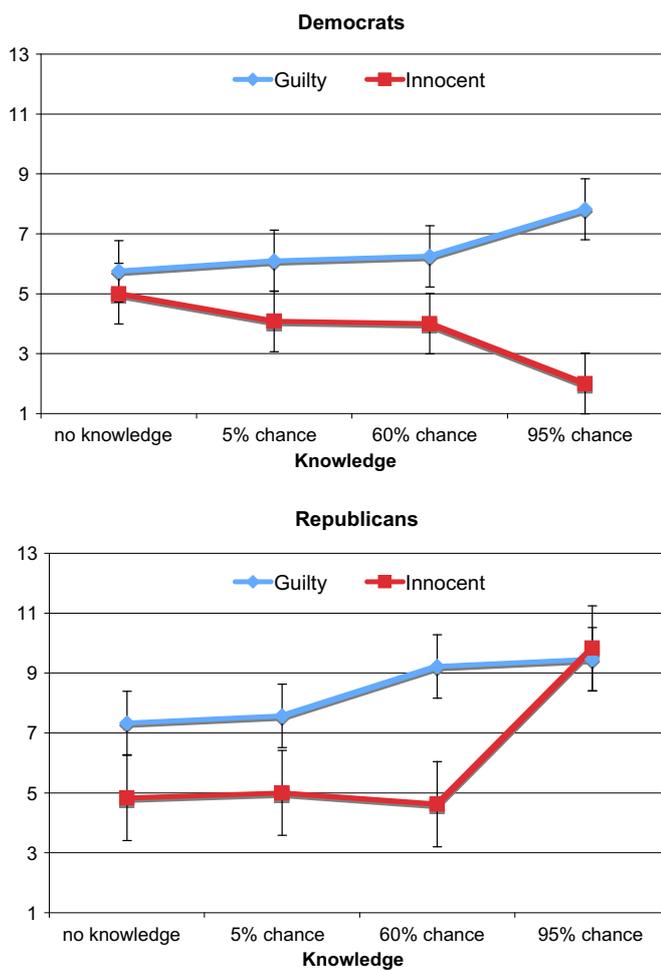


Fig. 3. Recommended interrogation severity by Guilt, Likelihood of Knowledge, and Political Identification. Error bars are standard error.

the innocent and the guilty target at the 95% certainty level was different for Democrats and Republicans, $F(1,35) = 7.63, p < .01$.

When the overall correlation between punishment and interrogation severity was broken down by political party, it was lower for Democrats ($r(67) = .53$) than for Republicans ($r(69) = .75$), and the Independents ($r(95) = .60$) fell in between. The coefficients for Democrats and Republicans were significantly different, $z = 2.18, p < .05$.

Discussion

The results of the study support the hypothesis that people's endorsement of harsh interrogation techniques may be fuelled, at least in part, by retributive motives. We found that ratings of interrogation severity depended not only on the likelihood of the target having useful knowledge, but also on whether or not he had a history of bad acts. Moreover, interrogation severity ratings responded to the Guilt and Knowledge manipulations in the same way as punishment severity ratings, and the correlation between these two dependent variables was strong and positive.

As expected from prior research, ratings of punishment severity were mediated by judgments about the moral status of the target. This study additionally demonstrated that the same was true for ratings of interrogation severity, thereby providing evidence for a similar psychological mechanism underlying both types of judgments. The retributive nature of support for severe interrogation

methods was further reinforced by the finding that the relationship between the target's likelihood of knowledge and interrogation severity was *not* mediated by people's beliefs about the effectiveness of such techniques.

The manipulations of Knowledge and Guilt were orthogonal, but it is possible that there were cross-effects such that guilty targets were presumed to possess more knowledge than their innocent counterparts. We did not include a manipulation check to assess this possibility, and thus cannot rule out that the Guilt manipulation operated through the utilitarian belief that the target knew more than was stated. We tested for this possibility in a brief follow-up study ($N = 174$) using a comparable sample and identical materials. After reading the vignette, respondents were asked a series of manipulation checks including "According to the story, how likely is it that the main character possesses useful information about current terrorist activities?" They were given a 4-point response scale anchored with 0%, 5%, 60%, and 95%. A two-way ANOVA revealed small but significant cross-effects. The Knowledge manipulation had an expected large effect on perceived knowledge: $F(3, 166) = 117.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .68$, and the Guilt manipulation also had a small but significant effect: $F(1, 166) = 5.96, p = .02, \eta^2 = .04$. When this manipulation check was controlled, all of the replicated analyses were unchanged. We conclude, then, that although such cross-effects are a possible confound in the main study, it is highly unlikely that they could provide a meaningful account for the pattern of results.

Research on retributive justice has shown that people seek to punish because an offense injures not only the immediate victim, but also the larger "fabric of society" (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Tyler & Smith, 1997). Thus, Tyler and Boeckmann (1997) argue that people punish in order to symbolically reassert the status of the violated rules. Noting that "moral outrage" correlates well with the severity of punishment and is a strong mediator between perceptions of a crime and the eventual sentence the wrongdoer receives, Darley and Pittman (2003) suggest a model of justice assignment whereby the intentionality of a bad act leads to high moral outrage, which in turn creates a desire for retribution and imposition of just deserts through punishment. The present study suggests a similar pattern in people's support for use of severe interrogation methods upon a target who is guilty of prior bad acts. By having engaged in past acts of terrorism the target has violated global norms, and people might feel the need to respond to this not only through punishment, but also during the interrogation process.

It is noteworthy that the mean interrogation severity even for an innocent target with no knowledge was well above the baseline. The explanation for this might lie in the impossibility of proving that the target was completely innocent or that there was absolutely no chance that he was withholding useful information. This could be a manifestation of the just-world phenomenon—the need to rationalize inexplicable injustice by assuming that the target was deserving of his treatment (Aguilar, Vala, Correia, & Pereira, 2008; Lerner, 1980). That is, participants might have decided that the innocent goatherd with 0% chance of useful knowledge *must* have done something to deserve being captured and detained by Coalition forces, so they were willing to apply some degree of coercion to uncover what he may be hiding. In fact, since derogation of a victim facilitates the return to an "orderly worldview" in which people get what they deserve, this impulse too, like motivation for punishment, can be seen as "stem[ming] from the desire to mete out 'just deserts'" (Darley & Pittman, 2003, p. 330).

Future research should empirically test alternative explanations for our findings. Janoff-Bulman (2007, p. 432) notes "people may erroneously assume that information from cruel, bad, harsh enemies can only be produced by similarly cruel, bad, harsh techniques." Thus, participants might have recommended more

severe interrogation methods for the guilty target because they assumed that someone with a history of engaging in acts of terrorism would be unlikely to give up useful knowledge without coercive techniques, whereas an innocent goatherd would succumb more easily. On a related note, dehumanizing the target may explain support for severe mistreatment in the context of both interrogation and punishment. “People are likely to question the appropriateness of rapport-based strategies, regarding them as too mundane and ‘soft’ to be useful in intelligence interrogation,” Janoff-Bulman (2007, pp. 431–432) suggests. “After all, this is the realm of ‘evil others,’ of enemies we typically dehumanize and regard as outside the scope of morality and justice (Opatow, 1990), lacking the same human motives and needs as our own.”

The individual differences that emerged due to political affiliation also merit further investigation and comment. The fact that Republicans had significantly higher correlations than Democrats between punishment and interrogation severity ratings is consistent with the main findings of the study. Republicans generally support more severe sentences for criminal offenses (Carroll, Perkwitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987), so their corresponding support of more severe interrogation methods is consistent with the proposition that a similar psychological mechanism underlies these two types of decisions. On the other hand, given that the use of severe interrogation techniques has become such a charged partisan issue, Republicans might have felt obligated to toe the party line by voicing support for methods that the current administration has condoned.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Democrats' inclination to suggest milder techniques when interrogating an innocent target who almost certainly had useful knowledge—milder even than the techniques they recommended when the target was less likely to have useful knowledge—is a baffling finding. Perhaps Democrats fear that in the current political climate, an innocent target with such a high likelihood of knowledge would have a high chance of being subjected to harsh interrogation methods, so they go to the other extreme in order to support the values of fairness, procedural justice, and protection of civil liberties. Especially given that the use of severe interrogation techniques has become the topic of such intense political debate, the scenario of a highly vulnerable detainee might trigger an impulse to advocate for the traditionally Democratic position of an absolute ban on torture.

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate that although utilitarian justifications dominate the public discourse about the use of severe interrogation methods, retributive motives are likely to play a critical role when the target of interrogation is guilty of prior bad acts. The present findings bear resemblance to research on the retributive nature of punishment, which has significant implications for hotly contested issues like the death penalty (Ellsworth & Ross, 1983), post-sentence civil commitment of sexual offenders (Carlsmith et al., 2007), and public support for preemptive war (Lieberman, 2006; Lieberman & Skitka, submitted for publication).

The implications of using severe interrogation methods as a proxy for punishment are significant not only for the targets of the abusive treatment, but also for the society that condones such practices. Moghaddam (2007, p. 439) suggests that during times of intergroup conflict and perceived external threat, political leaders may “gain popularity by positioning themselves as being ‘tough on terror’ and willing to endorse harsh interrogation techniques”—although “by taking this route, political leaders are also likely to both gain greater support among those higher on author-

itarianism (Altemeyer, 1996) and to strengthen authoritarian tendencies in the public.” Given the controversial nature and global consequences of US laws and policies on the use of severe interrogation methods, an honest confrontation of the psychological motivations underlying people's positions, as evidenced by empirical data, must inform the debate on this issue.

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