

HOW MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES RELATE TO COMMUNITY SENTIMENT TOWARD ENHANCED INTERROGATION TECHNIQUES

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Controversy surrounds the CIA's "enhanced interrogation" techniques that could be considered torture. Replicating previous studies, 1) sentiment toward torture was moderately supportive yet divided and 2) there was a positive relationship between belief that techniques are effective and belief they are justified. Supporting our hypotheses, general just world beliefs, religious fundamentalism, and moral disengagement *negatively* related to considering various techniques as torture and *positively* related to beliefs about effectiveness and justification of torture. Religious devotionism positively related only to considering various techniques as torture, partially supporting hypotheses. Relationships between IVs (e.g., fundamentalism) and DVs (i.e., sentiment toward torture) were mediated by moral disengagement. This helps explain cognitive processes that underlie sentiment. Finally, the moral disengagement scale we developed had good reliability and predictive ability.

Keywords: torture, religion, just world beliefs, moral disengagement, interrogation, community sentiment

Torture is excessively harmful or inhumane behavior used to elicit information from suspects (i.e., terrorists) or punish them for committing radical acts (see, e.g., Hope, 2004; Levinson, 2005). Such techniques include 1) "waterboarding," a procedure that simulates drowning, 2) "cold cell," a technique in which a nude suspect is doused with cold water and exposed to prolonged temperatures of 50 degrees Fahrenheit, and 3) "long-time standing," a technique that requires the suspect to remain in a standing position for 40 hours without sleep (Ross & Esposito, 2005; see also Gronke et al., 2010 for descriptions of many techniques). Although these techniques are often referred to by the less-controversial term "enhanced interrogation techniques," many people consider them to be torture or are generally opposed to their use (for reviews, see Gronke et al., 2010; Piazza, 2015). The U.S. government has long used controversial interrogation techniques in the name of national security (Hope, 2004), with such discussions intensifying after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Hope, 2004). America's use of such techniques was made public

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after the release of the “Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program report” (Senate Intelligence Committee Releases CIA Report, 2015). This report was compiled by the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and created an uproar among those who believe these techniques are inhumane and/or ineffective. More recently, President Donald Trump created controversy over his support for such techniques (CNN.com, 2016a).

These recent events, along with terrorist attacks such as the shootings in San Bernardino and Orlando (CNN.com 2016b), have renewed researchers’ interest in the study of community sentiment toward the use of techniques that might constitute torture.¹ Community sentiment is the collective attitudes and beliefs of a group such as Americans, women, voters, or students (Miller, Blumenthal, & Chamberlain, 2015). Understanding sentiment is an important part of ensuring that legal actors adopt policies that represent their constituents, however community sentiment toward complex issues—such as torture—is often difficult to measure (Miller et al., 2015).

Americans are only moderately supportive of torture as a whole, yet are deeply divided. Gronke and colleagues (2010) averaged results of 32 polls taken from 2001-2009 and found that 55% of Americans oppose and 40.8% support the use of torture; this approval rate varies based on the type of technique, the sample being surveyed, and the organization conducting the survey. For instance, only 10% of Americans favored the use of sexual humiliation and only 17% favored the use of electric shock and waterboarding. Yet 66% favored the use of sleep deprivation, 56% favored the use of noise bombs, and 55% favored use of harsh interrogation (Gronke et al., 2010). Notably, most studies do not ask if participants think these are effective or justified—they merely ask if the participant supports or opposes the technique (Gronke et al., 2010). Houck and Conway (2013) found that people, even those who oppose torture techniques, are more supportive of torture in situations involving harm to loved ones. Their research provides further support that Americans’ sentiment toward torture techniques might differ based on factors such as potential justifications (e.g., saving loved ones) and personal relevance (e.g., Miller, Alvarez, & Weaver, 2018; Yelderman, Miller, Forsythe, & Sicafuse, 2018).

Community sentiment often varies based on individual differences (e.g., Chomos & Miller, 2015; Sigillo & Miller, 2018). For instance, sentiment toward torture techniques varies based upon political orientation (Wallace, 2013) and retributive beliefs (Lieberman, 2014), but also likely varies based on other individual differences, such as religious ideology, moral disengagement, or belief in a just world—variables that have yet to be tested thoroughly. Individual differences might help explain variations in people’s sentiment toward torture. For example, people who believe in a just world (i.e., believe people get what they deserve; Lerner, 1991) are likely more supportive of the use of torture against wrongdoers than those who do not possess this worldview. People who perceive torture as a retributive act support its use more than those who do not (Lieberman, 2012; 2014).

1 While it is controversial whether these techniques should be considered torture, we will use the term “sentiment toward torture” rather than other more bulky terms such as “sentiment toward enhanced interrogation techniques that might be considered torture.”

Finally, people are more supportive of torture techniques if they perceive them as effective (Bulman, 2007); this trend becomes stronger when people perceive torture as an act that could save loved ones (Houck & Conway, 2013; Houck et al., 2014). These findings hint that individual differences (e.g., just world beliefs and religious characteristics) might relate to sentiment toward torture.

Sentiment toward torture could also be partially explained by a person's propensity for moral disengagement, a process that allows people to justify immoral behaviors through a number of mechanisms. Such mechanisms include use of euphemistic language (e.g., calling an act "enhanced interrogation" rather than "torture") or reasoning that the harm done was for a good reason such as saving a loved one (Bandura, 2002; Bandura, Barbarnelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; McAlister, 2001).

This study has several purposes. First, it replicates previous studies finding that people have moderately supportive sentiment toward torture, yet are fairly divided (i.e., some strongly supporting while others strongly opposing; Gronke, 2010). Second, it extends previous findings that the belief that torture is *justified* is related to belief that torture is *effective* (e.g., Houck et al., 2014). The third purpose is to explore direct and mediating relationships between sentiment toward torture and just world beliefs, religious characteristics, and moral disengagement. Results provide a nuanced understanding of the individual differences that relate to sentiment, including an investigation of the mental process (i.e., moral disengagement) that can help explain sentiment toward torture. Finally, in order to test these hypotheses, we create and test a new scale to measure moral disengagement related to torture—a measure that could possibly be used to measure moral disengagement more broadly and explain beliefs about various legal actions.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN LEGAL ATTITUDES

Individual differences relate to sentiment toward a myriad of legal topics ranging from gay rights (Miller & Chamberlain, 2013), to gun rights (McCann & Zawila, 2016), to vigilante justice (Miller, 2013). Other than political ideology (Wallace, 2013) and retributive dispositions (Lieberman, 2012), little is known about what individual differences relate to sentiment toward torture techniques. This research examines the role of individual differences (i.e., belief in a just world and religious characteristics) on sentiment toward the use of torture techniques. These two individual differences both relate to people's worldviews and sense of justice; thus, they possibly relate to sentiment toward the treatment of others (e.g., torture) as well.

Belief in a Just World

Belief in a just world describes the ideology that the world is a fair place in which people experience positive things if they are good people, and experience negative things if they are bad people (Dalbert, 1999; Lerner, 1991). Those who endorse just world beliefs perceive their environment to be stable and organized in such a way that people get what they deserve. People can adopt this worldview generally (i.e., everyone lives in a just world) or personally (i.e., positive things happen to me because I am a good person; Dalbert, 1999).

In addition to being more punitive in general (e.g., death penalty; Butler & Moran 2007), people high in belief in a just world tend to derogate (Furnham, 2003; Lerner, 2003) and blame (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001) victims. Victim derogation and blame bolsters the belief that the world is a predictable and just place; if someone was injured, it must be because he was a bad person who deserved it. A logical extension of this belief is the premise that those who commit terrible acts (e.g., terrorists) should receive harm (e.g., torture). This study investigates whether individual differences in just world beliefs relate to sentiment toward torture.

Religious Characteristics

Religious characteristics influence people's behavior and sentiment regarding legal and social issues (Bornstein & Miller, 2009; Miller, 2013; Miller & Chamberlain, 2013), which might include sentiment toward torture. While there are numerous religious characteristics (e.g., orthodoxy, fanaticism; Putney & Middleton, 1961), the two of interest for this study are two of the most commonly studied: religious fundamentalism and religious devotionism. Religious fundamentalism describes the belief that there is a single set of religious teachings (e.g., the Bible) that should be followed in all aspects of one's life (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Religious devotionism is the *degree* to which people perceive their religious views to be important to their lives and worldviews (also referred to as religious importance; Putney & Middleton, 1961).

Although religious fundamentalism and devotionism are both dimensions of religious ideology that inform a person's worldview, they differ in how people incorporate these characteristics in their lives (Young, 1992). Religious fundamentalism provides guidance for people's attitudes based on *what* their 'fundamentally accurate' religion would support (i.e. belief in "eye for an eye"), whereas devotionism indicates the *degree to which* religious views influence one's attitudes and behavior. In general, religious fundamentalism is related to increased support for punitiveness (e.g., death penalty; Evans & Adams, 2003; Kivisto & Swan, 2011; Miller & Hayward, 2008; Yelderman & Miller, 2016, 2017; Young, 1992), possibly because of a belief in the "eye for an eye" doctrine generally endorsed by fundamentalists. In contrast, devotionism is associated with decreased support for punitiveness (Bjarnason & Welch, 2004; Miller, Maskaly, Peoples, & Sigillo, 2014; Young, 1992), perhaps due to beliefs that one should embrace forgiveness. As an extension of prior studies, it could be predicted that sentiment toward torture will be more positive for those high in fundamentalism and those low in devotionism.

While it is of interest to determine whether these individual differences (i.e., belief in a just world and religious characteristics) relate to sentiment toward torture, this study goes further by investigating the reasons for these relationships. One possible explanation, discussed next, is that these individual differences relate to moral disengagement, which in turn relates to punitiveness.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

Moral disengagement is a mental process involving cognitive strategies that allow people to support actions they would otherwise view as immoral (Bandura, 2002; Bandura et al., 1996; McAlister, 2001). A person can justify causing harm to someone through one or more of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement: 1) reasoning that the harm done is morally justified, 2) using euphemistic language which sounds less harmful, 3) reasoning that the person being harmed actually caused more harm in comparison, 4) displacing responsibility for the harm on to another person, 5) diffusing responsibility of administering the harm to a group of people, 6) distorting/minimizing harm, 7) attributing blame to the person harmed, and 8) dehumanizing the person being harmed (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement can help explain sentiment toward crime and punishment (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013); for instance, moral disengagement is positively related to support for vigilante justice (McDermott & Miller, 2016).

There are many reasons to predict a relationship between sentiment toward torture and moral disengagement. First, people typically consider torture as a matter of national security (Lieberman, 2014); this belief “diffuses responsibility” to an entire country of citizens who can all share the blame for the harm done through torture. It is also an “advantageous comparison of harm” because it justifies the harm to one person (e.g., a terrorist) in order to protect an entire nation from harm (e.g., a terrorist attack). Second, sentiment toward torture is related to retributive beliefs—essentially that terrorists get what they deserve (Lieberman, 2012; 2014). This is an example of the mechanisms of “attributing blame to the person being harmed” (i.e., terrorist), and “dehumanizing the person being harmed” by labeling that person a terrorist (rather than a suspect that has legal rights to be considered innocent until proven guilty). Third, people are more likely to support torture if they believe torture is an effective technique for eliciting information that could save people’s lives (Bulman, 2007; Houck & Conway, 2013; Houck et al., 2014). This is an example of the “moral justification” mechanism. Finally, many people prefer the term “enhanced interrogation technique” rather than the term “torture;” this exemplifies the “euphemistic language” mechanism because the term implies that the harm was little more than just normal police interrogation. As it also implies that the harm was minimal, it could also be an example of “distorting harm.” Finally, a person who engages in torture could “displace responsibility” to the government, one’s superiors, or other entities as a way to reduce one’s own responsibility for harming others. This study is the first that we know of to investigate the relationship between one’s propensity to morally disengage and one’s sentiment toward torture.

While one’s propensity to morally disengage might be directly related to sentiment toward torture, it might also be a mediator between individual differences (IV) and sentiment toward torture (DV). Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between individual differences (e.g., need for cognition and legal authoritarianism) and beliefs about *vigilante justice* (McDermott & Miller, 2016); and thus might also be a mediator between individual differences and sentiment toward torture. We predict that just world beliefs and religious characteristics will relate to moral disengagement, which then relates

to sentiment toward torture. Previous research on the antecedents of moral disengagement indicates that various individual differences (e.g., empathy) relate to a person's tendency to morally disengage (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008), suggesting that individual differences can relate to people's propensity to morally disengage. As such, we are the first (to our knowledge) to propose that belief in a just world and religious characteristics might relate to a person's propensity to morally disengage, which then relates to sentiment toward torture.

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

The current study has five purposes. The first is to investigate whether participants' sentiment toward interrogation techniques (i.e., torture) are moderately positive (Gronke et al., 2010; Liberman, 2014); we predict that we will replicate this finding. We also believe that participants' scores will be diverse, with some strongly supporting and some strongly opposing these techniques (Gronke et al., 2010). The second purpose of this study is to extend previous findings (e.g., Houck et al., 2014) that belief in the *effectiveness* of torture is related to belief that torture is *justified* in some circumstances (i.e., saving loved ones); we hypothesize a similar positive relationship between effectiveness and justification more directly. The third purpose is to create and test a scale measuring moral disengagement regarding torture. The fourth purpose is to investigate whether several factors (i.e., just world beliefs, religious characteristics, moral disengagement) relate to participants' sentiment toward torture. Overall, it is predicted that participants low in religious devotionism or high in just world beliefs, religious fundamentalism, or propensity for moral disengagement will have more positive sentiment toward torture than their counterparts. Specifically, such participants will be less likely to believe that these techniques should be considered torture, will be more likely to perceive these techniques as effective, and will be more likely to perceive these techniques to be justified. The fifth purpose is to determine whether moral disengagement mediates the relationships between individual differences (just world beliefs and religious characteristics) and sentiment toward torture. It is predicted that moral disengagement will be a mediator.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate students ($N = 631$) enrolled in social science courses at a university in the western U.S. participated in the surveymonkey.com survey in exchange for course credit. Forty-nine students were removed from analysis for not responding to any questions pertinent to this study (i.e., independent or dependent variables). Participants in the final sample ($N = 582$) were aged 17 to 51 ($M = 20.88$, $SD = 4.6$), 63.3% female, and 67.7% Caucasian. The majority of participants were Catholic (29.1%) or believed in God but did not have a particular religious affiliation (24.1%); and were either Democrats (31.1%) or politically unaffiliated (27.5%).

Materials

Materials included a moral disengagement scale, sentiment toward torture scale, a just world beliefs scale, and two religious scales. All items used a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha indicated that each scale or subscale was unidimensional; thus, all items were averaged to create one score for each scale or subscale.

Moral disengagement scale. We created the moral disengagement scale by adapting Bandura et al. (1996)'s general moral disengagement scale. Our scale measures moral disengagement regarding torture against terror suspects. This scale measures 6 of the 8 mechanisms of moral disengagement. Two (diffusion of responsibility and displacement of responsibility) were considered inappropriate because they address disengagement from *personal* actions that cause harm. It would be unrealistic to ask participants whether "I am justified in torturing someone because my superior told me to" (displacement of responsibility mechanism). Thus, the scale focused on perceptions of harm caused by others. This scale had high reliability ($\alpha = .92$) (see Table 1 for all items).

Table 1. Means for Sentiment Toward Torture

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Do you consider waterboarding to be torture?	578	1	5	3.86	1.05
Do you think that waterboarding is JUSTIFIED to help gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect?	578	1	5	2.72	1.18
Do you think that waterboarding is EFFECTIVE to help gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect?	574	1	5	3.05	1.15
Do you consider this technique to be torture?	579	1	5	3.98	.98
Do you think that the cold cell technique is JUSTIFIED to help gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect?	579	1	5	2.72	1.20
Do you think that cold cell technique is EFFECTIVE to help gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect?	578	1	5	3.05	1.14
Do you consider the long time standing technique to be torture?	578	1	5	3.78	1.05

Do you think that the long time standing technique is JUSTIFIED to help gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect?	578	1	5	2.80	1.15
Do you think that the long time standing technique is EFFECTIVE to help gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect?	578	1	5	2.97	1.11

Sentiment toward torture scale. We developed nine questions regarding three different types of techniques: waterboarding, cold cell, and long-time standing.² After reading descriptions of these techniques, participants indicated the degree to which they agreed that each technique (1) should be *considered torture*, (2) is *effective* in helping to gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect, and (3) is *justified* to help gain accurate information or a confession from a terror suspect. Identical questions for each technique were averaged to form three subscales measuring agreement that the techniques were 1) considered torture ($\alpha = .89$), 2) effective ($\alpha = .92$), and 3) justified ($\alpha = .93$).

Belief in a just world scale. The belief in a just world scale included six questions assessing people's level of *general* belief in a just world (GBJW, $\alpha = .79$; e.g., "I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve."), and seven measuring *personal* belief in a just world (PBJW, $\alpha = .86$; "I believe that, by and large, I deserve what happens to me."; Dalbert, 1999).

Religious fundamentalism scale. The religious fundamentalism scale included 12 questions assessing participants' endorsement of religious fundamentalist beliefs (Altmeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). The scale had good reliability ($\alpha = .91$) and included items such as "To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one, fundamentally true religion".

Religious devotionalism scale. The religious devotionalism scale included six items measuring participants' religious devotionalism (Putney & Middleton, 1961). The scale had good reliability ($\alpha = .88$) and included items such as "My ideas about religion are one of the most important parts of my philosophy of life."

RESULTS

Our first prediction was that participants would be moderately positive yet diverse (i.e., some strongly supporting but some strongly opposing the techniques) in their sentiment toward torture. Means for all variables were generally in the mid-range of responses. Table 1 contains the means for items measuring sentiment toward torture and Table 2 contains

2 These three techniques were chosen because they were among the first to be approved by the U.S. government for use against terrorist suspects (Ross & Esposito, 2005) and because they were believed to be the most widely talked about at the time the study was conducted.

the means for all items measuring moral disengagement regarding torture. All means were near the mean (3) of the Likert-type scale used. The distribution of means for all variables indicate a wide distribution of beliefs: some participants strongly disagree and some strongly agree with these beliefs.

Table 2. Means of Moral Disengagement Items

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.	581	1	5	2.85	1.20
These techniques are justified because terrorists are monsters.	581	1	5	2.68	1.14
These techniques are justified because they help protect innocent people from being victims of terrorist acts.	580	1	5	2.98	1.22
These techniques are acceptable because there is no long-term harm done to the terrorist.	581	1	5	2.78	1.14
These techniques are acceptable because of the extreme immorality of the terrorists' acts.	578	1	5	2.86	1.17
These techniques are acceptable because terrorists chose to do the acts that put them in this situation.	579	1	5	2.98	1.20
Reverse coded-Suspected terrorists should be treated the same as any suspect of any other crime.	574	1	5	2.92	1.17

Our second prediction was that there would be a positive relationship between beliefs about effectiveness and justification of torture. The bivariate correlation between the justification scale and the effectiveness scale was large, positive, and significant ($r=.614, p<.01$).

Our third inquiry was whether a moral disengagement scale we developed would be reliable and have good predictive validity. Chronbach's alpha was high (.92) indicating that all items were highly interrelated. Table 3 lists the inter-correlations among items. As will be demonstrated, this scale also has good predictive ability because it significantly related to individual differences and sentiment toward torture.

Table 3. Inter-correlations among Moral Disengagement Items

	Correlations					
	These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.	These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.	These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.	These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.	These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.	These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.
These techniques are justified because the crimes they are not nearly as harmful as the crimes the terrorists committed.	1	.75**	.78**	.67**	.79**	.77**
	Pearson Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
N	581	581	580	581	578	579
These techniques are justified because terrorists are monsters.		1	.72**	.62**	.78**	.73**
	Pearson Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
N	581	581	580	581	578	579
These techniques are justified because they help protect innocent people from being victims of terrorist acts			1	.70**	.79**	.79**
	Pearson Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
N			580	580	577	578
These techniques are acceptable because there is no long-term harm done to the terrorist				1	.74**	.72**
	Pearson Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
N				581	578	579
These techniques are acceptable because of the extreme immorality of the terrorists' acts.					1	.85**
	Pearson Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
N					578	576
These techniques are acceptable because terrorists chose to do the acts that put them in this situation						1
	Pearson Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
N						572
Suspected terrorists should be treated the same as any suspect of any other crime.						1
	Pearson Correlation					
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
N						574

**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The fourth and fifth purposes were to investigate the direct and mediating relationships between individual difference measures, moral disengagement, and sentiment toward torture. Several regression and mediation analyses were conducted. Mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS by Hayes (2013; see Appendix for mediation models). The *total effect* of the independent variable (IV; e.g., general just world beliefs) on the dependent variable (DV; e.g., effectiveness score) is indicated by the c path. The *direct effect* of the IV on the DV, indicated by the c' path, describes the effect of the IV when accounting for the relationship between the mediator (e.g., moral disengagement) and the DV. The *indirect effect* of the IV on the DV describes the effect of the IV on the mediator (a path) multiplied by the effect of the mediator on the DV (b path). In order for mediation to occur, the a path, b path, and c path have to have significant relationships. That is, mediation does not occur when the IV does not significantly relate to the DV (total effect), when the IV does not significantly relate to the mediator (path a), or when the mediator does not significantly relate to the DV (b path). A test of this regression model would identify whether the relationship between individual differences and sentiment toward torture is mediated by moral disengagement. The specific analyses are outlined below and visually represented in Figure 1.

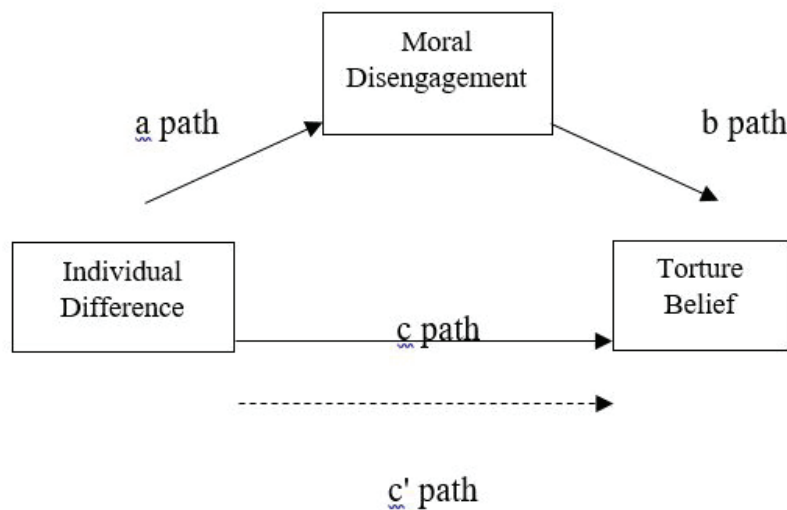


Figure 1. Mediation Model

Individual Differences Related to Moral Disengagement

An OLS (ordinary least squares) regression examined the relationship between IVs (just world beliefs, religious fundamentalism, and religious devotionism) and the mediator variable (moral disengagement). This was the a path in Figure 1. The overall model explained 7.6% of the variance in participants' moral disengagement score ($R^2 = .076$, $p < .001$). General just world beliefs ($B = .21$, $p = .002$), and religious fundamentalism ($B = .28$, $p < .001$) both related to moral disengagement scores, but personal just world beliefs

and religious devotionism did not ($p > .05$). This suggests that moral disengagement potentially mediates the relationship between general just world beliefs (but not personal just world beliefs) and religious fundamentalism (but not religious devotionism) on participants' sentiment toward torture. Mediation analysis were therefore only conducted with general just world beliefs and religious fundamentalism as IVs.

Agreement that Techniques are Considered Torture

Two ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models tested the relationships between the IVs (i.e., just world beliefs, moral disengagement, religious fundamentalism, and religious devotionism) on the DV (i.e., participants' agreement that the three techniques are considered torture). The first regression model tested the relationships between variables without accounting for moral disengagement, to identify whether there was a total effect of these variables on agreement that the techniques are considered torture (the DV). This was the c path in Figure 1. The second model examined these relationships while accounting for moral disengagement to identify whether moral disengagement greatly reduced other effects.

The first overall model explained 13.3% of the variance in participants' agreement that the techniques are considered torture ($R^2 = .133, p < .001$). General just world beliefs ($B = -.16, p = .009$) and religious fundamentalism ($B = -.26, p < .001$) negatively related to participants' agreement that the techniques are considered torture. However, personal just world beliefs ($B = .4, p < .001$), and religious devotionism ($B = .09, p = .032$) positively related to participants' agreement that the techniques are considered torture.

Results of the second regression model indicated that adding moral disengagement significantly improved the model ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .132, p < .001$). The overall model explained 26.5% of the variance in participants' agreement that the techniques are considered torture. Personal just world beliefs ($B = .37, p < .001$) positively related to participants' agreement that the techniques are considered torture, whereas religious fundamentalism ($B = -.15, p = .002$), and moral disengagement ($B = -.36, p < .001$) negatively related to participants' agreement. However, general just world beliefs and religious devotionism no longer predicted participants' agreement that the techniques are considered torture ($p > .05$) after controlling for moral disengagement.

Two mediation analyses examined the degree to which moral disengagement mediated the effects of the IVs (general just world beliefs and religious fundamentalism) on the DV (agreement that the techniques are considered torture). These were the only two individual difference variables related to moral disengagement. Moral disengagement did not mediate the relationship between general just world beliefs and agreement that the techniques are considered torture ($p > .05$, c path). However, moral disengagement partially mediated the relationship between religious fundamentalism and agreement that these techniques are considered torture, 95% CI $[-.156, -.059]$. See Table 4 for path coefficients. Thus, the negative relationship between religious fundamentalism and participants' agreement that the techniques are considered torture was partially explained by an increase in moral disengagement.

Table 4. Path coefficients for mediation model: religious fundamentalism → moral disengagement → agreement techniques are considered torture

Path	Coefficient
a path	0.291***
b path	-.346***
c path	-.273***
c' path	-.172***
a*b path	-.101
a*b CI95	-.156, -.059

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ for all subsequent tables

Effectiveness Scores

Two OLS regression models examined the relationship between IVs (i.e., just world beliefs, moral disengagement, religious fundamentalism, and religious devotionism) and the DV (i.e., agreement that these techniques are effective in eliciting accurate information from terrorists; titled effectiveness score). These models served the same purpose described in previous analyses; the first model included individual difference variables but excluded moral disengagement while the second model added moral disengagement as an IV.

The first overall model explained 3.4% of the variance in participants' effectiveness scores ($R^2 = .034$, $p = .001$). General just world beliefs ($B = .16$, $p = .047$), and religious fundamentalism ($B = .17$, $p = .012$), were both positively related to effectiveness scores. However, personal just world beliefs and religious devotionism were not related to beliefs about effectiveness ($p > .05$).

Results of the second regression model indicated that adding moral disengagement significantly improved the first model ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .387$, $p < .001$). The overall model explained 42.2% of the variance in effectiveness scores. Moral disengagement ($B = .73$, $p < .001$) positively related to the effectiveness scores. However, the other four variables did not relate to effectiveness scores ($p > .05$) after controlling for moral disengagement.

Two mediation analyses were conducted to examine the degree to which moral disengagement mediated the relationships between of general just world beliefs and religious fundamentalism with effectiveness score. These were the only two predictors related to moral disengagement, as discussed earlier. Moral disengagement partially mediated the relationship between general just world beliefs and effectiveness score, 95% CI [.07, .235]. See Table 5 for path coefficients. The positive relationship between general just world beliefs and effectiveness score is partially explained by increased moral disengagement.

Table 5. Path coefficients for mediation model: general just world beliefs → moral disengagement → effectiveness score

Path	Coefficient
a path	.237**
b path	.639***
c path	.265**
c' path	.114*
a*b path	.151
a*b CI95	.07, .235

Moral disengagement fully mediated the relationship between religious fundamentalism and effectiveness score, 95% CI [.116, .272]. See Table 6 for path coefficients. The positive relationship between religious fundamentalism and effectiveness score is explained by increased moral disengagement.

Table 6. Path coefficients for mediation model: religious fundamentalism → moral disengagement → effectiveness score

Path	Coefficient
a path	.291***
b path	.65***
c path	.181**
c' path	-.008
a*b path	.189
a*b CI95	.116, .272

Justification Score

Two OLS regression models examined the relationship between IVs (i.e., just world beliefs, moral disengagement, religious fundamentalism, and religious devotionism) and the DV (i.e., beliefs regarding whether the three techniques were justified for the elicitation of information from terrorists). These models served the same purpose described in previous analyses; the first model included all variables with the exception of moral disengagement, and the second model included moral disengagement as an IV.

The first overall model explained 4% of the variance in justification scores ($R^2 = .04, p < .001$). General just world beliefs ($B = .22, p = .008$) and religious fundamentalism ($B = .17, p = .012$) positively related to justification scores. However, personal just world beliefs and religious devotionism did not predict participants' beliefs about justification ($p > .05$).

Results of the second regression model indicated that adding moral disengagement significantly improved the first model ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .642, p < .001$). The overall model explained 68.2% of the variance in justification scores. Moral disengagement ($B = .97, p < .001$) positively related to justification scores, but the other four variables did not relate to justification scores ($p > .05$) after controlling for moral disengagement.

Two mediation analyses were conducted to examine the degree to which moral disengagement mediated the effects of general just world beliefs and religious fundamentalism on justification scores. These were the only two predictors that related to moral disengagement, as reported above. Moral disengagement partially mediated the relationship between general just world beliefs and justification scores, 95% CI [.104, .34]. See Table 7 for path coefficients. Thus, the positive relationship between general just world beliefs and justification scores was explained by increased moral disengagement.

Table 7. Path coefficients for mediation model: general just world beliefs → moral disengagement → justification score

Path	Coefficient
a path	.237**
b path	.952***
c path	.259**
c' path	.034
a*b path	.225
a*b CI95	.104, .34

Moral disengagement also fully mediated the relationship between religious fundamentalism and perceived justification of torture, 95% CI [.172, .382]. See Table 8 for path coefficients. Thus, the positive relationship between religious fundamentalism and justification scores was explained by increased moral disengagement.

Table 8. Path coefficients for mediation model: religious fundamentalism → moral disengagement → justification score

Path	Coefficient
a path	.291***
b path	.947***
c path	.261***
c' path	-.014
a*b path	.276
a*b CI95	.172, .382

DISCUSSION

Whether “enhanced interrogation techniques” are torture is a current and controversial topic that merits psychological investigation. This study had five main purposes. First, it replicated previous findings that Americans are moderately supportive of the use of torture, using different measures than previous studies (e.g., Gronke et al., 2010; Liberman, 2014; Wallace, 2013). Gronke and colleagues’ (2010) work demonstrates that Americans’ sentiment toward torture varies greatly based upon the type of technique used. However, Houck and colleagues (2014) indicates that Americans are much more likely to support torture techniques in situations that personally affect them (i.e., saving loved ones), compared to situations that are not personally relevant. Our findings indicate somewhat stronger support than many other studies, perhaps because we used different measures (i.e., continuous belief measures) than most previous studies that measured only support or opposition typically using categorical variables (Gronke et al., 2010 for review). We also found that, although participants overall were fairly positive in their sentiment toward torture, some strongly opposed while others strongly supported these techniques.

Second, it extended the finding that there is a relationship between beliefs about *effectiveness* and beliefs about the *justification* of torture (e.g., Bulman, 2007; Houck et al., 2014), by using measures that more directly assess perceptions of effectiveness and justification of torture. The relationship between effectiveness and justification is supported by Houck and colleagues’ (2013, 2014) finding that people are more likely to perceive torture as effective when presented with a personally relevant scenario (i.e., involving loved ones vs. stranger). Although they measured people’s beliefs about effectiveness, Houck and colleagues presented people with a potential justification rather than measuring justification beliefs. This study assessed participants’ justification beliefs directly by asking them about their agreement with the use of various techniques to elicit information from potential terrorists. The strong correlation between perceptions of effectiveness and perceptions of justification of torture found in this study further supports this finding in the literature.

Third, we developed a scale measuring moral disengagement regarding use of torture for terrorist suspects. The scale had good reliability and predicted all three of our outcome variables (i.e., sentiment toward torture). On the one hand, this is not surprising because a participant who agreed that the waterboarding technique (although not labeled as “torture” in the study) is justified is likely to also agree that torture in general is justified. Humans have a strong need for consistency (with exceptions; Miller, Clark, & Jehle, 2018) and thus it is possible that our findings are the result of consistency needs rather than any real psychological process. However, there is evidence that this moral disengagement scale predicts more than just sentiment toward torture. It also predicts attitudes toward insanity and the postpartum depression legal defenses (Wood, Trescher, McDermott, & Miller, 2017) and support for vigilante justice (McDermott & Miller, 2016). Thus, although the scale measures participants’ moral disengagement related to torture, it has predictive validity to other topics as well.

The fourth purpose of the study was to examine relationships between individual differences (i.e., personal and general just world beliefs, religious fundamentalism, and religious devotionism), moral disengagement, and people's sentiment toward torture (i.e., belief that a technique is considered torture, is effective, and is justified). Overall, hypotheses were supported regarding the relationships between general just world beliefs, moral disengagement, and religious characteristics on all three outcome variables (i.e., sentiment toward torture). Specifically, it was hypothesized—and found—that general just world beliefs, moral disengagement and religious fundamentalism negatively related to participants' agreement that the techniques should be considered torture, but positively related to beliefs about whether the techniques were effective and justified. This pattern was expected for personal belief in a just world, but was nonsignificant for effectiveness and justification scores, and in the opposite direction as predicted for the variable measuring agreement that the technique was considered torture. Further research is needed to determine why general and personal just world beliefs would produce opposite effects on that variable.

Finally, it was hypothesized that religious devotionism would positively relate to whether techniques are considered torture, and negatively relate to justification and effectiveness beliefs; these were partially confirmed. Devotionism was only positively related to agreement that the techniques should be considered torture. Because personal just world beliefs and devotionism each only related to one of the three outcome variables, this might indicate that the effects are spurious. Further study is needed to explore this possibility.

The fifth purpose of the study was to determine whether moral disengagement mediated the relationship between just world beliefs (personal and general) and religious characteristics on people's sentiment toward torture. These hypotheses were partially supported; moral disengagement mediated relationships between general belief in a just world on only the effectiveness and justification outcome variables. Moral disengagement mediated the relationships between religious fundamentalism and all three belief outcome measures, as predicted. This is the first study that we know of to find that moral disengagement helps explain participants' sentiment toward torture and adds to a growing body of research on moral disengagement as a mediator (e.g., Wood et al., 2017; McDermott & Miller, 2016). Understanding *why* individual differences predict punitiveness adds depth to the psychology literature.

Implications

These findings have several important implications for psychology, which suggest more research is needed. The first implication relates to the unexpected finding that *general* just world beliefs (GJWB) relate to people's beliefs regarding all three aspects of sentiment toward torture, whereas *personal* just world beliefs (PBJW) only relate to the consideration of techniques as torture. The positive relationship between PBJW and agreement that the techniques described are considered to be torture suggests that people might use personal just world beliefs (i.e., I am a good person therefore good things happen to me) to assess the fairness of behaviors (e.g., torture) when there is no other reference point to assess justice.

It is possible that because the questions assessing the consideration of techniques as torture did not include a specific target, people thought of themselves as the potential target and subsequently determined these techniques were torture. Furthermore, because questions assessing perceived torture effectiveness or justification explicitly identified terrorist suspects and the targets, people's general (but not personal) just world beliefs informed their judgments. Furthermore, mediation analyses indicated that moral disengagement explains the relationship between general just world beliefs—but not personal just world beliefs—and sentiment toward torture. This suggests that beliefs about justice for others (i.e., GBJW) do relate to moral disengagement, while beliefs about justice for the self (i.e., PBJW) do not relate to moral disengagement. Future studies should further investigate these relationships.

The second implication is for the study of religious characteristics. This study investigated two different religious characteristics. Specifically, religious fundamentalism is the belief that there is one fundamental religion and one set of teachings that should be followed literally (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004), while religious devotionism is the importance of religion to one's life and worldview (Putney & Middleton, 1961). These two characteristics are very different and thus differentially relate to sentiment toward torture. As predicted by previous research (see Bornstein & Miller, 2009 for review), devotionism was related to more negative sentiment toward torture (i.e., that the techniques are considered torture) while fundamentalism was related to more positive sentiment toward torture (i.e., the techniques are not torture and are effective and justified). While this was predicted, what was not predicted is that the outcome variables that related to both of the characteristics were different. Specifically, religious devotionism only related to one DV (i.e., the degree to which people consider techniques to be torture), while religious fundamentalism related to all three aspects of sentiment toward torture (although some relationships became nonsignificant when controlling for moral disengagement). Further, it is interesting that the relationships between religious fundamentalism—but not devotionism—and sentiment toward torture were either partially or fully mediated by moral disengagement. Perhaps fundamentalism is more related to sentiment toward torture because it is a measure of what to believe—and these beliefs are often outlined in the Bible (e.g., a high belief in the Bible's "an eye for an eye" verse relates to greater support for torture). However, devotionism is perhaps less strongly related to sentiment toward torture because it is a measure of how strongly one uses religion in their lives, rather than a measure of what to believe. The degree that a person uses religion in his daily life is only weakly related to sentiment toward torture. This is speculation, however findings do support the notion that these two characteristics are distinct measurements of religious ideology that deserve to be studied further, especially with respect to their relationships to moral disengagement.

Perhaps the biggest implication is in regard to the findings about moral disengagement. It is perhaps no surprise that moral disengagement was related to sentiment toward torture. However, this study uniquely demonstrated that moral disengagement is one explanation for why other individual differences (GBJW and fundamentalism)

are related to sentiment toward torture. The mediation findings revealed the process by which individual differences relate to moral disengagement, and moral disengagement relates to sentiment toward torture. Indeed, when controlling for moral disengagement, the individual differences were much less—or not—related to sentiment toward torture. Thus, it is not that individual differences per se relate to sentiment toward torture, but that they do so *through* moral disengagement. Broadly speaking, this highlights the importance of measuring moral disengagement in studies investigating the relationships between punitiveness and individual differences. These findings can be extended to examine how moral disengagement influences other domains, such as support for the death penalty or jury verdicts.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the use of a college sample. It is possible that individual differences and moral disengagement are different in a community population. For instance, community members might be higher in devotionism than students who might still be exploring whether religion will play a role in their lives. Furthermore, the students were not representative of a nation-wide sample. This is an issue if people from various parts of the U.S. differ in their individual characteristics or propensity to morally disengage.

A second limitation involves the timing of the study. The sample for this study was collected just prior to release of the CIA report in 2015, therefore opinions regarding torture might not be representative of current sentiment toward torture. It is possible that endorsement of torture techniques might have changed since the acknowledgment that the US engaged in these techniques. There have also been numerous terrorist activities since that time, including the shootings in San Bernardino and Orlando; these historical events might also have influenced overall support for such techniques. Although the factors predicting support (e.g., religious characteristics) for torture likely have not changed since the release of the report, future research could demonstrate this—and also measure the degree to which general support has changed.

CONCLUSION

The use of torture has long been an important and controversial issue, but it has been even more hotly debated since the September 11, 2001 attacks (Hope 2004), the Senate's report on the CIA's use of torture (Senate Intelligence Committee Releases CIA Report, 2015), and Donald Trump's recent endorsement of torture (CNN.com, 2016a). Thus, it is worthwhile to measure community sentiment toward these controversial techniques, and how their beliefs are related to their individual differences and propensity to morally disengage. This study replicated previous studies by demonstrating that 1) Americans as a whole moderately support torture (e.g., Gronke et al., 2010), 2) people are quite divided in their beliefs, with some being fairly supportive and others strongly opposing the use of these techniques (Gronke et al., 2010), and 3) there is a positive relationship between beliefs about effectiveness and beliefs about the justification of torture (e.g., Houck et al., 2014). We also developed a moral disengagement scale that has good reliability and

predicts sentiment toward torture (in this study) and other legal issues such as support for the insanity defense (Wood et al., 2017) and vigilante justice (McDermott & Miller, 2016). Most importantly, this study extended the existing research on sentiment toward torture by investigating how belief in a just world, religious characteristics, and moral disengagement relate to people's sentiment toward torture.

Overall, belief in a just world and religious fundamentalism negatively relate to sentiment regarding what types of techniques are considered torture, but positively relate to people's beliefs regarding the effectiveness and justification of torture. Further, many of these relationships are mediated by moral disengagement. Moreover, people high in general just world beliefs or religious fundamentalism tend to morally disengage in order to believe various techniques are not considered torture, and that the techniques are effective and justified. Results advance the understanding of how religious characteristics and just world beliefs relate to punitiveness in this context; future studies should further this line of research. Ultimately, this study produced novel contributions to the study of community sentiment toward torture.

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