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Reports

Social identity and perceptions of torture: It's moral when we do it☆

Mark Tarrant [a,*], Nyla R. Branscombe [b], Ruth H. Warner [c], Dale Weston [d]

[a] Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Exeter, UK
[b] University of Kansas, USA
[c] Saint Louis University, USA
[d] University of Exeter, UK

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined the effects of social identity concerns on the moral justification of torture. British and American nationals read a media report concerning the torture of a terrorist suspect that they were led to believe had been perpetrated either by members of their own nation's security services or by another nation's security services. When the torture was perpetrated by the ingroup, participants described it as more morally justified than when the torture was perpetrated by the other nation's security services. This effect was mediated by participants' decreased empathy for the ingroup's torture victim (Study 1), as well as increased victim blame and perceiving the perpetrators as prototypical of their national group (Study 2). We consider how social identity concerns enable moral justification of harm doing.

Introduction

The governments of Great Britain and the United States are legally committed to international law concerning the use of torture (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Yet, in recent years, details have emerged concerning human rights violations by these governments' security services, most notably during the military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both governments have gone to considerable lengths to deny that they authorize torture, or else to legitimize its use. For example, politicians have attempted to avoid acknowledging responsibility for acts of torture by placing blame for its occurrence on individual perpetrators ("bad apples": e.g., Blair, 2004), and by minimizing the degree of harm caused to torture victims (see Hooks & Mosher, 2005). In the US, the Bush administration sought to legitimize the use of torture by redefining behaviors commonly regarded as torture (e.g., "water-boarding"), and also defending such techniques as necessary for national security (Hooks & Mosher, 2005).

Reports suggesting that a government has approved or authorized the use of torture have the potential to undermine the moral stature of government, and the nation it serves. Because of this, attempts to justify torture are unlikely to be restricted to those who are most closely involved (e.g., military and government leaders), but may also be employed by people across the nation who have played no role in the torture. By virtue of the group membership they share with the perpetrators, reports of torture are likely to be perceived as threatening to social (national) identity, and we argue that this will motivate strategies aimed at offsetting that threat. We consider one such defensive response in the current research by examining people's differential *justification* of torture depending on their relationship to the perpetrators of it. Specifically, we test the hypothesis that when torture is perpetrated by members of their own national (in)group, people will describe that torture as more morally acceptable than when it is perpetrated by members of a group to which they do not belong. We also consider different pathways (e.g., victim empathy and blame; perceptions of perpetrator prototypicality) by which defense of the ingroup's morality is achieved.

Our research builds upon the idea that social group membership structures the ways in which people respond to acts of intergroup harm doing (Miron & Branscombe, 2008). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) holds that group members are motivated to perceive their group in a positive light. Evidence that one's ingroup has harmed another group can undermine this goal and promote identity-protective behaviors amongst group members. When reminded of their group's harmful behavior toward others, ingroup members often shift the standard used to judge the behavior such that more evidence is required to determine that it actually is unjust (Miron, Branscombe, & Biernat, 2010). While acknowledging that one's group has harmed another group is a necessary first step toward experiencing collective guilt and making reparations for the suffering that the harm caused (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002), by shifting standards of justice, guilt and reparations are less likely to

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* Corresponding author at: Peninsula College of Medicine & Dentistry, University of Exeter, Exeter, EX1 2LU, UK.
E-mail address: mark.tarrant@pcmd.ac.uk (M. Tarrant).

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occur. Research on responses to intergroup harm complements work on vicarious dissonance which has shown that ingroup members who engage in deviant behavior create dissonance in fellow group members. Members then seek to reduce their dissonance by changing their attitudes in the direction of the deviant behavior (Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003). More generally, work on the intergroup attribution bias has revealed that group members attempt to explain the negative behavior of individual ingroup members (Islam & Hewstone, 1993) and the ingroup's actions as a whole (Doosje & Branscombe, 2003) in ways that favor the ingroup (see also Bandura, 1990).

Because torture violates widely-held social norms, accusations concerning the ingroup's involvement should be especially likely to elicit identity-protective responses. When the legitimacy of such accusations can be questioned, identity-driven responses include the denial of the harm done and minimizing its severity (Branscombe, 2004). However, when social identity cannot be protected in this way, as is the case in the current research, we suggest that group members may instead seek to defend the *morality* of their nation's behavior. Specifically, we predict that when perceivers' social identity is undermined by being implicated in torture (when the torture is perpetrated by the ingroup nation), people will perceive the torture as more morally justified compared to when social identity is not implicated in this way (when it is perpetrated by another nation). By morally justifying ingroup-perpetrated torture, group members are able to resolve the threat to identity stemming from conflict between the group's claimed adherence to a societal norm (e.g., upholder of international law) and the harmful behaviors in which it has demonstrably engaged.

Explaining moral justification: inhibiting empathy for torture victims

Torture is a highly emotive event, not just for its victims but also for those who are exposed to it through media reports. Many of the reports depicting torture that have been published by the news media—for example, those from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq—depict highly harmful victim experiences. One emotional response that can occur when people are presented with accounts of another's suffering is to empathize with the victim (Batson, 1991; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Gordijn, & Wigboldus, 2002). Empathy reflects a sense of caring for the other, and can promote a positive orientation toward that person and his or her social group (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; see also Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006). However, just as people's appraisals of harmful intergroup behavior are affected by its implications for social identity, so too does social identity structure emotional reactions to harm doing (e.g., Branscombe et al., 2002; Dumont, Yzerbyt, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). Indeed, categorizing victims as outgroup members (rather than ingroup members) has been shown to inhibit empathy for them (Tarrant, Dazeley, & Cottom, 2009).

In the current research, we expect this bias against empathizing with harmed outgroup members to be especially pronounced when the ingroup has perpetrated the harm. That is, we suggest that people's experience of empathy for a torture victim will depend upon who is regarded as responsible for the torture: torture perpetrated by the ingroup is expected to lead to an *inhibition* of empathy for the victim compared to when the harm is perpetrated by another group. Because empathy reflects a degree of caring for another's welfare, avoiding empathy for an ingroup's torture victim (when social identity is undermined) may serve to morally exclude the victim, placing him or her "outside the boundary in which moral values apply" (Opotow, 1990, p. 1). As such, empathy avoidance may lessen the application of moral standards that would otherwise structure people's responses to torture (see Haidt, 2001; Nordgren, McDonnell, & Loewenstein, 2011). Specifically, if being confronted with an ingroup's torture victim inhibits empathic concern for that victim, then the torture may not be seen as morally wrong. In other words, the effect of perpetrator group membership on the moral justification of torture may be mediated by lessened feelings of empathy for the ingroup's victim.

Overview of the studies

Two studies examined people's reactions to an event depicting the torture of a terrorist suspect that was perpetrated by either their ingroup's national security services or by another nation's security services. We examined empathy as a mediator of the hypothesized effect of perpetrator group membership on justification of torture. In Study 2, we sought additional evidence for our prediction that the differential responses to torture reflect concerns about social identity, and we investigated two further mediating mechanisms by which the ingroup's morality might be defended: attributions of blame to the victim and perceptions of the prototypicality of the perpetrators.

Study 1

Method

Participants and design

British citizens ($N = 42$; 16 males, 26 females; M age = 20.07, $SD = 1.26$) from a university in the UK were randomly assigned to read an excerpt of a newspaper article depicting an instance of torture in which the ingroup was implicated (or another group was implicated) as perpetrators.

Materials and procedure

Before being accepted to the study, participants were asked to confirm their nationality. A page header on the participant information sheet and at the top of the article was further used to raise the salience of participants' national identity by emphasizing that the study was about "British people's" reactions to torture. Participants first read an excerpt of a newspaper article about a suspected terrorist (an Ethiopian national). The content of the article was adapted from actual media reports and presented detailed information about the torture the target experienced, including the claim that he had been held "in cruel and inhuman conditions and subjected to prolonged and brutal torture, including the repeated slashing of his genitals with a razor blade." The article also stated that the High Court had strong evidence in support of the target's claims that he had been tortured by British (ingroup) security services or by American security services.

After reading the article, participants completed a questionnaire containing the dependent measures. Empathy for the target was assessed with the eight items of Batson et al. (1997: e.g., sympathy, compassionate, understanding; 1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; $\alpha = .91$). *Moral justification* of the torture was assessed with four items (e.g., "To what extent did the torture violate a moral standard" (reverse-scored), "To what extent do you think the torture was justified?": 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*; $\alpha = .83$). An item was also included to check on participants' perceptions of the veracity of the torture: participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they believed the target was actually tortured while in custody (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely).

Results

Participants generally agreed that the target had been tortured (M = 4.50, SD = .94). Responses to this item did not depend upon the group membership of the perpetrators, $t(40) = .32$, $p = .75$; therefore, participants did not employ the strategy of *denying* the harm doing in response to being implicated in the torture. As

expected, participants perceived the torture of the target to be significantly more morally justified when it was perpetrated by members of the British security services than when it was perpetrated by members of the US security services, $t(40) = 2.11$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$: M = 2.92 (SD = 1.23) and M = 2.16 (SD = 1.08) respectively. Empathy for the target was also influenced by the group membership of the perpetrators: as predicted, participants empathized significantly less with the target when the perpetrators belonged to the British security services (M = 2.55, SD = 1.00) than when the perpetrators belonged to the US security services (M = 3.85, SD = .97), $t(40) = 4.25$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$.

A bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008) was used to test whether participants' empathy for the target mediated the effect of perpetrator group membership on moral justification. There was a significant effect of perpetrator group membership on moral justification of the torture (b = −.84, $t(38)) = -2.25$, $p = .03$) and on the mediator, empathy (b = 1.39, $t(38) = 4.31$, $p < .01$). There was also a significant relationship between empathy and moral justification, with greater empathy being associated with lower perceptions of the morality of the torture (b = −.45, $t(40) = 3.15$, $p < .01$). When perpetrator group membership and empathy were entered into the equation simultaneously, the direct effect of perpetrator group membership on morality perceptions was rendered nonsignificant (b = −.30, $t(38) = -.69$, $p = .50$), while the relationship between empathy and moral justification remained significant (b = −.39, $t(38) = -2.13$, $p = .04$). The indirect effect was significant, as the bias-corrected confidence interval did not include zero (95% CI −1.32, −.05). Thus, empathy for the target significantly mediated the effect of perpetrator group on moral justification of torture.

We also tested a reverse-mediation model in which the effects of perpetrator group membership on empathy were mediated by perceptions of the morality of the torture. There was no support for this alternative model: the effect of perpetrator group membership on empathy remained significant when perceptions of morality were included in the equation, b = 1.15, $t(38) = 3.49$, $p < .01$ (95% CI −.001, .72). This analysis is consistent with the hypothesis that it is reduced empathy for the ingroup's victims that increases people's moral justification of torture, rather than their moral justification determining the extent to which empathy is experienced.

Discussion

Study 1 provides evidence that people's perceptions of torture are fundamentally tied to the meaning it has for them as group members. Participants adjusted their perceptions of the morality of torture depending upon who they perceived to be responsible for it. When the torture was perpetrated by members of the ingroup (i.e., when social identity was implicated), participants claimed that the torture was more morally justified than when it was perpetrated by members of another group (i.e., when social identity was not implicated). These differing responses to the torture were found to be driven by participants' lower empathy for the victim.

As well as further testing our predictions, Study 2 aimed to rule out an alternative explanation of the results based on the US and Britain's respective contributions to the "war on terror". Specifically, it is possible that the stronger justification of the British security service's involvement in the torture, and lessened empathy for the torture victim, reflected participants' awareness of the widely recognized leading role of the US in the conflict. In other words, participants' differential responses to the torture may have been driven by recognition of these nations' unequal contributions to the military operation rather than by concerns about protecting social identity. To rule out this possibility, Study 2 focused on members of a different national group: participants were Americans responding to torture perpetrated either by US security services (ingroup) or British security services. If the effects in Study 1 were driven by social identity concerns as we argue, then we should see greater moral justification for US-perpetrated torture in Study 2. Study 2 also included a measure of social identity threat. If exposure to information about an ingroup's involvement in torture threatens social identity, participants should perceive their group as likely to feel more threatened in this condition compared to when the torture is perpetrated by another group.

While Study 1 showed significant mediation of the perpetrator group membership effect on moral justification via empathy for the target, the beta value for the direct effect when the mediator was included in the equation, while nonsignificant, was not zero (b = −.30). This suggests that there are potentially other processes that might account for additional variance in the effect. In addition to examining the role of empathy in structuring responses to torture, Study 2 therefore considered two additional means by which people can justify their groups' harmful actions. Opotow's (1990) work on morality judgments considers how perpetrators of harm attempt to disengage from their actions by morally excluding their victims—a process that enables group members to meet their identity needs (see Haslam, 2006). Moral exclusion can be achieved through a process of defensive victim blaming—attributing responsibility for negative outcomes to victims (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1966; Staub, 1989, 1996). Blaming an ingroup's torture victim for his or her negative experiences should enable group members to preserve their beliefs about the group's morality. We tested the role of victim blaming in Study 2 by examining whether people assign greater blame to an ingroup's torture victim than to another group's victim. We reasoned that blaming the ingroup's victim may be a strategy that group members employ to justify their group's harmful actions.

Another strategy we investigated concerned participants' perceptions of the perpetrators of torture. One reaction to knowledge that ingroup members have tortured others might be to distance those perpetrators from the ingroup as a whole and to present them as unrepresentative of the ingroup (Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001). Indeed, this has been a strategy pursued by politicians following reports of prisoner abuse (e.g., Blair, 2004; Hooks & Mosher, 2005). However, because of the reported scope of prisoner abuse by members of the US and British security services in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, depicting torture as the actions of deviant *individuals* within the group lacks credibility and therefore may be ineffective in protecting social identity (Hooks & Mosher, 2005). Consistent with this suggestion, several studies have demonstrated that rather than distancing individual norm violators from the ingroup, group members often go out of their way to *defend* their behavior (De Cremer & Vanbeselaere, 1999; Tarrant & North, 2004; also Jetten, Iyer, Hutchison, & Hornsey, 2011), and respond to social identity threats by reporting stronger perceptions of ingroup homogeneity (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Hutchison, Jetten, Christian, & Haycraft, 2006). Reflecting this, therefore, knowledge that ingroup members have tortured others might actually encourage stronger perceptions of those perpetrators as representative, or prototypical, of the ingroup. Such perceptions could in turn motivate ingroup members to morally justify their group's harmful actions.

Study 2

Method

Participants and design

American undergraduates ($N = 105$; 44 males; 60 females; 1 unspecified; M age = 19.20, $SD = 2.18$) participated in return for course credit. All participants confirmed that they were US citizens. As in Study 1, participants read of an instance of torture and the group membership of the perpetrators was varied.

Materials and procedure

Following Study 1, page headers emphasized that the study was about the ingroup's ("American people's") reactions to torture. Participants read the newspaper article from Study 1, with the perpetrators belonging to the US security services (social identity implicated) or British security services (social identity not implicated). The same eight items from Study 1 were used to assess participants' *empathy* for the target ($\alpha = .95$). Four items assessed participants' attributions of *blame* to the target for his experiences (e.g., "To what extent can he be blamed for the way he was treated while in custody?", "To what extent is he responsible for the way he was treated while in custody?": 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .85$). Perceived *prototypicality* of the perpetrators was assessed with four items (e.g., "To what extent do you perceive the American [British] service personnel who tortured him as representative of Americans [British people]?", "To what extent do you regard the American [British] service personnel who tortured him as typically American [British]?": 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .86$). A factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded a three-factor solution when all of the items making up the three mediator scales were included (total variance explained = 74%; all factor loadings >.60). Items on the empathy, victim blame and perpetrator prototypicality scales loaded on separate factors: therefore, the three mediator measures are empirically distinguishable. The scales were not redundant with each other (average $r = .24$).

Participants' *moral justification* of the torture was assessed with a six-item scale, comprising the four items from Study 1 and two new items (e.g., "To what extent was the torture immoral?": 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .90$). Participants also reported the extent to which they agreed that torture actually happened, using the same item from Study 1 (1 = *disagree*, 7 = *agree*). Finally, perceptions of *social identity threat* were assessed with seven items. Because people might be reluctant to explicitly acknowledge that they feel threatened (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Schiffhauer, 2007), we asked participants to report the degree to which they thought Americans in general might experience each of seven emotion items in response to the newspaper article (e.g., distressed, threatened, defensive: 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .87$).

Results

Preliminary analyses

As in Study 1, participants generally agreed that the target had actually been tortured while in custody ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.58$), and responses to this item did not differ by perpetrator group membership, $t(103) = .05$, $p = .964$: thus, participants did not appear to be *denying* the harm doing in response to being implicated in the torture. Confirming our assertion that being implicated in torture undermines social identity, participants perceived torture as more threatening to social identity when the perpetrators were American ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.23$) compared to when the perpetrators were British ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.15$; $t(99) = 2.05$, $p = .043$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$).

Main analysis

Replicating Study 1, there was a significant effect of perpetrator group on the moral justification of the torture, $t(103) = 3.02$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .081$. As shown in Table 1, participants believed that the torture was more morally justified when it was perpetrated by members of the ingroup (US) security services compared to when it was perpetrated by members of the British security services. Effects of perpetrator group membership on each of the three possible mediators were also significant: participants experienced lower levels of empathy for the torture victim, blamed the victim more, and perceived the perpetrators as more prototypical of their national group when the perpetrators were members of the US security services compared to when they belonged to the British security services.

Table 1
Effects of perpetrator group membership on participants' responses to torture (Experiment 2).

	American perpetrator mean (SD)	British perpetrator mean (SD)	*t*	*df*	*p*	η_p^2
Justification	3.08 (1.38)	2.32 (1.19)	3.02	103	.003	.081
Empathy	2.88 (1.33)	3.77 (1.42)	3.33	103	.001	.097
Victim blame	3.92 (1.51)	2.95 (1.30)	3.50	101	.001	.108
Prototypicality of perpetrators	3.37 (1.11)	2.68 (1.25)	2.96	102	.004	.079

A multiple mediation model (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was tested to determine whether the effects of perpetrator group membership on participants' torture justifications were mediated by the three mediator variables. Perpetrator group significantly predicted moral justification of torture ($b = -.35$, $t(101) = -2.75$, $p = .007$). When the three mediators were included in the model, the effect of perpetrator group on moral justification of torture became nonsignificant ($b = .06$, $t(101) = .63$, $p = .53$). The 95% CI for the overall indirect effect was −.63, −.22, which did not include zero, indicating that the overall indirect effect was significant.

Analysis of the specific indirect effect of each of the three mediators revealed an effect of perpetrator group on empathy ($b = .44$, $t(101) = 3.21$, $p = .001$), victim blame ($b = -.49$, $t(101) = -3.48$ $p < .001$), and perpetrator prototypicality ($b = -.32$, $t(101) = -2.74$ $p = .01$). Empathy significantly predicted moral justification of torture ($b = -.23$, $t(101) = -3.24$, $p < .03$), as did victim blame ($b = .49$, $t(101) = 6.84$, $p < .001$), and perpetrator prototypicality ($b = .22$, $t(101) = 2.78$, $p < .01$). Empathy (95% CI = −.24, −.04), victim blame (95% CI = −.41, −.10), and prototypicality (95% CI = −.19, −.01) all significantly mediated the effect of perpetrator group on moral justification of torture.

Discussion

Using a different participant national group, Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 and again showed that people's moral justification of torture differs depending on whether social identity is implicated in the harm doing or not. US participants reported stronger justification of torture perpetrated by ingroup members (US service personnel) than that perpetrated by members of another group (British service personnel). As in Study 1, the effect of perpetrator group membership on moral justification was mediated by reduced empathy for the ingroup's victims. Extending Study 1, two additional variables played a mediating role in participants' justification perceptions: when social identity was implicated in the torture, participants attributed greater blame to the victim for his experiences and perceived the perpetrators as more prototypical of their national group, compared to when social identity was not implicated in the torture. Indeed, inclusion of all three mediators in the model rendered the beta value for the effect of perpetrator group membership on moral justification almost zero ($b = .06$).

General discussion

This research examined group members' responses to knowledge that their ingroup is implicated in a particularly severe form of harm doing: torture. While torture is a clear violation of human rights, the findings from this research demonstrate that torture is more likely to be justified when it has implications for people's social identity. Reminders of an ingroup's involvement in torture undermines the integrity of the group and group members respond to this threat in ways that help them to restore positive social identity. Across two studies, we demonstrated that group members respond to such

reminders by claiming that torture perpetrated by an ingroup is more morally justified than is torture perpetrated by another group.

Past research has shown that when the harmful actions of ingroup members can be downplayed, social identity can be protected by denying the severity of the harm, or denying the harm itself (Branscombe, 2004; Miron et al., 2010). In the current research, participants were informed that the High Court had established strong evidence confirming that the torture had actually happened, thereby making it difficult for them to question its veracity. Indeed, our participants did not attempt to deny their group's responsibility for the torture and there were no effects of perpetrator group membership on participants' beliefs about whether or not the torture had actually happened. Despite this, participants were able to uphold the integrity of the ingroup by claiming that its behavior was more *morally justified* than the very same behavior perpetrated by another group. We believe our research is the first to show differences in group members' morality perceptions when confronted with such clear violations of human rights.

This research also provides evidence for the different psychological mechanisms by which people morally justify their group's involvement in torture. First, the studies showed that judgments about the morality of torture are driven in part by perceivers' feelings of empathy for victims. This finding supports Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model that argues that moral judgments are an outcome of moral intuitions—including affective responses. However, our research demonstrates that empathy is itself shaped by social identity concerns. Specifically, our studies show that empathy for an outgroup torture victim is experienced less strongly when the ingroup is implicated in the torture compared to when the torture is perpetrated by another group. Because empathy reflects concern for another's welfare (Batson et al., 2002), empathizing with victims of ingroup-perpetrated torture might prompt acknowledgment that the ingroup has behaved illegitimately (see also Miron et al., 2006). Since such an acknowledgment would further undermine social identity, limiting empathy for those victims enables group members to maintain their belief in the ingroup's morality—and interpret its actions as justified.

Second, Study 2 identified additional processes by which ingroup members morally justify their group's involvement in torture—by attributing greater blame to the ingroup's victim and by portraying the perpetrators as more prototypical of the ingroup. Even when doubts about the veracity of an event cannot be raised, group members have been shown to protect their social identity by distancing the ingroup perpetrators of harm from the ingroup (Jetten et al., 2011; Marques et al., 2001). However, the scope of such abuses reported in the media around the time of the current research likely made it difficult for our participants to distance the ingroup perpetrators in this way (see Hooks & Mosher, 2005). In fact, early in his tenure as US president, Barack Obama released secret documents that detailed the interrogation techniques sanctioned by the CIA, thereby establishing that individual service personnel who performed such duties could not easily be portrayed as "rogue individuals" (MacAskill, 2009). The current findings suggest that, while acknowledging its veracity, participants sought other ways of justifying the ingroup's behavior. By portraying the ingroup perpetrators as more prototypical of the ingroup—in effect, bringing them under the ingroup "umbrella"—and attributing greater blame to the ingroup's victims, participants' responses to the torture can be seen as driven by strategic concerns about protecting social identity.

Of course, it is possible that the pro-ingroup morality bias shown here in response to torture could be moderated by important features of the social context. In this research, the torture victim had not engaged in activities that explicitly affected the ingroup nation: while the victim was depicted as a terrorist suspect, he was not said to be involved in perpetrating terrorist attacks against Britain or the US. We might expect stronger legitimization of the ingroup's harmful behavior to emerge if the ingroup was more directly under threat (for example, if the torture victim had traveled to Britain or the US with intentions to conduct terrorist attacks). Indeed, prior research has shown that believing one's group is a target of a terrorist attack is an important determinant of emotional responses. Dumont et al. (2003) examined Europeans' reactions to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US. When participants self-categorized in terms of a social identity that included themselves and Americans as part of the ingroup (i.e., as "Westerners"), fear was higher and a stronger interest in receiving information about possible retaliatory intervention was expressed than when the salient self-category excluded the victims from the ingroup (i.e., Europeans versus Americans). On this basis, we might expect that people's justification of the use of torture would be even stronger when they feel that their group is directly threatened.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the ingroup's role in harm doing is an important first step toward apology and reparation (Branscombe & Cronin, 2010). However, precisely because standards of justice are not fixed, group members are able to legitimize harm caused by the ingroup and this undermines reparation intentions and can have negative consequences for intergroup relations (Branscombe & Miron, 2004). Even when it is clear that ingroup harm doing has occurred and when the harm violates human rights and international law, as is the case with torture, group members can pursue strategies to protect their social identity. By limiting their empathy for, and attributing blame to, the ingroup's victims, and by strengthening the association between the perpetrators and the ingroup, group members in effect shift the standard of injustice by which torture is evaluated. In doing so, group members are able to portray the ingroup's behavior as morally justified. And when this happens, support for reparative actions that lead to justice for victims is unlikely to be observed.

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