Short Communication

What makes authoritarian and socially dominant people more positive to using torture in the war on terrorism?

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ABSTRACT

Both right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and the dominance facet of social dominance orientation (SDO-D) are related to positive attitudes towards torture in a war context. We investigated whether dehumanization of Muslims and identification with Swedes as an in-group served as mediators of these relationships. Employing a student and a military sample we found that the relationship between RWA, SDO-D and torture was completely mediated by dehumanization. In-group identification added to the model by partially mediating RWA and the equalization facet of social dominance orientation (SDO-E). The relationship between SDO-D and torture was weaker in the military sample, which also scored higher than the student sample on all variables. It is argued that the mediating effect of dehumanization on RWA and SDO-D might be understood as authoritarians and social dominators feeling lower empathy towards dehumanized out-groups and that research on the relationship between RWA, SDO and abuse in a war context should preferably be conducted on relevant groups (such as soldiers).

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1. Introduction

Soldier abusing or torturing enemy prisoners is a problem in modern warfare despite being forbidden by humanitarian laws. Two individual difference factors have been suggested as risk-factors of such abuse (Fiske, Harris, & Cuddy, 2004); right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO). High RWA is characterized by a proneness to accept violent behaviors when sanctioned by an authority and to be submissive towards authorities (Altemeyer, 1998). High SDO is characterized by a support of group-based hierarchies and the right of superior groups to dominate inferior groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). There is evidence that both factors are related to dispositional aggression (Carnahan & McFarland, 2007) as well as abusive behaviors and attitudes (RWA; Dambrun & Vatiné, 2010, SDO; Kteily, Cotterill, Sidanius, Sheehy-Skeffington, & Bergh, 2014).

Recently, it has been suggested that SDO can be divided into two separate but related constructs; SDO-Dominance (SDO-D) and SDO-Egalitarianism (SDO-E). The former concerns the preference for some groups to dominate others while the latter concerns non-egalitarian intergroup relations (Ho et al., 2015). Previous findings support the view of SDO-D being the central factor of abusive attitudes and behavior (Ho et al., 2015).

In a military torture context, Larsson, Björklund, and Bäckström (2012) found that RWA and SDO-D, but not SDO-E, were related to legitimization of and hypothetical self-involvement in torture of enemy prisoners. Similarly, Ho et al. (2015) found that SDO-D but not SDO-E was related to a positive attitude towards using torture in a terrorist and law-enforcement context. Although these findings go in line with RWA and SDO-D being risk-factors of torture, no conclusions could be drawn from these studies regarding what factors mediate the relationships. The present study attempts to test a mediation model, and to account for the relationships between RWA, SDO and torture attitudes. Based on prior research we suggest two potential mediators; dehumanization and in-group identification.

Dehumanization, a variable related to both RWA (Motyl, Hart, & Pyszczynski, 2010) and SDO (Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008), has been identified as a risk factor of abuse (Zimbardo, 2008) and increased willingness to torture Muslim prisoners of war (Viki, Osgood, & Philips, 2013). Moreover, dehumanization mediates the relationship between SDO and approval of war as a political intervention (Jackson & Gaertner, 2010). Since common themes in research on dehumanization have been that it is a pre-condition for violence, that it involves extreme negative evaluations of out-groups and that it serves intergroup-functions such as dominating others (Haslam, 2006) it seems reasonable to predict that it mediates some of the variability of SDO and RWA on torture attitudes. As for in-group identification, a variable which is related to SDO-D (Jost & Thompson, 2000), it too has been identified as a risk-factor of abuse in a military context (Castano,

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and group comparisons.

Variable	All participants		Students		Military		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	t
RWA	51.83	10.70	46.49	10.70	57.04	8.41	−7.13
SDO-D	24.13	9.67	21.12	8.65	27.07	9.75	−4.08
SDO-E	17.99	7.98	15.21	7.55	20.70	7.49	−4.60
Dehumanization	20.23	8.07	17.05	7.90	23.33	7.00	−5.33
In-group identification	27.01	5.18	25.10	5.40	28.89	4.19	−4.98
Torture	2.22	1.15	1.80	0.99	2.64	1.15	−4.93

Note: all group comparisons are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 2
Pearson correlations between all variables of the study.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. RWA	–	.47	.53	.64	.44	.45
2. SDO-D		–	.59	.52	.39	.38
3. SDO-E			–	.46	.43	.38
4. Dehumanization				–	.37	.58
5. In-group identification					–	.40
6. Torture						–

Note: all correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

Leidner, & Slawuta, 2008). It appears that no study has investigated whether in-group identification mediates the variability of SDO or RWA with regard to torture related variables. We expected that RWA and SDO-D would predict a more positive view of using torture in the war on terrorism but that these relationships would be mediated by dehumanization and in-group identification. There was no hypothesis regarding SDO-E and in-group identification. To gain higher validity the study was conducted using both a student and a military sample. Given the overall increased level of RWA and SDO in soldiers (RWA: Kurpius & Lucart, 2000; SDO; Nicol, Charbonneau, & Boies, 2007) we predicted that the mean levels of all variables would be higher in the military sample.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

There were 160 participants (53 women; 107 men; age $M = 25.30$; $SD = 5.64$). 79 of them were undergraduate students at Lund University. 81 were soldiers from a mechanized infantry unit, mainly squad-leaders in training.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Social dominance orientation

The Social Dominance Scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) was used. It has 16 items, 8 of which capture SDO-Dominance (e.g. "*To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups*") and eight SDO-Egalitarianism (e.g. "*We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups*" reverse coded). Responses are made on a 7-grade scale ranging from "1 = Very negative" to "7 = Very positive". Cronbach's alpha was .88 for SDO-Dominance and .90 for SDO-Egalitarianism, indicating good internal reliability for both scales.

2.2.2. Right-wing authoritarianism

The 15-item short right-wing authoritarianism scale (Zakrisson, 2005) was used. It included items as "*Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today.*" and "*Facts show that we have to be harder against crime and sexual immorality, in order to uphold law and order.*". The response scale was the same as for SDO. Cronbach's alpha was .77 indicating an acceptable internal reliability.

2.2.3. Dehumanization

The 6 item measure of dehumanization from Jackson and Gaertner (2010) was used. Examples of items included in the scale are "*Enemy rulers and their followers are no better than animals*", "*Terrorists do not deserve to be treated like humans*" and "*Terrorists are vermin that need to be exterminated*". The response scale was the same as for SDO and RWA. Cronbach's alpha was .87, indicating good reliability.

2.2.4. In-group identification

Identification with Swedes was assessed by an adaptation of a 5-item measure from Gatto, Dambrum, Kerbrat, & de Oliviera (2010). The items were "*I identify strongly with Sweden and other Swedes*", "*Swedes as a group is very important for me*", "*I feel strongly connected to other Swedes*", "*I am happy to consider myself a Swedish citizen*" and "*I feel close to other Swedes*". The response scale was the same as for the previous measures. Cronbach's Alpha was .87.

2.2.5. Torture

Attitudes towards the use of torture were assessed by an item from the fourth Mental Health Advisory Team's survey (MHAT-IV, Mental Health Advisory Team, 2006), a large health survey issued by the United States Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07. It contained a part assessing the soldiers' attitudes regarding the treatment of insurgents and non-combatants. The item used was "*Torture should be allowed if it will save the life of a soldier/marine*" (changed here to "a Swedish soldier"). Ratings were made on a 5-point scale ranging from "1 = Strongly disagree" to "5 = Strongly agree".

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

A frequency analysis of the torture item (one missing value) showed that 97 (61%) of the participants disagreed to allowing torture. 39 (25%) were neutral and 23 (15%) agreed to allowing torture. As expected, the military sample scored higher on all variables of the study (Table 1). All variables of the study were also positively intercorrelated (Table 2).

3.2. Path-analysis

We used a path-analysis (Mplus 7.11, Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to investigate the mediating power of dehumanization and in-group identification on RWA, SDO-D and SDO-E. Since some variables did not have a normal distribution we used Robust Maximum Likelihood to estimate the model (MLR in MPlus). We report standardized indirect effects as estimated by the Mplus program.[1] The final model (Fig. 1) included all significant relations, the others were deleted from the model. The model fit very well to the data, $\chi^2(6) = 4.914$, $p > 0.05$. As can be seen, the indirect effect from RWA to the torture index was strongest for dehumanization, Ind. Beta = 0.253, 95% CI[0.155, 0.353], but was also significant for SDO-D. Ind. Beta = 0.142, 95% CI[0.060, 0.225]. This clearly supports the hypothesis that dehumanization mediates the relation between RWA and SDO-D to torture acceptance. The indirect effects through in-group identification were weaker, but both RWA, Ind. Beta = 0.062, 96% CI [0.0008, 0.116] and SDO-E Ind. Beta = 0.060, 95% CI [0.007, 0.114]) had significant indirect effects. This suggests that also in-group identification mediates the relation between RWA and SDO to torture acceptance. Altogether the model fit indicates that dehumanization and in-group identification completely mediated the

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[1] E.g. the indirect path from RWA to torture over dehumanization consists of the raw weight for RWA to dehumanization multiplied by the raw weight from dehumanization to torture. The reported index is the standardized result as estimated by MPlus.
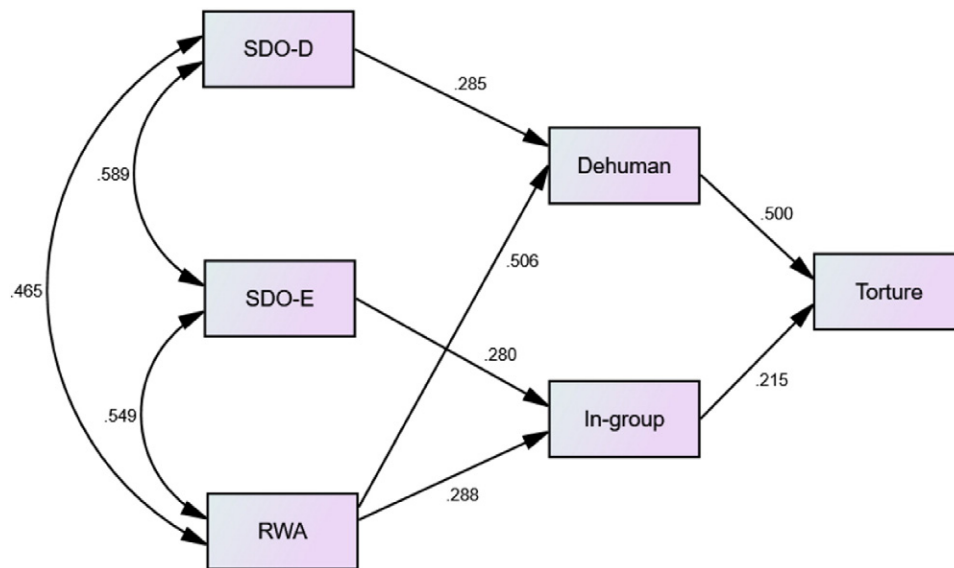
Fig. 1. Path model of how the mediators (dehumanization and in-group identification) relate to SDO and RWA with regard to torture acceptance.

relations between SDO and RWA to the torture variable (the direct paths from SDO and RWA in the model were not significant).

The invariance of the paths between the student and the military sample was also tested, and found to be significant, Santora Bentler $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 18.75$, $p < .01$. We tested if the fit was increased when the equality of a path was freed. It was found that the relation between dehumanization and SDO-D, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 5.67$, $p < .01$ and between in-group identification and SDO-E, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 7.00$, $p < .01$ contributed to the difference between the two groups. The relation between dehumanization and SDO-D was significant in the student sample ($\beta = .425$) but not in the military sample ($\beta = 0.172$), and the relation between ingroup identification and SDO-E was significant in the student sample ($\beta = .399$) but not in the military sample ($\beta = .121$).

4. Discussion

Previous research has shown that RWA and SDO-D are related to legitimization and self-involvement in torture of enemy prisoners (Larsson et al., 2012). Likewise, SDO-D has been related to positive attitudes towards using torture in a terrorist and law-enforcement context (Ho et al., 2015). The present study adds to the prior findings by showing that dehumanization and in-group identification, two variables that also have been identified as risk-factors of military abuse, are possible mediators of that relationship. Dehumanization was the more important mediating variable, regardless of whether the respondents were students or military, but in-group identification contributed beyond it, in the prediction of torture attitudes.

Concerning the specific paths, it was found that SDO-D was mediated by dehumanization while SDO-E was mediated by in-group identification. RWA was mediated by both variables, although more strongly to dehumanization. These findings fully support our first prediction. We also found that the military group had higher values on all variables investigated. Thus, our second prediction was supported too. The relationship between SDO-D, dehumanization and torture was stronger in the student sample than in the military sample, implicating that the importance of a given risk-factor may differ with regard to the sample investigated. Based on our finding, authoritarianism seems to be a more important factor for soldiers' motivation to torture terrorists than social dominance. This underscores the limitation of relying exclusively on student samples when investigating behavior that is likely performed by other groups in society. Summing up, dehumanization is arguably an important factor for understanding why authoritarian and socially

dominant people advocate the use of torture in the war on terrorism. Moreover, the mediating role of dehumanization may give an important clue to the underlying mechanism behind the previously found relationship between RWA and SDO-D. Whether that is caused by other factors such as low empathy should be a focus for future research.

Although our results provide important clues to the understanding of risk-factors of torture during war, some limitations must be noted. First, the use of a cross-sectional design makes it difficult to draw conclusions regarding causality. Second, we made assumptions regarding what factors should be conceived of as preceding others, but cannot verify that they hold. For example, it is possible that in-group identification should have been placed alongside with SDO and RWA rather than as a mediator. Third, our dependent measure specifically concerned torture of an enemy in order to save the life of a person from the in-group. It does not refer to other situations where torture may occur or to attitudes towards abuse in general. Apart from these shortcomings, the measure has merit in that it refers to a type of situation that actually occurs in armored conflicts, where soldiers may face the moral dilemma of whether or not to inflict pain on another human being in order to try and save other people. Since it is particularly soldiers who are likely to find themselves in this situation, it is a strength of the current study that the sample contained soldiers. It increases the possibilities of generalizing the results to a real-life context. Fourth, although we found that dehumanization plays an important mediating role regarding the relationships between RWA, SDO-D and torture attitudes and that in-group identification matters too, there may of course be a common factor which explains the variance in both, and then function as a single mediator. Whether this is the case or not has to be settled in future research.

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