

Dehumanization and Proclivity to Torture

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Dehumanization and self-reported proclivity to torture prisoners of war

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## Abstract

Several authors have argued that dehumanization may be the psychological process that underlies people's willingness to torture outgroup members. In the current research, we directly examined this question among Christian participants, with Muslims as the target outgroup. Across two studies, we found that to the extent that Christians dehumanized Muslims, they were more likely to self-report the willingness to torture Muslim prisoners of war. We also found that perceiving Muslims as a threat moderated the relationship between dehumanization and the self-reported proclivity to torture. These findings support the propositions made by previous authors on the role of dehumanization in torture, war and genocide.

**Key Words:** Dehumanization, Torture, Violence, War, Ingroup, Outgroup

The horrifying images of the torture of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq shocked the world (Taguba, 2004). Recent empirical research has shown that people tend to view outgroups as being less human than their ingroup (Leyens et al., 2001). The link between such dehumanization and violence against outgroups has been written about extensively (e.g. Bandura, 1990; Bar-Tal, 1990; Opatow, 1990; Staub, 2005). However, we are not aware of any research that has examined the link between dehumanization and people's willingness to torture outgroup members. The current research was conducted as the first to directly explore this link with empirical data.

#### Dehumanization and Its Consequences

Contemporary researchers have conceptualized dehumanization in several ways. Harris and Fiske (2006) identify a biological basis for dehumanization that involves the deactivation of the brain region that is responsible for attributing mental states to other people (i.e. the medial prefrontal cortex). Haslam (2006) identifies two types of dehumanization; *animalistic dehumanization*, which is the denial of *uniquely human attributes* (e.g. refinement and moral sensibility); and *mechanistic dehumanization*, which is the denial of *human nature* (e.g. interpersonal warmth and cognitive openness). Animalistic dehumanization at the intergroup level resembles *infracumanization*, which is the attribution of more uniquely human emotions to the ingroup versus the outgroup (Leyens et al., 2001). Viki et al. (2006) also developed a measure of intergroup animalistic dehumanization in which participants assign human-related words (e.g., person, humanity, man), and animal-related words (e.g., pet, creature, feral) to ingroups and outgroups. The words used in this measure were initially equated for valence in a

pilot study. Viki et al. (2006) found that human-related words were considered as being more typical for the ingroup than the outgroup.

Researchers have also begun to explore the consequences of dehumanization (e.g. Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006). Cuddy, Rock and Norton (2007) found that the less people attributed secondary emotions to outgroup victims of Hurricane Katrina, the less willing they were to help them. In Northern Ireland, Tam et al. (2007) found that dehumanization led to decreases in the willingness to forgive outgroup members. Zebel, Zimmermann, Viki and Doosje (2008) found that to the extent that Dutch people dehumanized Muslims, they were less likely to feel guilty when they read about the negative role Dutch soldiers played in the massacre at Srebrenica. All this research shows that dehumanization is related to several negative outcomes for intergroup relations.

#### The Current Research

The current studies directly examined the role of dehumanization in Christian participants' self-reported proclivity to torture Muslim prisoners. As noted earlier, the connection between dehumanization and torture has been written about by several authors (e.g. Staub, 2005). These authors have argued that dehumanization may result in the exclusion of certain people from the boundaries of moral treatment (e.g. Opatow, 1990). Such exclusion may make torture seem justified and less emotionally distressing (Harris & Fiske, 2011). Recent research by Waytz and Epley (2012) found that individuals who felt socially connected were more likely to dehumanize distant others and also to recommend the harsh treatment of terrorist detainees. However, Waytz and Epley (2012) did not directly ask participants to indicate their own willingness to engage in abusive behaviour against the terrorist detainees. As far as we are aware, there has

been no research that has directly examined this hypothesised connection between dehumanization and the willingness to torture outgroup members.

Our studies were conducted as a first step in making an empirical contribution to this question. In Study 1, we experimentally manipulated the perceived humanity of Muslims (high vs. low). Participants were then presented with images of the Abu Ghraib incident and asked to indicate the likelihood that they would behave like the soldiers. We predicted that participants in the low (vs. high) humanity condition would report a higher level of proclivity to torture (*Hypothesis 1*). In Study 2, we measured participants' own ratings of Muslim humanity and its relationship with the proclivity to torture. We predicted that Christian participants would dehumanize Muslims (*Hypothesis 2*). We also predicted that the more Christians dehumanized Muslims, the higher the proclivity to torture they would self-report (*Hypothesis 3*). In this study, we also examined the moderating role of perceiving Muslims as a threat. We expected a significant interaction between dehumanization and threat in predicting the proclivity to torture; such that the connection between dehumanization and the proclivity to torture would be strongest among individuals who perceive Muslims to be a threat (*Hypothesis 4*).

## Study 1

### Method

#### *Participants, Materials and Procedure*

Sixty-eight Christian participants took part in this study (36 females; *mean age* = 21.38 years, *SD* = 2.92). Some participants took part in exchange for course credit, whereas others participated voluntarily. Participants were randomly assigned to read either a low humanity or high humanity description of Muslims. The vignettes were

presented as research completed by social anthropologists on Muslim culture. The first two paragraphs were the same. In the final paragraph, we introduced our manipulation using words that were presented as descriptors of Muslims obtained from the 'research'. In the high-humanity condition, Muslims were described using words strongly associated with human uniqueness and human nature, such as *passion*, *ambitious* and *irresponsible*. In the low-humanity condition, we used words weakly associated with human uniqueness and human nature, such as *unemotional*, *relaxed* and *comfortable*. These stimuli were adapted from previous research by Haslam and Bain (2007) that explores the personality traits associated with different types of humanity.

After reading the vignette, participants completed the measure of dehumanization by Viki et al. (2006). This measure served as our manipulation check and used a conceptually different set of stimuli from the words in the vignettes. The words used in the vignettes were drawn from personality traits (e.g. *ambitious* and *relaxed*; Haslam & Bain, 2007). In contrast, the Viki et al. measure uses words that are more directly related to descriptions of humans versus animals. Participants read a list of 20 randomly ordered words (10 human-related; e.g. *humanity*, *person*, *civilian* and 10 animal-related; e.g. *pet*, *wild*, *critter*) and were asked to select 8-10 words they thought best characterized Muslims. This measure of dehumanization is ipsative. As such, our analyses focused only on the number of selected human words.

Participants were then presented with four images of torture from the Abu Ghraib prison. These were selected from the images that had been published when the story broke in 2004 (e.g. The Guardian, 2004). Under each image, participants were asked to imagine themselves in the same situation as the soldiers and respond on a Likert scale (1

to 7) to the following three questions: “How excited would you have felt in this situation?”, “Would you have behaved like this in this situation?”, “How much would you have enjoyed having control in this situation?”. A single proclivity to torture score was computed across all 12 items ( $\alpha = .93$ ). This measure of proclivity was adapted from Bohner et al. (1999) who developed it as a measure for the proclivity to commit sexual violence (see also Bohner, Siebler & Schmelcher, 2006; Chiroro, Bohner, Viki & Jarvis, 2002). After completing the questionnaire participants were thanked and debriefed.

### Results and Discussion

Participants selected more human words for Muslims on the Viki et al. (2006) measure in the high-humanity condition ( $M = 8.08, SD = .71$ ) than in the low-humanity condition ( $M = 7.00, SD = 1.93; F(1, 66) = 10.16, p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$ ). These findings show that our manipulation successfully affected the perceived humanity of Muslims. In support of *Hypothesis 1*, participants also reported higher levels of the proclivity to torture Muslim prisoners in the low-humanity condition ( $M = 2.05, SD = 1.29$ ), compared to the high-humanity condition ( $M = 1.55, SD = .69; F(1, 66) = 4.26, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$ ).

Multiple regression analyses were then performed to test whether the humanity ratings mediated the effects of our manipulation on the proclivity to torture (see Table 1 for correlations and means). As expected, a significant relationship between the experimental condition and the proclivity to torture was obtained,  $\beta = .25, t = 2.06, p < .05$ . We also obtained a significant negative relationship between humanity ratings and the proclivity to torture,  $\beta = -.59, t = 6.01, p < .001$ , showing that the less participants attributed human words to Muslims, the more they reported a proclivity to torture Muslim prisoners. Finally, the relationship between our experimental conditions and proclivity to

torture was reduced to non-significance when humanity ratings were included in the equation,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $t = .31$ ,  $p = .75$ ; whereas the relationship between humanity ratings and proclivity to torture remained significant,  $\beta = -.58$ ,  $t = 2.77$ ,  $p < .01$ . Sobel Tests indicated that this mediation effect was significant,  $Z = 2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ . These findings make us confident the manipulated descriptions of Muslim culture significantly affected self-reports of proclivity to torture prisoners, and that this effect occurred via the perceived humanity of Muslims.

## Study 2

Given the strong mediating effect of humanity ratings obtained in Study 1, we did not manipulate dehumanization in the current study. Instead, we focused on measuring individual differences in the dehumanization of Muslims among Christian participants using the same measure from Viki et al., 2006. We also examined the potential moderating role of the perception of Muslims as a threat. Fiske, Harris and Cuddy (2004) argue that the situation at Abu Ghraib was exacerbated by the fact that the prisoners belonged to an enemy outgroup that was perceived as a threat. *Realistic threats* are perceived threats to the physical and economic well-being of the group; whereas *symbolic threats* refer to perceived threats to the group's cultural values or worldview (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Recent research has demonstrated the role of perceived threat in the relationship between dehumanization and discrimination against outgroups (e.g. Pereira, Vala & Leyens, 2009). We expected that perceived threat would moderate the relationship between dehumanization and the proclivity to torture.



## Method

### *Participants, Materials and Procedure*

Sixty-one Christian students took part in this study in exchange for course credit (19 males; *mean age* = 21.15, *SD* = 3.56). Participants completed the Viki et al. (2006) measure of dehumanization as in Study 1. However, in this case participants were asked to separately select 8-10 words that best characterized the Christians and Muslims. The order in which each participant rated each group was counterbalanced. As in Study 1 and due to the ipsative nature of this measure, our analysis focused only on the human words. Participants then completed an 18-item measure of perceived threat from Muslims (realistic and symbolic; Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Examples items are; “British culture is under threat from Muslims” and “Muslims deplete the economic wealth of Britain”. Exploratory factor analyses revealed that fifteen of the items loaded onto one factor. We, therefore, computed a single composite score for perceived threat ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Participants then completed the measure of torture proclivity as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .91$ ). In this study, the four images of torture from the Abu Ghraib prison were presented to participants on a computer screen one at a time using Microsoft PowerPoint. After completing the study participants were thanked and debriefed

## Results and Discussion

In support of *Hypothesis 2*, participants selected more human words for the Christians ( $M = 8.29$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) than Muslims ( $M = 7.75$ ,  $SD = 2.37$ ;  $t(60) = 2.59$ ,  $p < 0.02$ , see Table 2 for correlations and means). We then performed multiple regression analysis in which we entered the humanity ratings of Muslims and Christians as simultaneous predictors of proclivity to torture. This analysis revealed that Muslim

humanity ratings were negatively related to the proclivity to torture,  $\beta = -.44, t = 2.35, p < .03$  (*Hypothesis 3*). In contrast, the relationship between Christian humanity ratings and proclivity to torture was positive and non-significant ( $\beta = .24, t = 1.27, p > .20$ ). As such, the remainder of our analysis focused on the Muslim humanity ratings.

To test for interaction effects involving dehumanization and perceived threat (*Hypothesis 4*), we performed hierarchical regression analysis. In step one, we entered Muslim humanity ratings and perceived threat as simultaneous predictors of the proclivity to torture. This analysis revealed a significant relationship between perceived threat and proclivity to torture,  $\beta = .37, t = 2.98, p < .01$ ; whereas the effects for dehumanization were non-significant,  $\beta = -.16, t = 1.32, p > .18$ . In the second step, a significant interaction between dehumanization and threat was obtained,  $\beta = .48, t = 3.77, p < .001$ . Simple effects analyses were then performed at  $\pm 1$  standard deviation from the mean of perceived threat (see Figure 1). These analyses revealed a significant negative relationship between dehumanization and proclivity to torture for individuals high in perceived threat,  $\beta = -.71, t = 2.63, p < .04$ . In contrast, this relationship was not significant for individuals low in perceived threat,  $\beta = -.29, t = 0.81, p > .44$ . These findings support our hypothesis that the relationship between dehumanization and the proclivity to torture is stronger for individuals that score high (vs. low) in perceived threats from Muslims.

### General Discussion

The results of both studies strongly indicate that dehumanization may be the psychological mechanism that partly underlies the torture of outgroup members. Our research provides empirical evidence showing that the more people dehumanize the

outgroup, the higher their self-reported willingness to torture outgroup members. We showed this across two studies; one in which dehumanization was manipulated experimentally and another in which dehumanization was measured as an individual difference variable. We also found a significant moderating role for perceived threat in the relationship between dehumanization and the proclivity to torture. Our findings indicate that the relationship between dehumanization and proclivity to torture is stronger among individuals who score high (vs. low) in perceived threats from Muslims.

Overall, our findings are consistent with previous research and theorising. As noted earlier, several authors have argued that dehumanization underpins the willingness to torture outgroup members (e.g. Harris & Fiske, 2011; Opatow, 1990; Staub, 2005). Our research provides empirical evidence that strongly and consistently supports this theoretical proposition. Furthermore, the findings concerning the moderating role of threat are consistent with Fiske and colleagues' (2004) argument that enemy outgroups that are perceived as a threat may be viewed as viable targets for torture and abuse.

In order to ensure that our comparison groups were differentiated on a single orthogonal dimension, we recruited Christian participants and utilised Muslims as the target outgroup. We were also conscious that within British society both Christians and Muslims can be citizens, even though the dominant religious identity connected with being British is Christianity (Mirza, Senthilkumaran & Ja'far, 2007). As such, future researchers may want to include measures of national identity, to examine its role in perceived threat and the proclivity to torture. Future researchers may also want to further examine the role of perceived threat through experimental manipulation. The distinction

between animalistic dehumanization and mechanistic dehumanization may also be examined in such research.

Despite some of the above limitations, the current study provides important and original empirical findings concerning the connection between dehumanization and the willingness to torture outgroup members. These findings are important because they provide empirical support for what historical commentators have always argued as the role of dehumanization in torture, wars and genocides.

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Table 1

*The correlations and means for humanity ratings and proclivity to torture in Study 1.*

	Experimental Condition	Humanity Ratings	Means and SD
Experimental Condition	-		-
Humanity Ratings	.37**	-	7.60 (1.48)
Proclivity to Torture	-.25*	-.59**	1.77 (1.03)

*Note.* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$

Table 2

*The correlations and means for humanity ratings, perceived threat and proclivity to torture in Study 2.*

	Muslim Humanity	Christian Humanity	Perceived Threat	Means and SD
Muslim Humanity	-			7.75 (2.37)
Christian Humanity	.74**	-		8.29 (2.11)
Perceived Threat	-.27*	.01	-	3.02 (.98)
Proclivity to Torture	-.26*	-.09	.41**	1.56 (.67)

*Note.* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$

Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* The interaction effects of Perceived Threat and Muslim Humanity Ratings on Proclivity to Torture (Study 2).

