

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233006674>

# Erroneous Assumptions: Popular Belief in the Effectiveness of Torture Interrogation

Article in *Peace and Conflict Journal of Peace Psychology* · November 2007

DOI: 10.1080/10781910701665766

CITATIONS

37

READS

4,595

1 author:



Ronnie Janoff-Bulman

University of Massachusetts Amherst

86 PUBLICATIONS 15,499 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

# Erroneous Assumptions: Popular Belief in the Effectiveness of Torture Interrogation

Ronnie Janoff-Bulman

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

People generally believe that torture is effective despite strong counterclaims by experienced military interrogators and intelligence experts. This article challenges us to reexamine some of our basic assumptions about torture by presenting four psychological factors—primarily errors and biases in human judgment—that help account for this mistaken popular belief.

In the public's mind, torture is perceived as an undesirable yet essential tool in confronting our enemies. Despite concerns about human rights, endangering our troops, and international moral standing, the majority of Americans believe torture is at least sometimes justified when interrogating suspected terrorists (e.g., Harris Poll, 2005), and this support is based on a popular belief in its effectiveness. Yet, experienced military interrogators and intelligence experts claim otherwise. They attest to the ineffectiveness of torture and the utility of far more acceptable interrogation techniques. There is a dramatic discrepancy between our popular conceptions of torture and the reality of intelligence collection through interrogation.

What accounts for the popular belief in the effectiveness of torture in intelligence work? Some may argue that because torture is used, it must work; yet, instead it seems likely that one reason torture is used is because people *think* it works. As Arrigo and Bennett (this issue) noted, civilian authorities and military officers who make the strategic decisions about torture interrogation are rarely knowledgeable about interrogation, and those with the greatest knowledge—the experienced interrogators—are ranked too low in the military hierarchy to have a significant impact on decisions. In recent years, social psychologists have laid bare

the pervasiveness of errors and biases in human judgment (for reviews, see Dawes, 1998; Nisbett & Ross, 1980), forcing a reexamination of our seemingly automatic beliefs in a variety of domains. This research challenges us to examine the assumptions and (mis)conceptions underlying our social judgments. With this goal in mind, this article identifies and explores four factors that are likely to contribute to the unjustified popular belief in the effectiveness of torture interrogation.

### COMPLIANCE VERSUS ACCURACY: MISPERCEIVING THE GOALS OF INTERROGATION

We have an implicit understanding that extreme coercion is likely to produce its desired *behavioral* effect. From the bully to the batterer, force can be very effective in generating behavioral responses consistent with the demands of the abuser. Fear and self-protection engender compliance, which involves immediate, visible behavior—doing what the coercer requires to avoid direct, adverse consequences. Yet, the aim of intelligence interrogation is to obtain accurate, reliable information. A successful technique is not one that produces a precise, prespecified act of submission, but rather one that elicits useful information previously unknown to the interrogator. Effectiveness in intelligence collection is not measured by readily available indices of behavioral compliance, but by the accuracy and reliability of information provided.

The long, bleak history of torture attests to its success in terrorizing populations (Ross, 2005)—in getting people to make specific confessions, with a goal not of truth, but as a system of control. From the Inquisition and the great witch hunts of Europe to horrors perpetrated in Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, and more recently by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, torture has been used against “heretics” and opponents of the state to instill terror and stifle opposition in the name of security (see Ross, 2005). The elicitation of accurate information (not to mention truthful confessions) has clearly not been the goal of these torturers. When such accuracy is the goal of interrogation, as it is in intelligence collection, the coercive power of torture is likely to result in proffered misinformation, misdirection, and lies—ineffective outcomes by any measure.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that experienced military interrogators believe that torture and abuse should unquestionably be avoided. In the words of one senior Army interrogator, “Beyond the moral imperative, the competent interrogator avoids torture because it is counter-productive and unreliable . . . . In my two decades of experience as an interrogator, I know of no competent interrogator that would resort to torture. Not one” (Bennett, 2006). In their recent *Statement on Interrogation Practices* (Bauer, 2006), 20 Army interrogators and interrogation technicians, representing over 200 years of interrogation service and experience (from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and Iraq), unequivocally contradicted

the proposition that torture is necessary to win the “War on Terror.” Recently released Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reports make it clear that the FBI, too (in contrast to the Central Intelligence Agency), objected to the use of torture and regarded it as an unreliable and ineffective interrogation method (Dratel, 2006; also see Suskind, 2006).

### SOCIAL INFLUENCE FOR “HUMANS” AND TORTURE FOR THE “DEHUMANIZED”

Successful interrogators are skilled applied social psychologists, for effective intelligence-gathering is based on the creation of an interrogator–interrogatee relationship and the application of “ordinary” processes of social influence. The Army Field Manual for Human Intelligence Collection (Field Manual 2-22.3; 2006) provides a long list and discussion of approach techniques, all of which are based on the establishment of rapport between the interrogator and the source. These are powerful techniques, and social psychology attests to their success (see Cialdini, 2001; also see McCauley, this issue). Successful interrogation is based on understanding the motives, needs, and self-perceptions of the other in the service of developing an effective strategy for eliciting intelligence information. Effective interrogation relies on persuasion strategies used in everyday life, but produced with greater forethought, applied with greater deliberation, and maintained in the context of objectivity and social control. (For recent accounts of successful interrogations in the “War on Terror” using these social influence techniques, see Bowden, 2007 and Suskind, 2006.)

Yet, somehow in the popular imagination these relationship-based techniques do not seem appropriate for terrorists. In part, this may be attributable to the scenario most likely to pop into people’s minds when imagining torture—that of the ticking time bomb. This involves an impending catastrophe and the necessity of obtaining information immediately so as to prevent it. In this situation, time pressure precludes the establishment of rapport, relationship, or any real understanding of the detainee. It also seems to particularly preclude success via torture, given that all the detainee need do is buy some time (i.e., provide no information, misinformation, or misdirection), and presumably very little time, given the ticking bomb. Most important, this is a scenario that is virtually nonexistent outside of TV and movies, yet it seems to fundamentally define how we think about and react to torture interrogation. Real intelligence collection instead is a time-consuming, effortful process.

Yet again, beyond the ticking time-bomb scenario, people are likely to question the appropriateness of rapport-based strategies, regarding them as too mundane and “soft” to be useful in intelligence interrogation. After all, this is the realm of “evil others,” of enemies we typically dehumanize and regard as out-

side the scope of morality and justice (Opotow, 1990), lacking the same human motives and needs as our own. Techniques based on everyday social influence processes are apt to be perceived as ineffectual with hardened enemies; something far harsher seems required. Such assumptions largely reflect a human bias in judging cause and effect, for we typically rely on a “resemblance criterion” (see Nisbett & Ross, 1980), a crude form of the representativeness heuristic (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973), whereby we believe causes and effects are similar. We assume economic events have economic causes, and big events have big causes. The latter cause–effect resemblance largely accounts for the popularity of conspiracy theories. As Nisbett and Wilson (1977) noted, “It is outrageous that a single, pathetic, weak figure like Lee Harvey Oswald should alter world history. When confronted with large effects, it is to comparably large causes that we turn for explanations” (p. 252).

Similarly, people may erroneously assume that information from cruel, bad, harsh enemies can only be produced by similarly cruel, bad, harsh techniques. Relationship-based persuasion strategies assume motives and needs we can identify with in terms of common humanity. In derogating our enemies, we deny them their humanity, and in doing so maintain that they would be most responsive to inhuman treatment.

People thereby conclude that social influence techniques based on rapport are effective and appropriate in social relationships and interactions with “good” people, but not with cruel enemy-others, who require cruel techniques. Our everyday persuasion techniques are neither big enough nor bad enough. Yet, these persuasion strategies are effective precisely because our enemies, too, are human—with needs, motives, weaknesses, and desires that can be understood and used by wise interrogators in their efforts to elicit reliable intelligence.

### THE LIMITS OF PREDICTION AND SELF-REFLECTION: UNDERESTIMATING RESISTENCE

In making predictions and forecasting probabilities, people overvalue the causal role of salient, prominent stimuli and events (see Kahneman & Tversky, 1973, on the “availability heuristic,” and Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, on “focalism”). In making predictions about torture, including the effectiveness of torture, we also focus on its most salient feature—extreme physical pain—and thereby expect detainees to “break”; focusing on the pain, people assume they themselves would readily give in to the torturer’s demands. Yet, we fail to take into account other possibilities—less obvious factors—that may contribute to resistance rather than submission, to imparting no information or misinformation. Resistance in the face of torture is not at all uncommon (see Arrigo, 2004). Two factors that may help us

better understand such resistance are human dissociative processes and attributions of meaning and purpose.

Dissociative processes often occur during extreme events such as torture and involve detachment, constricted consciousness, and the minimization of pain perception (Herman, 1992). Dissociation provides protection via psychological escape. A part of our ongoing experience is “dissociated” from consciousness; in this way, a torture victim may minimize the experience of pain and maximize the possibility of resistance. Similarly, pain becomes increasingly bearable as meaning is attributed to the suffering (e.g., see Dimsdale, 1980). Thus, if people are specifically asked to consider if there is something for which they would bear torture, they begin to understand that they too might resist—to protect loved ones, a worldview, or a way of life. Strong devotion to a cause is likely to be associated with psychological strength in the face of torture. This may account for why the Gestapo failed to get any information from the German Resistance in World War II despite its use of all forms of torture (Hoffman, 1977). In the context of intelligence interrogation, those detainees who hold the most valuable information are likely to be those most capable of resisting, not only because of greater training, but also because of greater commitment to a cause. In such instances no information—or malicious, unreliable information—is apt to be the fruitless product of torture.

### EFFICACY AS VENGEANCE

The more destructive the enemy, the more likely the aim of obtaining reliable information will be seriously tainted by a different goal—that of revenge and punishment for past misdeeds. Efficacy measured in terms of intelligence collected may increasingly play a subordinate role to the desire for vengeance and aggression. People want to harm those who have harmed them and humiliate those who have made them feel vulnerable. Torture not only aims to terrorize, but to humiliate as well, and it serves to reassure torturers of their own power and dominance.

Although for many this may satisfy some deep sense of retributive justice (e.g., see Hogan & Emler, 1981), it will surely get in the way of effective interrogation, which requires clear-minded consideration of optimally persuasive techniques. Yet, the greater the perceived threat, the greater the possibility that people will increasingly judge the efficacy of interrogation not in terms of the nature of information obtained, but in terms of “deserved” punishment and harm imposed on the suspected enemy. Success is then measured by how much we can hurt enemy detainees, rather than how much truthful, useful information we can obtain.

## CONCLUSION

Those who argue for the use of torture can all too readily rely on people's virtually automatic belief in its effectiveness. Given torture's inordinate threat to moral standing, respect, and rights within and across institutions and cultures, we should feel obligated to reexamine our beliefs and subject our assumptions to greater scrutiny. The experience of senior military interrogators and years of research attest to the effectiveness of traditional social influence techniques in intelligence work; in contrast, belief in the effectiveness of torture derives largely from our collective false assumptions.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ronnie Janoff-Bulman is a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is a social psychologist whose work has focused on trauma and victimization. Her current research interests lie in the psychology of morality and justice.

## REFERENCES

- Arrigo, J. M. (2004). A utilitarian argument against torture interrogation of terrorists. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 10, 543–572.
- Bauer, P. (2006, July 31). *Statement on interrogation practices*. Submitted to the Committee on the Armed Services, Available online at [http://www.amnestyusa.org/denounce\\_torture/statement\\_on\\_interrogation.pdf](http://www.amnestyusa.org/denounce_torture/statement_on_interrogation.pdf)
- Bennett, R. (pseudonym). (2006). Interrogator's request to professional psychologists. In J. M. Arrigo (Ed.), *Visible remedies for invisible settings and sources of torture* (American Psychological Association annual convention), New Orleans, LA.
- Bowden, M. (2007, May). The ploy. *The Atlantic*, 54–68.
- Cialdini, R.B. (2001). *Influence: Science and practice* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Dawes, R. M., (1998). Behavioral decision-making and judgment. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 497–548). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Dimsdale, J. E. (Ed.). (1980). *Survivors, victims, and perpetrators*. New York: Hemisphere.
- Dratel, J. (2006). The curious debate. In K. J. Greenberg (Ed.), *The torture debate in America* (pp. 111–117). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Field Manual 2-22.3 (FM 34-52). (2006). *Human intelligence collector operations*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Harris Poll. (2005). *Majorities of public believe that torture, "rendition" and the use of secret prison camps outside U.S. are sometimes justified* (The Harris Poll #93). Retrieved November 27, 2006 from [http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/printerfriend/index.asp?PID=621](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/printerfriend/index.asp?PID=621)
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hoffman, P. (1977). *The history of the German resistance: 1933–1945* (R. Barry, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Hogan, R., & Emler, N. P. (1981). Retributive justice. In M. J. Lerner & S. C. Lerner (Eds.), *The justice motive in social behavior* (pp. 125–143). New York: Academic.
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1973). On the psychology of prediction. *Psychological Review*, 80, 237–251.
- Nisbett, R., & Ross, L. (1980). *Human inference: Strategies and shortcomings of social judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Nisbett, R., & Wilson, T., (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review*, 84, 231–259.
- Opatow, S. (1990). Moral exclusion and injustice: An introduction. *Journal of Social Issues*, 46(1), 1–20.
- Ross, J. (2005). A history of torture. In K. Roth & M. Worden (Eds.), *Torture* (pp. 3–17). New York: New Press.
- Suskind, R. (2006, September 10). The unofficial story of the al-Qaeda 14. *Time*, 168(12), 34–35.
- Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2003). Affective forecasting. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 35, pp. 345–411). San Diego: Academic.