Primetime Torture: Selective Perception of Media Modeled Efficacy of Torture

THESIS

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Abstract

A three-factor between subjects experiment was conducted to assess the impact of effective and ineffective torture modeled on television on subsequent attitudes and beliefs. Participants viewed one of three video clips depicting torture leading to important, time-sensitive information, torture that failed to acquire said information, or a control condition of equal dramatic intensity, but without torture. Findings demonstrated efficacy to be a strong predictor of attitudes towards torture, however; processing of modeled torture was biased by previous beliefs. Specifically, participants with less supportive attitudes and weaker efficacy beliefs were more influenced by effectively modeled torture.
Acknowledgments

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Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Communication
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................... iii

Vita ................................................................................................................................... iv

Fields of Study ................................................................................................................ iv

List of Tables ................................................................................................................... vii

List of Figures ................................................................................................................ viii

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Literature Review .............................................................................................................. 4

Two dimensions of efficacy ............................................................................................ 4

Torture on Television ...................................................................................................... 5

Social Cognitive Theory and Modeled Policy Efficacy .................................................. 6

Selective Perception ....................................................................................................... 9

Culturally motivated decision-making .......................................................................... 12

Methods .......................................................................................................................... 16

Experiment Overview ................................................................................................... 16

Materials and Induction ................................................................................................. 16
List of Tables

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression, Efficacy Beliefs predicting Attitudes .................................. 24
Table 2. Hierarchical Regression, TV Exposure predicting Attitudes .......................................... 25
Table 3. Descriptives for ANOVA .............................................................................................. 27
Table 4. ANOVA for Main Effect ............................................................................................... 28
Table 5. Tukey HSD for Perceptions of Interrogator Competence ............................................. 29
Table 6. Interaction between Stimulus and Attitudes ................................................................. 31
Table 7. Interaction between Stimulus and Efficacy Beliefs ....................................................... 33
List of Figures

Figure 1. Conditional Interaction for Perceptions of Interrogator Competence............. 34

Figure 2. Conditional Interaction for Circumstantial Justification.................................. 36

Figure 3. Conditional three-way interaction................................................................. 40
Introduction

The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the emerging photographs of prisoner abuse and torture in the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 brought to light the issue of torture in America’s “War on Terror.” The recent release of the CIA report highlighting the enhanced interrogation techniques used by interrogators in the wake of September 11th has reintroduced the topic of torture into the national discussion about the ethics of counter-terrorism. A series of public opinion polls from 2001 to the present have highlighted sizeable American support for a practice that the entirety of the developed world, the U.S. included, has determined to be unethical. Notwithstanding the value of a national ethics discussion, the question of why Americans do or do not support the use of torture remains unanswered.

A Gallup poll conducted in October of 2001 asked the question “Would you be willing to have the U.S. government torture known terrorists if they know information about future terrorist attacks in the U.S.?” In a nationally representative sample, 45% of respondents said they were willing. A few years later in 2005, 39% of respondents answered “willing” to the same question (Gallup).
This decline would suggest a mitigating effect of time on aggressive attitudes towards torture. However, a Pew survey conducted in 2007, 2008, and 2009 asked respondents to indicate how often “Torture to gain important information from suspected terrorists is justified.” Nearly half of respondents from a nationally representative sample (48% in 2007, 48% in 2008, and 49% in 2009) indicated they either “often” or “sometimes” felt this way. Furthermore, a mere 27% in 2007, 30% in 2008, and 25% in 2009 indicated they “never” saw torture as justified.

A recent poll conducted by ABC news and the Washington Post again measured public support for torture in response to the release of the CIA report. In December of 2014, 58% of respondents felt torture was either “often” or “somewhat” justified. Moreover 49% percent reported that they believed the CIA tortured suspected terrorists, and 53% claimed this led to important information. Simply put, despite increasing temporal distance from 9/11, support for the use of torture has increased.

In an effort to explain popular support for torture in the American public many scholars and journalists have turned to the ubiquity of torture in television (Downing, 2011; Weiner, 2007; Mayer, 2007). Specifically, the popular and critically acclaimed series 24 has been both praised and scrutinized for its protagonist’s willingness to torture captives to gain time sensitive information. The show’s format highlighting a ticking clock, slowly counting down every second of a 24-hour day is said to make the infamous ticking time bomb scenario more salient. The salience of impending disaster casts torture
as a risk mitigation strategy. For this reason, it is likely that support for torture will be largely contingent on the perceived efficacy of its ability to mitigate risk.

RQ: How does media modeled efficacy of torture affect attitudes about its use?
Literature Review

Two dimensions of efficacy

The Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM; Witte, 1994) positions efficacy as an integral factor in determining individual motivation to comply with a suggested solution to an imminent threat. In the case of torture, this threat is obviously terrorism or crime. Provided this threat is perceived as credible, torture as a proposed way to manage this threat will inevitably receive more support based on the perception that it will help to mitigate the threat of terrorism. The scope of this paper does not extend to the ethics of torture as deterrence or punitive policy, but rather focuses on the modeling of torture as an effective way to gain time sensitive information that provides the necessary intelligence to mitigate the risk of terrorism.

According to EPPM, sufficient efficacy beliefs to inspire compliance are contingent on two dimensions, response efficacy and self-efficacy. Response-efficacy deals with the response itself (i.e. can torture lead to the successful acquisition of information?), while self-efficacy refers to an individual’s confidence in his or her own ability to carry out the necessary task (i.e. I can use torture to get information from someone). In the case of torture depicted on television, response- efficacy can be modeled based on whether the torture leads to effective information acquisition.
Contrarily, the self-efficacy dimension requires the modeled efficacy to be either deferential (I can defer this task to an expert torturer) or collective (We can train interrogation professionals who can effectively use torture to gain important information). As a result, the combination of beliefs that torture is an effective interrogation strategy, and the modeling of an interrogator as an effective torturer should increase supportive attitudes towards torture.

**H1**: Perceptions of response-efficacy and vicarious self-efficacy of torture will positively predict supportive attitudes.

**Torture on Television**

Media and television in general have long been scrutinized largely in response to its narrative format’s ability to “bypass cognitive gatekeepers” (Newcomb, 1986, p.211). In other words, due to an individual’s ability to be transported (Green & Brock, 2000) into a narrative, or identify with media characters (Cohen, 2001), “truths” portrayed in entertainment media often do not receive the same scrutiny as factual based messages.

Additionally, for practices such as torture, which are generally not publicly accessible, television can provide a sense of what is normative behavior by increasing the accessibility of these practices (Shrum & Lee, 2012). Evaluations of ones beliefs about societal norms are one of the most important determinants of acceptance of an educational narrative (Parrish & Campbell, 1953). In other words, by seeing torture modeled on television, the viewer is immersed in a world where torture is normative. For
heavy consumers who are regularly immersed in this world, the normativity of torture is likely to be applied to the real world. The assumption herein is that continued exposure to scenes of torture both effective and ineffective will cultivate a belief among those exposed most often that torture is standard protocol for extracting information. From there, perceptions regarding effectiveness, moral permissibility, justification, and other evaluations that would determine individual policy support are likely to be influenced by the modeling effects of specific torture event models.

**Social Cognitive Theory and Modeled Policy Efficacy**

This study posits that the predominant mechanism explaining how torture on television can influence attitudes stems from Bandura’s work on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura, 1982). SCT posits that people learn not only through trial and error, but also through logical deduction, and through witnessing modeled behavior (Bandura, 1986). Simply put, a child can learn to look both ways before crossing the street by a) surviving the resulting collision with a motor vehicle resulting from a prior failure to do so, b) noticing the similarity between the road in front of his house, and the road where cars drive, and deducing that he should check for them before walking into the street, or c) watching his mother model the behavior of looking both ways before crossing the street. Conversely, if the same child continuously witnesses the more salient models in his life cross the street without looking both ways, he will imitate this behavior until
either of the other two ways of learning correct it. Essentially, SCT elaborates on the mechanisms that facilitate mediated operant conditioning.

For the aforementioned reason, SCT can be applied to modeled learning through the mass media; cemented by what Bandura describes as people’s limited contact with their physical and social environments (2001a). In other words, the average person’s daily routine provides little variation in experience, leading people to expand that reality vicariously through media (2001a). For this reason, the mass media is among the leading disseminators of new ideas as well as social and behavioral norms (1986, 2001a), allowing it to serve as a primary agent for social change (2001a).

In the case of a moral dilemma like the use of torture, the application of SCT lies not in the realm of modeled behavior, as it is unlikely that the viewer will ever find themselves in a position where they would have to choose whether or not to perform this behavior; but rather in the modeling of general societal rules or outcomes, and ultimately policy. People use the exemplars provided by the mass media to extract general rules that can be modeled abstractly to form evaluative judgments (2001a). These judgments are then reinforced vicariously as the model performing the behavior is either rewarded or punished.

The study of reinforcement on learning dates back to the behaviorist tradition wherein it was observed that animals could learn a new task faster and more accurately when rewarded with a piece of food upon successful completion (Thorndike, 1898;
Skinner, 1938). The inverse was also found to be true, as an aversive stimulus (punishment) encouraged avoidance in the same way a desired stimulus encouraged approach (Solomon & Wynne, 1953). Unique to punishment based reinforcement however is the variance in types, and the implications of each for modeled learning.

Punishment can be delivered in the form of a negative stimulus (Type I) or the denial of a positive stimulus (Type II; Skinner, 1956). In the case of torture, both types are relevant, as the torturer could be punished through feelings of guilt and remorse (type I) or by being denied the information he was using the torture to obtain (Type II). The importance of perceived causality to this process complicates this method of reinforcement when modeled vicariously through television. The influence of efficacy beliefs on torture attitudes positions modeling inefficacy (a type II punishment) as a prospective mechanism to reducing support for torture contingent on both the relationship between attitudes and efficacy beliefs, as well as the effectiveness of modeling type II punishments.

It has been demonstrated that children are more likely to evaluate the rewarded behavior than the punished one (Walters, Leat, & Mezei, 1963; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963, Bandura, 1965) suggesting that the presentation of an attractive stimulus is more likely to be associated with a salient preceding cause. This presents a problem for modeling inefficacy, as the learner is required to note the absence of the reward, and
attribute that absence to the inefficacy of the modeled behavior. This places significantly higher cognitive demands on the learner.

This likely speaks to why vicarious negative reinforcement on adults has not been effective. For example, Nabi and Clark found that even negatively reinforced sexual behaviors did not lead to a negative evaluation of the behavior (2008). The results of the study are attributed to previously held schemas that things eventually work out in the end for good characters. However, more parsimonious is the idea that mediated learning is weaker than direct experience. As a result, the causality of the negative outcome is not salient enough to trigger the sort of inductive reasoning required to connect the dots between action and consequence. Instead, the behavior is modeled as normative simply by being portrayed on television. Moreover, when modeled effectively, it is more likely that modeled lessons will be taken from it.

**H2: High reported television exposure as well as exposure to torture on TV will predict support for torture**

**H3: Modeled efficacy of torture will affect efficacy beliefs.**

**Selective Perception**

Regardless of how influential the mass media is people do not interpret the lessons it teaches in a vacuum. They bring with them their own experiences, biases, and
perceptions that are employed as an involuntary lens through which they view the world. Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) demonstrated selective perception when they found that the fictional caricature of a racist named Archie Bunker was viewed as the ridiculed character by people with less racist attitudes, and as a loveable realist by people who were sympathetic to his views. To then say that watching All in the Family made viewers more or less racist does not tell the whole story. Rather those who were already supportive of pluralistic liberal society had their views validated by what they interpreted as a degradation of Archie, and his archaic belief system. In contrast, those who shared Archie’s beliefs also had their beliefs validated by Archie’s folksy charm and forthrightness. Moreover, Eno and Ewoldsen (2010) found that attitudes activated in context influence both the processing of mediated information, as well as subsequent attitudes that result from that processing. Most importantly, the intent of the media has little bearing on the effect the media has on the viewer.

For this reason, just as viewers’ attitudes towards torture are biased by their ideology, their interpretation of a mediated message is likely to exhibit the same bias in processing that message. Someone who believes torture is effective has little need to learn about its efficacy, and thus is unlikely to learn from modeled behavior. On the contrary, someone exposed to a situation where torture provides a means to an ends will be more inclined to orient their attention to evaluating the efficacy of torture in a mediated setting, rendering them more likely to learn from it. A similar effect should be
seen with attitudes wherein stronger support for torture provides a needed means to reach a desired ends which would negate any social cognitive effects. Contrarily, weaker supportive attitudes should increase orienting needs as a way to provide a means for the desired ends. This positions the orienting needs of contextually activated attitudes as an important determinant of modeled learning. Ultimately the valence of these activated attitudes should drive their orienting needs, and thus the processing of mediated messages.

**H4a:** Strength of efficacy beliefs will moderate the conditional effect of modeled torture on perceptions of interrogator competence, wherein participants with stronger efficacy beliefs will be less affected by modeled torture than participants with weaker ones.

**H4b:** Polarization of efficacy beliefs will moderate the conditional effect of modeled torture on perceptions of interrogator competence, wherein participants with more polarized efficacy beliefs will be less affected by modeled torture than participants with less polarized efficacy beliefs.

**H5a:** Strength of supportive attitudes towards torture will moderate the conditional effect of modeled torture on circumstantial justification, wherein participants with more supportive attitudes will be less affected by modeled torture than participants with less supportive ones.

**H5b:** Polarization of supportive attitudes towards torture will moderate the conditional effect of modeled torture on circumstantial justification, wherein participants with more
polarized support or opposition to torture will be less affected by modeled torture than participants with less polarized attitudes.

Culturally motivated decision-making

National polling has demonstrated several important moderators relating to support of torture, from gender to political party affiliation to religious denomination (Pew, 2009). One could argue that the most important explanatory mechanism regarding support for torture is the tendency to make deontological or utilitarian moral judgments. Common sense would suggest that a participant’s tendency to make judgments based on deontological rules and intentions, as opposed to utilitarian outcomes, would explain whether or not they supported a utilitarian employment of torture. Still, the very fact that different religions (Protestant versus Catholic) are more explanatory of torture support than religiousness in general lends itself to the conclusion that one’s propensity to support torture cannot be explained by simply underlining one’s tendency to employ deontological rules in the decision making process. One goal of this paper is then to access the source of these different sets of deontological rules.

The cultural theory of risk posits that the interpretation of information related to risk avoidance is the product of a cultural assessment of a hierarchical risk evaluation (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). In other words, the support of policies related to risk
mitigation is the result of a cultural evaluation of which particular risks are most important. Torture, as this paper discusses it, is a policy designed to address the risk of crime and terrorism. This risk is then weighed against the perceived risk of consequences for performing torture (i.e. international sanctions, moral corruption, retaliation). Support of this policy is a result of the evaluation of the risk of crime and terrorism to be of higher priority than the risk of the aforementioned consequences. The cultural lens through which an individual evaluates the world around them, or their cultural cognition, will determine which risk-addressing policies take priority (Kahan & Braman, 2006).

The concept of cultural cognition essentially provides a quantitative alternative to ethnography. Present research on cultural cognition seeks to expand Douglas and Wildavsky’s work to effectively measure this cultural cognition on its two dimensions of “group” and “grid.” (Kahan, In Press; Kahan & Braman, 2006). Douglas describes “group” as a spectrum delineating the interdependency of a particular society ranging from *individualist* to *collectivist*. While a strong collectivist culture would suggest close interconnectedness and societal cooperation, an individualist culture would leave individuals to subsist based on their own means with minimal societal intervention. “Grid,” refers to the degree to which a society is socioeconomically stratified based on those specific societal roles. Thus a high grid society would adhere strictly to hierarchical norms while low grid societies would be more egalitarian. (Douglas, 1970; 1982)
These two dimensions are of particular importance to torture attitudes. The “group” or collectivist dimension refers largely to a shared identification with a collective. Torture being a very deliberate violation of individual liberty in favor of the safety of the collective, it is likely that a high group identification is related to support for torture under some circumstances. The intersection of this collectivist dimension with the “grid” or hierarchical dimension can potentially explain some of the variation in supportive attitudes towards torture. Specifically, the hierarchy (grid) dimension applies to torture insomuch as it should capture whether or not someone believes any particular institution or group can be entrusted with the authority to manage the collective good, and thus torture people.

By employing these two dimensions scholars can attempt to account for the influence of culture on public policy evaluations based on the intersection of the two aforementioned dimensions (Kahan, Inpress; Kahan, Braman, Gastil, Slovic & Mertz, 2007; Kahan, Braman, Slovic, Gastil & Cohen, 2009; Kahan, Braman, Monahan, Callahan & Peters 2010). The purpose of this scale is not to make evaluations of each intersection, but rather to predict how an individual will view the assessment of a risk through the lens of their cultural cognition. Being a policy designed to address risk, torture should be no exception to this rule. Given that cultural cognition has been found to be a better predictor of policy support than religion, gender, political ideology, and race (Kahan et. al., 2007), one can expect that an individual’s location on the two-
dimensional cultural spectrum will serve as an important moderator of their attitudes towards torture as well as an important explanatory mechanism for selective perception.

**RQ:** *What impact do individualism and hierarchy have on the formation of attitudes towards torture?*
Methods

Experiment Overview
A nationally representative sample (n=160) was recruited from Qualtrics research panels to participate in an experimental study manipulating the modeled efficacy of torture in return for small cash compensation. Following the manipulation, participants completed an online survey accessing various media exposure and attitudinal measures in order to evaluate the extent to which media portrayal of torture affects attitudes and beliefs regarding its use.

Materials and Induction

Participants underwent a three-factor between-subjects manipulation of a video clip from the Fox television show *The Following*, to manipulate the portrayal of torture as either an effective or ineffective interrogation strategy. All three clips begin with the same narrated slideshow providing appropriate background to understand the context of the target scene. By maintaining the narrative format, this technique provides for greater control between conditions without sacrificing the ability to engage with the content (Cohen, 2001). Both the “torture works” and “torture doesn’t work” conditions feature the protagonist (Kevin Bacon) torturing an antagonist in order to gain information about the whereabouts of a hostage. In both conditions, the protagonist has injured the
antagonist who is now lying on a stretcher. The necessity of figuring out where the hostage is hidden is made clear when the protagonist suggests that he will get the information if he is allowed to “talk to him”. In the “torture works” condition, the final thirty seconds of the clip is an immediate cut to the protagonist leading a police team to rescue the hostage implying the necessary information was successfully gained through torture. In the “torture doesn’t work” condition, the final thirty seconds of the clip depicts the hostage’s mother expressing disappointment that the protagonist has failed to successfully rescue her son.

Additionally, a control clip from the show of equal dramatic intensity, which does not depict torture, was included to provide the effect of dramatically induced tension without modeling torture. The control clip included the same backstory, but resolved with a clip of the hostage trying to run away from his captors. The captive was not in any way restrained or injured in any way that would imply either past or impending use of torture.

**Manipulation check**

After exposure to the stimulus material participants answered two questions checking the strength of the manipulation. Participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements “The interrogator in the video clip tortured the other character,” and
“The tactics used by the interrogator were successful in acquiring the information he was after,” on 11-point likert type scales anchored from “totally disagree” (-5) to “totally agree” (5). Participants’ prior exposure to the program and the specific episode were also recorded. Responses were recorded as 1-11 with higher scores indicating more agreement. On the whole, participants recognized when torture was and was not present, and when it was effective. A significant difference in perceived efficacy existed between the torture works $M=9.68, SD=1.89$ and torture doesn’t work $M=6.08, SD=3.05$ conditions. However, there was no significant difference in perceived efficacy between the torture doesn’t work and control conditions.

**Measures**

**Torture Attitudes ($\alpha=.93$).** In order to accesses attitudes towards torture, participants rated the “torture of suspected criminals or terrorists for the purpose of obtaining information” as “morally impermissible” to “morally permissible”, “unjustified” to “justified”, “good” to “bad” [reversed], and “harmful” to “beneficial” on four sliding 11-point (1-11) semantic differential scales. The mean of the four items formed an index of torture attitudes wherein higher scores indicated more favorable attitudes towards torture $M=6.42, SD=3.1$. 
Response efficacy of torture (α=.95). In order to access beliefs about the efficacy of torture participants will respond to the question “regardless of the moral permissibility, how effective is torture for gaining information from otherwise uncooperative detainees?” on three sliding 11-point (1-11) semantic differential scales from “never effective” to “always effective”, “never works” to “always works”, and “reliable”, to “unreliable” [reversed]. The mean of these three responses formed an index of torture efficacy beliefs wherein higher scores indicated a higher belief in the efficacy of torture $M=6.99$, $SD=3.07$.

Selective Interpretation. In order to measure whether participants’ evaluated the stimulus in terms of efficacy and justification of their attitudes, two indices were created. To assess whether modeled efficacy was evaluated, participants responded to three questions indicating their agreement with the degree to which “the interrogator is good at getting information from people” from “Completely Disagree” (-5) to “Completely Agree” (5). Responses were recorded (1-11) and averaged together to form an index assessing perceptions of interrogator competence $M=7.59$, $SD=2.18$, $\alpha=.73$. In order to measure whether participants engaged in justifying of their attitudes towards torture, the belief that certain circumstances justify the exhaustion of every option available was accounted for by asking participants to indicate their level of agreement with the colloquialism “desperate times call for desperate measures” as well as “there is no time
for idealism when innocent lives are at risk” on 11-point scales from “Completely Disagree” (-5) to “Completely Agree” (5). Responses were recorded (1-11) and averaged together to form an index assessing circumstantial justification of “desperate measures” \( M=7.53 \ SD=1.77 \ (\alpha=.82) \).

**Interpersonal reactivity (\( \alpha=.86 \)).** Trait empathy, or the tendency of an individual to share the affective state of another serves as an important covariate when accessing the effects of the induction on attitudes towards torture. Participants will responded to 14 items pertaining to two sub-scales of the interpersonal reactivity index, empathic concern \( M=8.15, SD=1.78 \ (\alpha=.85) \) and perspective taking \( M=7.72, SD=1.4 \ (\alpha=.753; \) Davis, 1980). Participants indicated their level of agreement with such items as “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them,” and “I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both,” on 11-point Likert-type scales “Does not describe me well” (-5), to “Describes me very well” (5). Responses were recorded 1-11 and averaged together to form a combined index of the two dimensions wherein higher scores indicate higher interpersonal reactivity \( M=7.93 \ SD=1.39 \).

**Perceived realism (\( \alpha=.88 \)).** Previous studies on modeled behavior in media have found perceived realism to be an important covariate (Nabi & Clark, 2008). For this
reason, a five-item measure of perceived realism (Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988) assessing the degree to which participants believed “the clip shows life as it really is” from “completely disagree” (-5) to “completely agree” (5). Responses were recorded as 1-11 and averaged together to form an index wherein higher scores indicate higher perceived realism $M=5.63 \ SD=2.3$.

**Narrative Engagement ($\alpha=.93$).** The “narrative experience” (Green, Garst & Brock, 2004) is an integral part of how people learn from media. For this reason, it is necessary to measure the degree to which a participant becomes engaged in the narrative experience. Six items measuring narrative involvement were taken from an 11-dimension index measuring narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Participants will indicate their level of agreement with statements like “I was mentally involved in the story while viewing,” on 11-point likert type scales anchored from “totally disagree” (-5) to “totally agree” (5). The mean of a participant’s six responses will indicate the degree to which they became involved in the narrative. Responses were recorded as 1-11 and averaged together to form an index wherein higher scores indicate higher narrative engagement $M=7.8 \ SD=2.70$.

**Television Exposure.** In order to measure overall television exposure participants first responded to the question “how often do you watch television shows portraying torture?” on an 11-point likert-type scale from “never” (1) to “often” (4) $M=2.41, SD=.89$. Afterwards, participants responded to a series of questions similar to
those used by Nabi and Clark (2008) to measure television exposure, asking the total number of hours they watch television at four specific intervals (6am-12pm, 12pm to 6pm, 6pm-12am, and 12am-6am) on both an average weekday and an average weekend day. These responses were then weighted to calculate an average daily consumption $M=7.54$ $SD=5.08$.

**Political Ideology ($\alpha=.92$).** In order to establish the convergent validity of the more complex cultural cognition measurements as explanatory variables for predicting the effects of political ideology within the context of torture, both political party (Democrat 38.8%, Republican 33.8%, Independent 10%, Libertarian 8.1%, and Green 3.1%) and political ideology were measured. Political ideology was measured by asking participants to indicate their “political leanings” as they pertain to American politics regarding economic and social issues on sliding scales from liberal to conservative. Responses were recoded as 1-11 and averaged together to form an overall political ideological leaning wherein higher scores indicated higher ideological conservatism $M=6.81$ $SD=2.77$.

**Religiosity ($\alpha=.90$).** Recent polling data has shown that religion plays an important role in the formation of attitudes regarding torture (Pew, 2009). Additionally, religion plays an important role in the formation of ideological biases that influence information processing (Hommel & Colzato, 2010). In order to account for this,
participants’ religiosity will be measured with the Duke University Religion Index (Koenig, Meador, & Parkerson, 1997). The index measures three important dimensions of religiousness including institutional, non-institutional, and intrinsic religiousness. The scale consists of two questions estimating the frequency of a participant’s engagement in various religious behaviors (e.g., “How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?” 1 = Never to 6 = More than once a week) and three questions about the role of religion (“In my life, I feel the presence of the Divine [i.e., God]” 1 = Definitely not true of me to 5 = Definitely true of me). A participant’s measure on the index represents an average of their five responses wherein higher scores indicate higher religiosity $M=3.22$ $SD=1.36$.

**Cultural Cognition.** In order to access the impact of political ideology on attitudes towards torture without the politicized language of “liberal and conservative”, participants were measured on a quantitative adaptation of Grid and Group Dimensions (Douglas & Wildansky, 1970). Initially conceived as a qualitative ethnographic technique for establishing the impact of culture on decision-making, the measurement was adapted to quantitative assessment of these dimensions by Dake (1991), and finally adapted to American public policy by Kahan and his colleagues (2007). Participants indicate their agreement from “completely disagree” (-5) to “completely agree” (5) to 12 questions evaluating the “Grid” or hierarchy dimension ($\alpha=.84$) which assesses the acceptability of social stratification and the imposition of rules on one hierarchy by the
other “it seems like criminals and welfare cheats get all the breaks, while the average citizen picks up the tab.” Participants then indicate their level of agreement with 17 questions on the “Group” or collectivism dimension (α=.91) assessing their location along a spectrum from individualist to collectivist “people who are successful in business have a right to enjoy their wealth as they see fit”. Participants’ responses were recorded as 0-10 and averaged together to form indices measuring both dimensions. The grid dimension is essentially a measure of hierarchical (social stratification) preferences $M=6$, $SD=1.8$, while the “Group” dimension is a measure of collectivism $M=7.17$ $SD=1.73$. 

Results

The Relationship between Attitudes and Efficacy Beliefs

Paired samples t-tests revealed no significant between groups differences for attitudes or efficacy beliefs with regards to gender, race, or college education ($p = \text{n.s.}$). As a result, these variables were excluded from any further analysis.

Before looking at the effects of the manipulation, hypothesis one that support for torture is contingent on the belief that it is an effective way of getting time sensitive information was investigated. Initial Pearson’s R revealed a strong positive correlation (.70) between supportive attitudes and efficacy beliefs.

The causal relationship between efficacy beliefs and supportive attitudes towards torture was tested using a two-step hierarchical regression model [Table 1]. Step one controlled for exposure to torture on television, grid, group, perceived realism, and narrative engagement, and was significant, $R^2=.224$, $F(5,154)=8.886$, $p<.001$. Step two demonstrated that the relationship between efficacy beliefs and attitudes is significant, $\Delta R^2=.327$, $F(1,153)=111.235$, $p<.001$, supporting hypothesis one.
Table 1.

Hierarchical regression efficacy beliefs predicting attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Torture Attitudes</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>SE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torture on Television</td>
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<td>Grid</td>
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<td>Narrative Engagement</td>
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</table>

Step 2

Efficacy Beliefs 0.634 0.061

The Effects of Torture on Television

Hypothesis two predicted that participants who watch more television would have more supportive attitudes towards torture. To test this hypothesis, a two-step hierarchical regression model predicting attitudes towards torture was constructed. The first step controlled for grid, group, narrative engagement, and perceived realism, and was significant, $\Delta R^2=.20$, $F(4,154)=9.66$, $p<.001$. The second step included both overall
television exposure, as well as self-reported exposure to torture on television, and was significant, $\Delta R^2=.05$, $F(2,152)=5.18$, $p=.007$ [table 2] supporting hypothesis two.

Table 2.
Hierarchical regression TV exposure predicting attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Torture Attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Step 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grid</td>
<td>.339*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Narrative Engagement</td>
<td>0.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Realism</td>
<td>0.152</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

|                        | Step 2            | β     | SE   |
| Television Exposure    | .152*             | 0.045 |
| Torture on Television  | .168*             | 0.266 |

*significant at $p<.05$
Selective Interpretation of Modeled Information

Hypothesis 3 seeks to replicate previous findings regarding biased interpretation (Nabi & Clark, 2008; Eno & Ewoldsen, 2010; Videmar & Rokeach, 1973) to test whether modeled efficacy will affect actual efficacy beliefs, or if participants will merely defer to a selective interpretation of the modeled information. To test this hypothesis, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA; see table 3 for descriptives) was conducted with the three experimental conditions as the independent variable, and efficacy, perceptions of interrogator competence, and circumstantial justification as the outcome variables. No significant difference was found between conditions for efficacy beliefs, $F(2,157)=.25$, $p=.78$, $\eta^2=.003$, or circumstantial justification, $F(2,157)=.55$, $\eta^2=.006$. However, perceptions of interrogator competence varied significantly between conditions, $F(2,157)=6.047$, $p=.003$, $\eta^2=.07$ [table 4]. A Tukey’s HSD post-hoc comparison [Table 5] showed that participants in the torture works condition evaluated the interrogator as significantly more competent than in the torture doesn’t work condition. There was however, no significant difference between the torture doesn’t work and control conditions. To fully support this hypothesis, further analysis focused on important moderators that served as biasing mechanisms.
**Table 3.**

Descriptives for ANOVA

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<td>3.10378</td>
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</table>

*0(torture works) 1(torture doesn’t work) 2 (control)
Table 4.
ANOVA for main effect

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<th>Sum of Squares</th>
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<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Torture Attitudes</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>.440</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>4.792</td>
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<td>.778</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>1497.196</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Perceptions of Interrogator Competence</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>53.965</td>
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<td>6.047</td>
<td>.003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
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<td><strong>Circumstantial Justification</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>5.193</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.551</td>
<td>.577</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>739.251</td>
<td>157</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>744.444</td>
<td>159</td>
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</table>
Table 5.
Tukey HSD for Perceptions of Interrogator Competence

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Condition</th>
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<th>Subset for alpha = 0.05</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>7.0119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torture Doesn't</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>7.3987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Torture Works</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>.613</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.
*0(torture works) 1(torture doesn’t work) 2 (control)

Hypothesis four suggests that selective interpretation of the stimulus, specifically the belief that torture is effective, will moderate the degree to which perceptions of an interrogator’s competence are affected by modeled efficacy. This hypothesis was tested with the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013), which uses a regression procedure that employs bootstrap sampling to allow for a test of regression models with interaction terms, and then probes those interactions highlighting moderation effects at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean for the dependent variable.

Perceived Realism and Narrative Engagement were included as covariates, with perceptions of interrogator competence as the dependent variable, experimental condition
as the explanatory variable, and efficacy beliefs as a moderator [table 6]. The interaction between modeled effective torture and efficacy beliefs [Figure 1] was significant, $\Delta R^2 = .023$, $F(1,154)=5.69$, $p=.0183$. Specifically, efficacy beliefs influence if and how seeing torture modeled effectively affected perceptions of the interrogator as a competent professional. For participants at or below the midpoint of the scale for efficacy beliefs, seeing torture modeled effectively significantly increased their perceptions of the interrogator’s competence. However, once efficacy beliefs were past the midpoint of the scale, and thus positive, the significant impact of the stimuli on perceptions of interrogator competence went away, suggesting that participants with lower efficacy beliefs were more likely to judge the competence of the interrogator on the effectiveness of his torturing abilities thus supporting hypothesis four.
Table 6.
Interaction between stimulus and attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Circumstantial Justification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>0.282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torture Works</td>
<td>-0.398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>0.208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Realism</td>
<td>0.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Engagement</td>
<td>0.161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hypothesis five predicted that participants with supportive attitudes towards torture will rationalize their support with an increased belief that the circumstances justified the means. To test this hypothesis, the same statistical procedure used to test hypothesis four was used to assess the effect of the interaction between attitudes and condition on the belief in circumstantial justification. The interaction was significant, $\Delta R^2 = .017$, $F(1, 154) = 4.45$, $b = .2079$, $p = .0365$. For participants with supportive attitudes...
towards torture, condition did not account for any of the variance in this belief. However, in both the torture works condition, as well as the control condition, low support for torture facilitated an increased belief in circumstantial justification [table 7]. No significant effects were found for the torture doesn’t work condition. These data replicate the findings of Nabi and Clark (2008) suggesting that previously held beliefs bias the interpretation of modeled information.

Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Perceptions of Interrogator</th>
<th>Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy Beliefs</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torture Works</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.231*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Realism</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0757</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at p<.05
Culturally Motivated Interpretation

Research question one inquires as to what sort of ideological biases influence attitudes and beliefs about torture. Given that the religiosity and political ideology measures were not significantly correlated with any of the outcome measures, it is clear
that the cultural cognition measures were able to capture cultural biases that were not accounted for through religious and political affiliations.

In order to compensate for the moderate correlation of the grid and group dimensions in the analysis, each dimension was tested independently in two separate two-step hierarchical regression models. For the grid dimension, step one controlled for group, political ideology, religious affiliation, perceived realism, and narrative engagement, and was significant, $\Delta R^2=.128, F(5,154)=4.517, p=.001$. Step two demonstrated that the grid dimension is a significant independent predictor of torture attitudes, $\Delta R^2=.089, F(1,153)=17.353, p<.001$.

The same procedure was repeated for the group dimension; however the predictive power of the independent group dimension was not significant. Each of the four outcome measures (torture attitudes, efficacy beliefs, perceptions of interrogator competence, and circumstantial justification) was tested in this fashion. For efficacy beliefs, step one controlling for grid and the aforementioned covariates was significant, $\Delta R^2=.15, F(5,154)=5.32, p<.001$. Step two assessing the independent predictive power of the group dimension was also significant, $\Delta R^2=.02, F(1,153)=4.08, p=.045$. When controlling for group however, grid was not a significant predictor.

No significant effects were found for perceptions of interrogator competence. For circumstantial justification, step one controlling for grid and the other aforementioned
covariates was significant, $\Delta R^2 = .29, F(5, 154) = 12.79, p < .001$. Step two revealed group to be a significant predictor of circumstantial justification, $\Delta R^2 = .04, F(1, 153) = 10.10, p = .002$.

The primary area of inquiry deals with how these dimensions interact with the interpretation of the stimulus. In order to examine the effect of the interaction of these cultural dimensions with the stimulus material on attitudes and beliefs about torture, a three-way interaction between grid, group, and the experimental conditions was tested using the same statistical procedure employed in hypotheses four and five. A two-way interaction between group and the torture works condition was approaching significance for torture attitudes, $\Delta R^2 = .018, F(1, 151) = 3.43, p = .066, b = .655$, implying higher group participants support torture more when it is modeled as effective. Additionally, a two-way interaction between group and efficacy beliefs was significant, $\Delta R^2 = .027, F(1, 151) = 5.13, p = .025, b = .806$, wherein higher group participants’ efficacy beliefs increased when torture was modeled as effective. Another two-way interaction between group and belief in circumstantial justification was approaching significance, $\Delta R^2 = .016, F(1, 151) = 3.72, p = .056, b = .435$, again suggesting that higher group participants increased their belief in circumstantial justification when torture was modeled as effective.
Finally, a three-way moderation model was tested with grid and group as moderators of the conditional effect of modeled efficacy on efficacy beliefs. The majority of the model’s variance in efficacy was explained by the two-way interaction between the group dimension and the torture works condition, $\Delta R^2=.03$, $F(1,151)=5.13$, $p=.02$. The grid dimension was not a significant predictor. However, the three-way interaction between both dimensions and the torture works condition was approaching significance, $\Delta R^2=.03$, $F(2,151)=2.98$, $p=.05$. Specifically, participants at the mean on the grid dimension, and one standard deviation above the mean on the group dimension had significantly higher efficacy beliefs when exposed to modeled effective torture, $b=1.71$, $p=.044$, $se=.8409$ [Figure 3], suggesting that high group participants who remained more ambivalent in the grid dimension were most likely to learn that torture was effective from seeing it successfully employed on television.
Figure 3. Conditional three-way interaction
Discussion

These data have important implications not only for how and why attitudes about torture form the way they do, but also more generally for how people process and encode media modeled lessons. For all the focus on the ethics of torture (Dershowitz, 2004; Allhoff, 2012; Bufacchi, 2006, Levin, 1982), these data suggest that the belief in the ability of torture to resolve imminent danger is a far stronger barometer of support for its use than adherence to religious and cultural belief systems from which these ethical boundaries are derived. Research on affect and cognition positioning human decision making as a rationalizing rather than a rational process (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Lodge & Taber, 2013, Kunda, 1990) supports the notion that when reminded of imminent danger, the rationalizing decision maker will be strongly motivated to positively evaluate anything that alleviates that danger. Essentially, these data suggest that people adjust their ethical beliefs to match their self-interest. The more likely torture is perceived as protective and self-preserving, the more likely it is to be rationalized as ethical.

In the realm of torture, the fact that a large percentage of Americans support its use is indicative of a general belief that there is some problem or danger that can be solved through using torture. While a healthy discourse regarding ethics is important to any society, whether the practice is “right” or “wrong,” is a post-hoc justifying mechanism for ones attitudes rather than the belief that drives them.
The primary area of inquiry in this paper is if television is an influential source in the development of these beliefs. While the evidence gathered is insufficient to make the claim that television exposure is driving American support for torture, these data highlight important conditions under which attitudes and beliefs about torture are affected in a mediated setting. Moreover, the fact that the torture works and torture doesn’t work clips are identical until the last minute when torture is reinforced strengthens the claim that the observed effect is the result of the reinforcement modeled in the clip.

It makes intuitive sense that an interrogator who is seen effectively performing his duties would be perceived as more competent. This finding in and of itself tells us little about the mechanisms at work. However, the ability for an interrogator’s competence to affect the outcome of torture requires the belief that the outcome is in some way contingent on this competence. In this way, the interrogator serves as an exemplar for the viewer. The fact that this exemplar is modeling information that may be of use to the viewer, whether it’s to soothe fears through modeling restorative justice or a just world, or to provide critical orientation (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994) on a highly politicized issue, greatly increases the likelihood of this modeled competence being encoded as a belief that will contribute to efficacy beliefs, and thus attitudes.

The fact that low and moderate efficacy beliefs allowed for this modeled learning, while high efficacy beliefs did not is indicative of a satisficing approach to processing mediated messages (Slovic, 1975). Essentially, those with high efficacy beliefs already
know torture works. As a result, they are not seeking orientation or further confirmation of this belief. Rather they are likely evaluating the interrogator’s competence on other dimensions having little to do with the effectiveness of the torture. For those with low and moderate efficacy beliefs, the outcome is still an important orienting indicator.

The finding that low support for torture moderated the belief in circumstantial justification helps to explain this discrepancy in orientating needs. As demonstrated in the control condition, simply being exposed to a tense situation increased the belief in circumstantial justification of “extreme measures” for participants with negative attitudes towards torture. The fact that participants with moderate and supportive attitudes towards torture were not affected in this way suggests that the availability of torture as a prospective solution to the problem serves to ease this tension. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that when torture was modeled effectively, participants with negative attitudes towards torture were less likely to believe in circumstantial justification. Essentially, those with negative attitudes towards torture do not have a solution to the problem modeled in the clips. Those with moderate and supportive attitudes towards torture do. By modeling effective torture, viewers whose attitudes do not usually provide this comfort are provided with one. In this way, the mechanism driving support for torture via modeling on television is essentially the presentation and demonstration of a solution to dramatic tension. A simple conditioning process then
explains why support for torture would grow as more people are presented with scenarios associating torture with an effective alleviation of dramatic tension.

With efficacy as a strong predictor of attitudes towards torture, much of changing attitudes towards torture lies in changing beliefs about its efficacy. If someone believes that torture is an effective way to solve a problem, then their opposition to it is contingent on the ability to inhibit self-interest on ethical grounds. Given the ability of dramatic tension to reduce this inhibitory control via resource depletion (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998), and thus increase circumstantial justification of unethical behavior, if not presented with an alternative for resolving this tension, viewers ultimately come to accept and support torture on utilitarian grounds.

Though few issues escape the highly politicized American public discourse, the inability of political ideology and religiosity to predict attitudes and beliefs about torture support the idea that public support of torture is largely based on some form of acquired information rather than some set of ideological biases. While previous acquisition of attitudinal biases does predict the interpretation of modeled information, it is likely that these biases are formed through a conditioned learning process rather than an inductive reasoning process based on ethical rules positioning a viewer’s general cultural disposition as an important interpretation biasing mechanism.

The finding that effectively modeled torture increased efficacy beliefs, supportive attitudes, and circumstantial justification amongst more collectivistic participants is in
many ways intuitive, as a higher association with the collective should be indicative of a willingness to sacrifice personal autonomy for the group good (Tajfel, 1974). While group was the predominant interacting predictor, the grid dimension’s ability to predict attitudes is indicative of the role these two dimensions play in the biasing process.

The group dimension and its focus on collective interests over individual liberty is likely to capture elements of nationalism that would seemingly justify the use of torture to protect the state. However, the grid dimension essentially provides a measure of support for the institutions that can be entrusted with the task of this collective welfare. The finding that efficacy is an important predictor is strengthened by the fact that rather than a cultural predisposition to favor the collective over the individual, the belief in legitimate and effective hierarchies is the best ideological predictor of torture attitudes.

Moreover, modeling effective torture for more collectivistic viewers was demonstrated to drive efficacy beliefs when hierarchical beliefs were more ambivalent. Consistent with the proposed orienting argument, these viewers are actively evaluating not only whether torture is being employed for the collective good, but also if the modeling exemplar possesses the legitimacy and competence to represent their collective interest. Herein lies the potential concern when a protagonist models torture.

This research suggests that the processing and encoding of media modeled information is largely contingent on a selective bias driven by a fundamental need for orientation. People are likely to support torture if they believe it is an effective means to
a desired end. If people’s attitudes and beliefs are strongly in support of torture, then the problem is addressed, and there is no need to divert resources to processing and encoding anything new. However, when presented with a problem that can be addressed via torture, the need to solve that problem can influence the need to reevaluate unfavorable attitudes. As a result of the increased resource allotment to evaluation, should this reevaluation happen as a result of effectively modeled torture, the increased attention increases processing and encoding thus influencing subsequent attitudes.
Limitations and future directions

Like any study examining the media effects, this study was limited by a one-time online exposure to the stimulus material. The inability to monitor and assure attention in an online setting undoubtedly leads to increased error in measuring the conditional impact of the stimuli. To account for this, the degree to which participants engaged in the specific stimulus clips was measured, neglecting the measurement of an overall trait narrative engagement measure. As these findings ultimately suggest the need for a more audience centered approach to media effects research, increased attention to trait variables that would potentially bias media interpretations is imperative to furthering our understanding of the mechanisms behind modeled learning.

Future studies exploring this question can increase the strength of the inefficacy manipulation through providing a model where the inability to attain information is more explicit, as opposed to implied, as it was in this study. Moreover, exploring the effect of a type one punishment such as punitive measures for the interrogator, or more explicit psychological distress and regret, or even highlighting retaliation as a result of the interrogation would further our understanding of when and why people support or do not support torture.

Another limitation of this study is the use of only one set of clips for the manipulation. Replication of the observed effects across multiple television programs would help strengthen the external validity of the claims made by this research. In
particular, future work should include a manipulation of identification with the person being tortured. The clips in this study involved a white criminal being tortured by a white interrogator. Whether the assailant is an in-group or out-group member is unlikely to bias interpretations based in efficacy, as the simple need to resolve tension should preclude racial biases. However, previous research suggests out-group homogeneity provides an important facilitator of moral disengagement (Bandura, et. al, 1996) allowing for unethical behavior like torture. Essentially, if support for torture is truly a function of efficacy, and not ideology, then out-group membership should not be an issue.

Finally, this research did not measure fear of crime and terrorism, which is likely to be an important moderating variable of the demonstrated effect. The claim that support for torture is contingent on the belief that there is a relevant danger that can be mitigated with torture would be strengthened through an evaluative measure of a belief that this danger exists. Future research in this area should incorporate this measure.
Conclusion

The most important finding of this research is that the strongest predictor of support for torture is whether or not it works. The strength and direction of this belief is determined whether individuals use the media to orient themselves on this particular issue via observing modeled behavior. Mediated scenarios that present a problem for which torture is a viable solution enhance this simple need for orientation. When torture is modeled, the critical need for orientation induced by dramatic tension affects the willingness of people who do not support torture to observe and reevaluate the behavior. As a result, when exposed to effective torture, the torturer is evaluated more favorably. Essentially, the belief that torture can be done effectively increases the belief that it is effective, which increases support for its use.
References


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53


