

Literature Review Independent Study Proposal

U.S. citizens have become increasingly aware of the “enhanced interrogation techniques” implemented by the U.S. government against enemy operatives in the War on Terror. As a result, controversy has risen regarding not only the moral implications of torture but also whether or not torture can effectively be used to extract information. The research in this field is growing and not necessarily novel, dating back to the beginning of the War on Terror when these questions became swiftly prominent. Because of the scarcity of this research, it is extremely important that questions regarding torture are answered. Future policy-making regarding interrogation may then be properly informed.

Currently, there are three interconnected themes in this research:

Theme 1: Ethics of use

Generally speaking, arguments of torture ethics involve weighing the risk to the detainee as a result of torture versus the risk to public safety if valuable information is not extracted from the detainee. One of the most prevalent models cited in pro-torture ethical arguments is the “ticking-time-bomb” scenario, detailing a situation in which a bomb has been planted in a major city by a terrorist, that terrorist is in captivity, and there is not enough time for any means of interrogation beyond torture (Bagaric & Clarke, 2005). This scenario is problematic in determining support for torture and some researchers have deconstructed the scenario to explain why it is inaccurate to real-life scenarios and biased in favor of torture (Bufacchi & Arrigo, 2006). Therefore, ethical arguments often are not as clear cut as an assessment of the number of people affected with or without the use of torture.

Theme 2: Public perception of torture

There is a disparity between the perceived and actual American support for torture, indicating that, while many Americans may believe that torture is largely supported, torture as an institution lacks majority support (Gronke et al., 2010). However, support for torture is subject to change depending on certain variables, such as closeness to potential victims of a crisis possibly prevented by torture (Houck et al., 2014). Even the definition of torture and what acts qualify as torture lack a popular consensus (Norris et al., 2010). Therefore, it is clear that arguments regarding the popular support of torture lack a firm foundation.

Theme 3: Efficacy

Alongside the confusion over support for torture is the lack of evidence for the efficacy of torture. Several factors involved in the implementation of torture are unclear. According to Arrigo and Wagner (2007), the implementation of torture may be a result of interrogators not receiving proper training. Additionally, it may not be reliably determined if detainees actually possess desired information or if truthfulness can be determined (Costanzo & Gerrity, 2009). The long-term health consequences of torture for both detainees and interrogators is unclear, but research has revealed shocking long-term emotional damage for torture victims (Rasmussen et al., 2007). Finally, it may not be neurochemically possible for subjects of torture to provide truthful information (O'Mara, 2009). There may not be sufficient empirical evidence that torture is or is not effective in the extraction of information, which may necessitate a future empirical study on torture efficacy.

Due to the rampant disagreement on ethics, perception, and efficacy of torture throughout the field of political psychology, a thorough investigation of both pro- and anti-torture arguments should be conducted. Torture research is currently divided into three facets: ethics, support, and efficacy. This investigation is necessary to establish connections between these three facets and

tie them into a cohesive argument regarding the implementation of torture. Additionally, this study would aid in determining where future research in this field should focus and what questions regarding torture still need to be answered.

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