

Comments on article “Beyond torture: the future of interrogation”

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I felt the need to comment on an article¹ published in your magazine, because my contribution to it has not been adequately represented. The article presents a rather optimistic view regarding the possibility of more “humane” interrogation of detainees. In a 2009 article² I proposed a learning theory formulation pointing to certain contextual characteristics of torture, including (1) intent; (2) purpose (e.g., to extract information / confession or as an act of punishment or vengeance); (3) exposures to often multiple, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and potentially traumatic stressors likely to induce intense distress in most people; and (4) deliberate and systematic attempts to remove all forms of control from the person to maximise stressor impact and induce a state of total helplessness. I published empirical evidence^{2,3} in support of this formulation pointing to the fact that both torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment exert their impact through removing control from the person and causing a state of helplessness. This work also shows that being held captive by the enemy during a war is at least as traumatic as the experience of torture per se. This is because captivity in such a setting involves the same psychological mechanisms of traumatic stress as torture and the additional threat to one’s physical and psychological integrity and well-being associated with falling captive to the enemy. Thus, the traumatic impact of captivity does not stem from an interrogator’s behaviour alone. It is indeed such contextually traumatic nature of the captivity setting that makes “beyond torture interrogation” a contradiction in terms. This is simply another euphemism, such as “light torture,” that only serves to obscure this fact.

Detention and interrogation, even when they do not involve physical violence, are inherently coercive and potentially traumatic processes, because they involve the four elements noted above. This is indeed supported by evidence showing that 20% of the suspects detained for ordinary police interrogation experience abnormally high levels of anxiety because of uncertainty and lack of control over the environment⁴ and that some people develop posttraumatic stress disorder after such an experience.⁵ Indeed, even suicides are known to occur under such circumstances. This is not to say, however, that all ordinary interrogations constitute torture. It simply implies that these processes overlap in their underlying psychological mechanisms that lead to traumatic stress. The critical distinction here is thus quantitative rather than qualitative. The above formulation implies that, *when the first two criteria are met, a particular process constitutes torture to the extent that it serves to remove control from the person to induce total helplessness*. Indeed, the importance of due legal process (e.g. adequate legal representation, presence of an attorney during interrogation, etc.) lies in the fact that it helps one avoid total loss of control during detention and interrogation process. The critical question to consider here is whether the contextual processes involved in detention or imprisonment of individuals, including but not limited to interrogation procedures, go far enough along this continuum to constitute torture.

Evidence² shows individuals who are strongly committed to a political cause or belief system are quite resilient to any form of psychological manipulations, including severe torture. That various “persuasion” or “information educating” techniques drawn from theories of social psychology developed in western cultures might work with such individuals reflects a rather naïve belief. The unrealistic nature of such a strategy would be immediately obvious to anyone with an adequate understanding of the mindset (or cognitive structure) of individuals

from non-western cultures involved in acts of terror and the reasons that motivate their violent actions at the expense of their own life.

I find the debate on whether torture is an effective interrogation method rather disconcerting, because the public is likely to perceive it as implying that torture might be justified in certain circumstances if torture did work. While “torture does not work” arguments might be viewed as useful in disarming the other side of this debate, one can easily get trapped in this position, if and when someone effectively challenges these arguments. Indeed, there are already claims of “classified evidence” to the contrary and such claims may well appear more convincing to an already fearful public than any indirect scientific evidence. Furthermore, there will always be challenges to scientific evidence on this politically sensitive issue and thus one needs to make sure that such evidence is watertight before making it public. In any event, even sound evidence does not easily translate into governmental policy when it goes against certain political interests. A more effective strategy in efforts against torture would be to clarify public misconceptions about what constitutes torture and to appeal to public conscience and sense of morality by emphasising the illegal and immoral nature of the act. After all, public opinion is the ‘soft belly’ of governments in western societies.

My conclusions may appear rather pessimistic in implying that there can be no interrogation method that is both effective and humane. If humane treatment is defined as one that is not likely to cause permanent psychological damage, then evidence suggests that this is not easily achievable in the context of war captivity. On a more optimistic note, however, it is worth noting that a focus on the root causes of terror acts is likely to be more rewarding in their prevention than a search for more effective interrogation methods. Yet unpublished evidence from our studies shows that exposure to war violence, among its other psychological effects, leads to a strong desire for vengeance on all sides of the conflict. Such evidence on the cognitive and emotional effects of war trauma may well explain the cycle of violence that plagues our world today and shed light on effective ways of dealing with this problem on political, social, and individual levels. A commonly held view of individuals involved in acts of violence as “religious fanatics” hell-bent on destroying western way of life and values does not contribute much to an adequate understanding of this issue.

References

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