

The pain of torture can make the innocent seem guilty

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The rationale behind torture is that pain will make the guilty confess, but a new study by researchers at Harvard University finds that the pain of torture can make even the innocent seem guilty.

Participants in the study met a woman suspected of cheating to win money. The woman was then "tortured" by having her hand immersed in ice water while study participants listened to the session over an intercom. She never confessed to anything, but the more she suffered during the [torture](#), the guiltier she was perceived to be.

The research, published in the "[Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#)," was conducted by Kurt Gray, graduate student in psychology, and Daniel M. Wegner, professor of psychology, both in Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

"Our research suggests that torture may not uncover guilt so much as lead to its perception," says Gray. "It is as though people who know of the victim's pain must somehow convince themselves that it was a good idea—and so come to believe that the person who was tortured deserved it."

Not all torture victims appear guilty, however. When participants in the study only listened to a recording of a previous torture session—rather than taking part as witnesses of ongoing torture—they saw the victim who expressed more pain as less guilty. Gray explains the different results as arising from different levels of complicity.

"Those who feel complicit with the torture have a need to justify the torture, and so link the victim's pain to blame," says Gray. "On the other hand, those distant from torture have no need to justify it and so can sympathize with the suffering of the victim, linking pain to innocence."

The study included 78 participants: half met the woman who was apparently tortured (actually a confederate of the experimenters who was, of course, not harmed at all), and half did not. Participants were told that the study was about moral behavior, and that the woman may have cheated by taking more money than she deserved. The experimenter suggested that a stressful situation might make a guilty person confess, so participants listened for a confession over a hidden intercom as she was subjected to the sham "torture."

The confederate did not admit to cheating but reacted to having her hand submerged in ice water with either indifference or with whimpering and pleading. Participants who had met her rated her as more guilty the more she suffered. Those who did not meet her rated her as more guilty when she felt less pain.

Gray suggests that these results offer an explanation for the debate swirling around torture.

"Seeing others in [pain](#) can perpetuate ideological differences about the justifiability of torture," says Gray. "Those who initially advocate torture see those harmed as guilty, unlike those who initially reject torture and its methods."

The findings also shed light on the Abu Ghraib scandal, where prison guards tortured Iraqi detainees. Prison guards, who are close to the suffering of detainees, see detainees as more guilty the more they suffer, unlike the more distant general public.

The case is still open on whether torture actually makes victims more likely to tell the truth. This research suggests instead that the mere fact that someone was tortured leads observers to think that the truth was found.

Source: Harvard University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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