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Cuing moral transcendence reduces support for torture and disentangles it from retributive and utilitarian concerns

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ABSTRACT

We investigated the impact of moral schemas with differing levels of “transcendence” on attitudes towards torture. Participants were exposed to one of three morality-relevant experimental conditions priming different levels of moral transcendence – with moral transcendence understood as the primary psychological dimension distinguishing preconventional, conventional and postconventional reasoning. Participants later considered two hypothetical detainee scenarios. For each detainee, participants judged the importance of punishment and seeking information, and evaluated the appropriateness of “severe interrogation”, either abstractly conceived (ACSI) or concretely described (CDSI). Across scenarios, the correlations between desiring information, desiring punishment, and recommending CDSI were strongest in the least transcendent condition and weakest in the most transcendent, suggesting that greater primed transcendence reduced associations between supporting CDSI and two common motivations of such support. Exposure to more transcendent moral schemas was also associated with a monotonic decline in support for CDSI in the two scenarios.

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The use in counter-terrorism operations of “enhanced” interrogation techniques – which arguably constitute torture (e.g. Siems, 2009) – has sparked moral and legal debate in the USA and worldwide, and the clear difference between the torturer’s perspective and that of the tortured can make the debate seem intractable (Batson, Chao, & Givens, 2009). Reaching consensus may depend on whether those involved in the debate take the perspectives of others and apply moral principles consistently. Thus, understanding what processes affect attitudes towards torture may have broad theoretical implications for moral judgment.

Some empirical research into torture-related attitudes has focused on the psychological factors underlying different perspectives toward torture (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009; Crandall, Eidelman, Skitka, & Morgan, 2009; Haider-Markel & Vieux, 2008; Homant & Witkowski, 2011; Malka & Soto, 2011), but the role of more general moral processes remains relatively unexplored. In a study that developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg conducted with social psychologist Stanley Milgram (described in Kohlberg, 1984), those with the highest

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moral development were most likely to resist orders to use electric shocks to torture another person (Milgram, 2009/1974). More recently, Leidner, Kardos, and Castano (under review) have found that moral arguments against torture are more effective at eliciting attitude change than pragmatic arguments. However, no research has yet investigated how manipulating an individual's moral orientation might impact torture's perceived justifiability (for example, on the grounds of obtaining true information or punishing transgression) or overall support for torture.

Neo-Kohlbergian moral schemas

Research into moral processing and development has often emphasized the degree to which moral consideration progresses from a more narrow range (e.g. me and mine) to a more inclusive one (e.g. all humans), and from a set of concrete, often self-serving, bases for moral judgment to more abstractly principled ones. Kohlbergian and, more recently, neo-Kohlbergian theories of moral development (e.g. Kohlberg, 1976; La Rue & Olejnik, 1980; Rest, 1979; Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000) are the most well-known psychological theories emphasizing this construct, which we refer to as "moral transcendence".

According to neo-Kohlbergian theory, a low-transcendence "Personal Interest" schema involves reasoning based on what seems pleasant or convenient for the self with little intrinsic regard for social norms or laws. A moderate-transcendence "Maintaining Norms" schema involves reasoning based on what is right by social norms and laws, even over hedonic self-concern. The highest-transcendence "Postconventional" schema involves reasoning based on what is right by abstract standards, discerned in a principled way, and valued over both hedonic self-concern and conformity with laws and norms (Rest *et al.*, 2000).

Previous research suggests that it is possible both for individuals to access different moral orientations at once and for researchers to activate, at least temporarily, reliance on certain ones. Kohlberg (1984), for example, documented cases of college students who seemed to "regress" to less-advanced reasoning. In later research, individuals asked to write arguments both for and against the death penalty often used different stages of reasoning for each. Notably, their arguments against the death penalty were coded as reflecting more advanced reasoning than those written to support it – even when participants personally supported it (de Vries & Walker, 1986). Walker (1982) also induced "stage skipping" among grade-school children, and university students primed to reason based on formal propositions (rather than concrete examples) scored higher on a neo-Kohlbergian measure of moral development (La Rue & Olejnik, 1980). Based on such evidence, neo-Kohlbergian theorizing improves upon its predecessor by specifying more fluid "schemas" and allowing for the coexistence of multiple schemas in an individual simultaneously (Rest *et al.*, 2000).

Our research attempted to cue moral transcendence, using these schemas. Plausibly, cuing moral schemas of differing transcendence can affect intuitions regarding torture's appropriateness as a tool of information-gathering and just punishment and, consequently, people's inclination to support it. For instance, if cued moral transcendence makes people intuit that torture is not a good way of procuring true information or administering just punishment, then people should be less likely to support it.

Support for torture, retribution, and concern for information

Previous research (e.g. Carlsmith & Sood, 2009; Homant & Witkowski, 2011) highlights retributive and utilitarian concerns as two effective motivators of support for torture, motivators that often overlap. People often profess utilitarian justifications for punishment while revealing strong retributive priorities (Carlsmith, 2008; Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). Both utilitarian and retributive concerns, particularly the latter, have been found to motivate pro-torture attitudes (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009) as well as support for the death penalty (Ellsworth & Ross, 1983) and support for the civil commitment of “sexually violent predators” (Carlsmith, Monahan, & Evans, 2007).

We expect that differences in moral transcendence may be relevant to how judgments differ on these questions. For instance, torture may strike some as a good means of obtaining retributive justice because it is such a satisfyingly brutal means of executing vengeance, whereas others may see torture as cruel and unusual punishment likely to undermine the rule of law, especially when applied to those who have not been charged, tried or convicted of any crime. Conceivably, the former reflects a more selfish orientation (what Kohlberg would call pre-conventional) and the latter reflects a law-and-order (conventional) or universalist, rights-based (post-conventional) orientation. Thus we might expect an individual’s state of moral transcendence to be relevant to judging torture’s appropriateness as a means of exacting retribution.

In discussions of policy, it is rare for official representatives of the state to claim that torture is a reasonable “just dessert” for suspected terrorists – although the bounds of acceptable public discourse on this subject may be changing (Johnson, 2015) – and it is more common to appeal to utilitarian concerns, such as the need to gain valuable information in order to save lives (Steinhoff, 2010). Yet retributive factors likely play a strong role in motivating ordinary people’s decisions to support torture. Although presenting a detainee as more likely to have information increases support for employing “severe interrogation” on him, presenting the detainee as a killer deserving of punishment has a substantially greater effect (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009). Many individuals contemplating the issue of coercive interrogation may thus fail to discriminate between retributive and utilitarian concerns, implicitly seeing the two as intertwined rather than as morally distinct and conceivably at cross-purposes.

Conflation of moral impulses, either with personal desires or with each other, may often occur by default, but may become less likely as morally transcendent thinking becomes more predominant. According to neo-Kohlbergian theory, moral transcendence moves people away from considering their own pleasure as always good and their own suffering as always bad. Still greater transcendence should also encourage people to recognize that something can be just even if it involves personal suffering, societal disapproval, or both. Moral development also influences more domain-general cognitive processes that lead individuals both to consider more perspectives when making a moral decision (“differentiation”) and to synthesize these perspectives into a more coherent and internally consistent moral stance (“integration”; de Vries & Walker, 1986).

Thus, increasing moral transcendence should encourage a tendency for broader perspective-taking that includes the perspective of the tortured as well as a more abstract, universal perspective that considers whether and when torture is consistent with human rights, the rule of law, and civil society. Transcendence should also attenuate automatic associations between what is pleasurable, or conventional, and what one considers morally good.

Abstractly conceived and concretely described torture

Not all forms of torture support may be equally sensitive to increasing moral transcendence, however. The moral sensitivity that transcendence encourages may have greater impact on judgments of concretely described torture behaviors (like “sensory deprivation in order to induce psychosis and regression”) rather than on torture conceived in the abstract.

Greene (2009), for example, found that increasing the emotional salience of a hypothetical act of killing (describing it as pushing someone in front of a trolley as opposed to flipping a switch) increased the moral reaction against the decision to kill. Assuming torture, like killing, inspires horror or moral repulsion (O’Donahue *et al.*, 2014), abstract framing may dampen the “moral horror” reaction while concrete descriptions may increase it. For instance, the most direct evidence for the role of moral transcendence in rejecting torture (the aforementioned collaboration between Milgram and Kohlberg) used an experimental paradigm that made the suffering of the tortured very salient (as cited in Kohlberg, 1984), and this salience may have enabled morally transcendent reasoning to attenuate complicity in that suffering.

Overview of the current study

Overall, our study sought to address two questions. (1) Can increased moral transcendence affect the associations between support for torture – abstractly conceived or concretely described – and its common motivations and justifications (i.e. utilitarian and retributive concerns)? (2) Can increased moral transcendence affect mean levels of support for torture?

Method

Participants

Participants from five different samples ($n = 734$) – including two online samples – gave informed consent to complete the study. Of these, 248 participants – mostly solicited from non-student samples, particularly online ones – did not proceed past the presentation of the independent variable, and we excluded an additional 73 and 12 participants, respectively, who either received a faulty version of the survey or did not respond to at least 13 items on the main dependent variable: determining the appropriateness of using various interrogation techniques on two hypothetical detainees. A total sample of 401 participants remained.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) testing for a condition by subsample interaction suggests that the high attrition rate among non-student participants did not significantly influence the results, ns , $p = .27$. Another analysis using the number of participants who passed our exclusion criteria as the outcome measure also revealed no evidence of differential attrition, $F(2,731) = 1.60$, $p = .20$.

The remaining participants were 65.6% female, mean age 23 years, 33.9% white, 27.7% Latino/a, 15.7% black, 7.0% Asian. Forty-seven and 63 participants were from two supervised college samples (both of the City University of New York) and 57 students completed the study online, all for course credit. In addition to college samples, we recruited participants from the general population: 171 from an online sample solicited at various websites and 63 from a line of theatergoers who completed the survey while waiting for tickets. University

participants received course credit for participation, while all others were compensated with entrance into a \$300 lottery.

Procedure

Participants were told that they would be taking part in a study about moral dilemmas and completed a survey that contained one of three conditions designed to cue different moral schemas. After the manipulation, all participants answered questions about interrogation, the imperative to obtain information from and punish two hypothetical detainees, and their demographics.

Materials

Independent variable

Each condition consisted of two parts to maximize impact. Participants first considered one of three hypothetical scenarios that required them to make a moral decision. A “Personal Interest” (PI) scenario encouraged refusal to reciprocate the generosity of an unwanted suitor. A “Maintaining Norms” (MN) scenario encouraged obedience to a stop light at night with no other cars or police around, and a “Postconventional” (PC) scenario encouraged assisting the rescue of Jewish children fleeing the Nazis in spite of the personal danger and criminality of that assistance. We designed these scenarios to encourage increasing levels of moral transcendence, using the three schemas implicated in neo-Kohlbergian research (Rest *et al.*, 2000).

To reinforce each schema even for those who did not make the expected decision, participants also indicated their agreement with five schema-consistent statements, unrelated to the scenario, on a biased Likert scale (ranging from “Neutral/disagree” [0] to “Totally Agree” [4]). We intended these items both to reinforce the manipulation by constraining disagreement with schema-consistent views and as a more facially valid measure of morally transcendent sentiments (see Appendix A for the specific scenarios and schema-consistent statements).

A separate pilot study completed for extra credit on a final exam by Introductory Psychology students ($n = 112$) offers evidence that each of the scenarios were relevant to the intended Kohlbergian schema. When given the scenarios and expected decisions, students who had all previously learned about and been tested on Kohlberg’s theory of moral development were more likely to designate the PI condition as “preconventional”, the MN condition as “conventional”, and the PC condition as “postconventional”. This pattern was especially pronounced among those with higher grades on the final exam (before extra credit); all students earning 90 (A–) or better on the exam made these designations.

In our main study, the majority of participants also endorsed the schema-consistent action in each condition: 62.5% in the PI condition, 93.1% in the MN condition, and 89.1% in the PC condition, suggesting that participants intuited the expected responses as appropriate. We retained participants who did not choose the schema-consistent action because even these participants read the scenario and completed the biased schema-evoking items (and thus were likely affected by the manipulation), and because doing so provides a stronger test of our hypotheses.

Summary measures composed of the five schema-evoking Likert items in each condition had adequate internal reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74, .72,$ and $.57$ for PI, MN, and PC conditions,

respectively), and one-sample *t*-tests confirmed that participants' endorsement of all these summary measures exceeded 1 (slightly agree), $M = 1.60$, $SD = .89$, $t(127) = 7.57$; $M = 2.76$, $SD = .78$, $t(143) = 27.08$; and $M = 2.48$, $SD = .69$, $t(128) = 23.35$, respectively, all $ps < .001$. Thus, the scenarios and biased Likert items seemed to incline most participants to agree (or at least not disagree) with condition-specific items. It was most difficult to elicit endorsement of the Personal Interest schema, as might be expected with adult participants, who, presumably, should rely less on PI reasoning (Rest *et al.*, 2001).

Dependent variables

All participants read two hypothetical scenarios – modified from Carlsmith and Sood (2009) – about two detainees: “Malik”, a non-violent detainee who was likely to have information regarding a planned attack on soldiers and citizens, and “Farid”, a detainee with a violent history but who was unlikely to have any useful information. We chose the name Farid because it was the same name used for a hypothetical detainee in previous research on torture (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009), and we chose Malik as a similarly Muslim-sounding name with two syllables and matching vowels. In the context of the US War on Terror, the vast majority of detainees selected for interrogation – including “enhanced interrogation” – are Muslims. Moreover, when in later studies we presented to participants thematically similar detainees without giving names, participants did not appear any less likely to use torture on these unnamed detainees (see Discussion).

We evaluated retributiveness with two questions – one for each hypothetical detainee – asking, “How important is it to punish [detainee]?” We measured utilitarian concern with two more questions asking, “How important is it to use effective methods to obtain the truth about what [detainee] really knows or doesn't know?” Each response was measured on a nine-point scale.

We assessed support for 16 coercive interrogation techniques against (1) Malik, (2) Farid, or (3) in some hypothetical situation left to the participant's imagination. We focus here on judgments rendered for Malik and Farid as these detainee scenarios were designed to tap into utilitarian and retributive motivations in particular. The coercive techniques considered are listed in Appendix B, and designated appropriateness of these 16 coercive techniques for each detainee constitute support for “concretely described severe interrogation” (CDSI).

Before assessing CDSI, we asked participants about abstractly conceived “severe interrogation” (ACSI). Participants were asked to propose an upper limit of “severe” interrogation on a nine-point scale for the purposes of setting limits in US law and for addressing the scenarios involving Malik and Farid. Finally, participants completed demographic measures.

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks

To assess whether participants discriminated between Malik and Farid, we evaluated whether, as a within-subjects comparison, they considered Farid (the violent detainee) as more worthy of punishment than Malik (the non-violent detainee) and whether they considered it more important to extract information from Malik (the detainee likely to have information) than Farid (the detainee unlikely to have information). As expected, participants were more

Table 1. Correlations of punitiveness and information concern, respectively, with number of specific coercive techniques recommended for detainees, by condition.

	Punitiveness	Information concern (n)
Coercive techniques (PI) ($n = 128$)	.57*** _a	.40*** _a
Coercive techniques (MN) ($n = 143$)	.50*** _{ab}	.21* _{ab}
Coercive techniques (PC) ($n = 129$)	.33*** _{bc}	.05 _{bc}

NB: Correlations lacking any overlap in subscripts are statistically different from each other at $p < .05$.

*** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$.

punitive towards Farid ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 2.25$) than Malik ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 2.07$), $F(1,394) = 102.96$, $p < .001$, and more solicitous of information from Malik ($M = 6.66$, $SD = 1.83$) than from Farid ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 2.38$), $F(1,396) = 20.79$, $p < .001$. Mixed ANOVAs predicting informational and retributive concern and including condition as an independent variable found no between-subjects main effects of condition, both $ps > .10$, nor any interactions between condition and detainee, $F_s < 1$. In other words, cuing moral transcendence had no impact on how much participants cared generally about obtaining information from or punishing the detainees.

Interrogation priorities and support for torture, by condition

The manipulation did, however, affect the extent to which participants implicitly saw torture as valuable for obtaining information or as a means of punishment. Given the strong overlap between willingness to use CDSI techniques on Malik and on Farid ($\alpha = .80$)¹ and in part to simplify analyses, we created summary measures of CDSI techniques (mean number of coercive techniques recommended), ACSI techniques (mean of expressed support for using unspecified “severe” interrogation), punitiveness (mean of expressed support for punishment of Malik and Farid), and information concern (mean of expressed support for seeking information from each detainee).

To assess whether participants generally perceived torture as valuable for obtaining information, we measured the correlation of “information concern” with support for CDSI in each condition. As Table 1 shows, the correlation between expressed information concern and support for CDSI declined monotonically, and significantly, from the least morally transcendent condition to the most. To assess whether participants generally perceived torture as a valuable tool of punishment, we measured the correlation of “punitiveness” with support for CDSI in each condition, finding that this correlation also declined monotonically. Finally, the correlation between punitiveness and information concern also declined monotonically, from $r(128) = .62$, $p < .001$ in the PI condition to $r(143) = .37$, $p < .001$ in the MN condition, to $r(129) = .29$, $p = .001$ in the PC condition, with the difference between the first and last being significant, $Z = 3.38$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants implicitly perceived punishment as a less valuable tool of obtaining information (or vice versa) and saw the two concerns as more distinct with increasing moral transcendence.

All three correlations (punitiveness and CDSI, information concern and CDSI, punitiveness and information concern) differed significantly between the PI and PC conditions, $2.36 \leq Z_s \leq 3.38$, all $ps < .02$. Subsequent analyses suggested that this pattern of declining correlations from conditions of lower to higher moral transcendence held for the first two correlations with regard to Malik. For Farid, only the correlation between punitiveness and CDSI declined

significantly, perhaps because punishment was a more salient concern for Farid, the detainee with a violent history.

The correlation of punitiveness and information concern with ACSI changed non-monotonically across conditions, and, although correlations were weaker in the PC than the PI condition, they were not significantly so, both $ps > .12$.

In sum, among those exposed to a more transcendent schema, CDSI became less associated with expressed concern for information and for retribution; also, retribution and information concern became less associated with each other. The most straightforward interpretation of these findings is that those in higher-transcendence conditions interpreted any perceived imperative to seek information or administer punishment as being more inconsistent with using the CDSI techniques presented and implicitly saw them as increasingly unrelated. These declines could reflect increased accessibility of cognitions that torture might well fail to elicit true information, and thoughts that one should only punish after due process (and thus not during detention).

These declines might also reflect increasing emotional disgust towards concretely described torture with increased transcendence. This increasing disgust may prompt a disassociation of support for torture (perceived as immoral) from support for finding information or punishing wrongdoing (perceived as moral). This explanation, however, has more difficulty accounting for the declining correlation between information concern and punitiveness in the absence of any overall declines in expressed concern for information or punishment by condition. This latter result suggests a logical disassociation between the two priorities, rather than an affective disassociation, and supports the contention that the underlying process is cognitive, rather than emotional.

Participants exposed to higher transcendence may have also increasingly considered other concerns – such as Kantian injunctions against using individuals solely as a means to an end – that made coercive techniques simply more philosophically unpalatable and dampened the relative contributions of utilitarian and retributive concerns. Because the CDSI items gave some explicit description to this suffering, increased transcendence may have also engendered a greater sense of empathetic overlap with the tortured and, thus, more visceral empathy for the suffering of detainees. Any or all of these processes might account for the effects, and all proposed processes are broadly consistent with neo-Kohlbergian expectations (Rest *et al.*, 2000; *cf* Suedfeld, 2007).

Changes in correlations among abstract and concrete interrogation measures

From the PI to the PC condition, the correlation between the proposed legal upper limit of severity (an ACSI measure) and the number of concretely described severe interrogation techniques considered appropriate for detainees (CDSI) declined (non-monotonically), from $r(124) = .46, p < .001$ in the PI condition to $r(127) = .04, ns$, in the PC condition, $Z = 3.6, p < .001$. The correlations between support for recommended interrogation severity for the detainees (also an ACSI measure) and CDSI also declined non-monotonically, from $r(128) = .59, p < .001$ in the PI condition to $r(129) = .34, p < .001$ in the PC condition, $Z = 2.54, p = .01$.

Because participants evaluated CDSI techniques *after* responding to these ACSI measures, these results suggest that those in the PC condition perhaps did not “seize and freeze” as much on their abstract commitments when making concrete judgments of whether to torture (for a discussion of seizing and freezing in the social psychology literature, see Kruglanski

and Webster, 1996). Participants, then, were seemingly more open to revising their original inclinations in the face of new information about the types – and effects – of the techniques that interrogators might use. We would expect such a result if participants were, indeed, better able to incorporate new, morally relevant information within a high-transcendence mindset.

These findings, along with the lack of any change in the correlations between perceived appropriateness of utilitarian and retributive concerns and ACSI measures by condition, may also indicate that the specific and detail-rich CDSI items were more sensitive to increased moral transcendence. Such a distinction between abstract attitudes on “interrogation severity” and more concrete responses under specific circumstances is consistent with research on the discrepancy between people’s abstract support for certain punitive policies (e.g. “zero tolerance” policies) and their willingness to apply them under specified circumstances (Carlsmith, 2008). Because CDSI measures seemed most sensitive to our manipulation, our subsequent analyses thus focus primarily on these measures.

Direct effect of moral transcendence on support for coercive interrogation

To assess the possibility that condition affected support for using CDSI techniques on detainees, we performed a mixed ANOVA with experimental condition (PI vs. MN vs. PC, a between-subjects factor), and detainee potentially subjected to these techniques (Malik vs. Farid, a within-subjects factor). The dependent variable was aggregate support for the 16 CDSI techniques expressed as a proportion (see Figure 1).

The analysis yielded two main effects: one of detainee and one of condition, with no interaction. Consistent with previous scholarship suggesting that people are more likely to support torturing targets apparently deserving of punishment, rather than those who can provide information (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009), participants considered about 15.8% of techniques as appropriate for Farid (a violent detainee lacking information), compared to 13.7% for Malik (a non-violent detainee with information), $F(1,398) = 6.15, p = .01$.

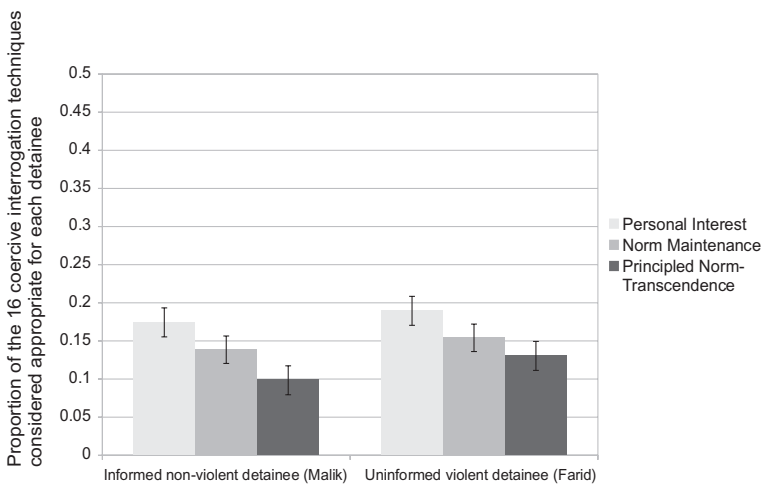


Figure 1. Proportion of the 16 coercive interrogation techniques considered appropriate for use on each detainee, by condition.

More relevant to our hypotheses, the analysis also found that the recommended number of interrogation techniques decreased monotonically from the PI to the MN to the PC condition for both detainees, $F(2, 398) = 4.26, p = .014$. The differences between the PI and PC conditions were significant and of modest effect size for both Malik, $t(255) = 3.20, p = .002, d = .40$, and for Farid, $t(255) = 2.33, p = .02, d = .29$. These results suggest that shifting participants' moral schemas toward higher transcendence can reduce support for torture, at least when the potential victims and consequences of it are made salient.

Additional analyses yielded no significant interactions between condition and race, or condition and nationality, $F_s < 1$ for all interactions (analyzed separately). Also, condition did not interact with political ideology, $F < 1$, despite criticisms of liberal bias in Kohlberg's original theories (e.g. Haidt & Graham, 2007). In other words, race, nationality, and political ideology did not moderate the effect of moral transcendence on support for torture. Consistent with previous research (Haider-Markel & Vieux, 2008), women ($M = 12.19\%$ of techniques), compared to men ($M = 20.23\%$), endorsed fewer CDSI techniques overall, $F(1,382) = 12.72, p < .001$. There was also a marginally significant interaction between gender and condition, $F(2,382) = 2.24, p = .11$, which was driven by responses to Malik, for whom the interaction was significant, $F(2,382) = 3.10, p = .046$. Once again, men tended to endorse more techniques than women, but this difference all but disappeared in the PC condition, $F < 1$.

To address the possibility that our manipulation may have activated more than simply moral transcendence, we also conducted the analyses with the biased-Likert scale responses as a moderator of condition. Because these measures are a more face-valid representation of moral transcendence (see Appendix A), evidence of moderation by these measures would indicate a relatively unique influence of schema-consistent reasoning. We carried out a mixed ANOVA treating condition, agreement with the biased scales, and their interaction as between-subjects variables, and detainee as a within-subjects variable. This analysis still showed a main effect of condition on CDSI, $F(2,395) = 4.34, p = .01$, but agreement with schema-consistent items moderated this effect, $F(2,395) = 4.55, p = .01$.

In addition, we still observed a main effect of detainee, $F(1,395) = 6.07, p = .01$, but it did not interact with condition, $F < 1$, or agreement with the schema-consistent items, $F(2,395) = 1.71, p = .18$. Thus, for a follow-up analysis regarding moderation of condition, we collapsed across detainee. Consistent with our expectations, agreement with the schema-consistent items further dampened support for CDSI with higher cued moral transcendence. Compared to those in the PI condition, the relationship between agreement with schema-consistent items and supporting CDSI for the detainees was nominally more negative for those in the MN condition, $b = -0.04, \beta = -.11, t(395) = 1.60, p = .11$, and was significantly more negative for those in the PC condition, $b = -0.09, \beta = -.19, t(395) = 2.99, p = .003$. Whereas agreement with the schema-consistent items positively predicted support for CDSI in the PI condition, $r(126) = .24, p = .01$, it did not predict such support in the MN condition, $r(142) = .13, p = .12$, and it *negatively* predicted CDSI in the PC condition, $r(127) = -.18, p = .046$.

With regard to the more abstract ACSI measures, additional analyses revealed no effect of condition on either the proposed legal upper limit of interrogation severity in the USA or on proposed "severity" of interrogation for Malik and Farid, both $F_s < 1$. This result is consistent with the declining correlations between support for CDSI techniques and ACSI measures.

In sum, similar to the results of de Vries and Walker (1986), who found that those scoring higher on measures of moral development showed greater opposition to the death penalty,

our findings suggest that more incrementally transcendent moral schemas elicit greater opposition to using coercive interrogation techniques, when those techniques are concretely described. This result holds especially when people indicate greater agreement with items that are consistent with the cued schemas. In other words, those who indicated the respective average levels of agreement with MN and PC sentiments were less supportive of torture than those who indicated average levels of agreement with PI sentiments, and this divergence grew larger among those who indicated even higher levels of agreement with the respective items. Indeed, greater levels of agreement with Personal Interest items positively predicted CDSI, whereas agreement with Postconventional items negatively predicted it. This increased opposition to CDSI techniques with greater moral transcendence held whether the detainee was described as violent or non-violent, well-informed or uninformed.

Limitations and future research

Confounds inherent to the independent variable

Given how rarely researchers have managed to shift people's morals schemas, we chose to design our manipulations to maximize impact – even though doing so likely introduced confounds unrelated to cued moral transcendence. We chose rich narrative cues rather than more minimalist primes out of concern that minimalist primes might not sufficiently affect our dependent variables. Thus the manipulations we used involve scenarios that differed greatly from each other in content, with minor differences in word count also. The postconventional scenario, in particular, may not only elicit postconventional moral intuitions, but also involves a much more severe and high-stakes moral dilemma, potentially makes mortality more salient, and evokes a historical event in a foreign country. We acknowledge this confound, but see it as both difficult to avoid and also not fatal to interpreting the meaning of the independent variable.

Kohlberg, like many researchers in social and personality psychology during his time, was motivated in part by a desire to understand what psychological factors inclined people to complicity with Nazi-led genocides and was specifically concerned with what psychological factors might provide a buffer of resistance to Nazi seduction (Kohlberg, 1969). Self-sacrificing and technically illegal acts (such as those committed by Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr.) also inspired much of Kohlberg's thinking on postconventional morality, and it is difficult to contemplate such acts without some appeal to sentiments inherent in postconventional thinking. Including the extreme scenario of the postconventional condition thus at least reflected an identity that Kohlberg perceived between moral transcendence – in this case, the highest levels of moral development – and having what it takes to stand up to genocide. Rescuing children from a legally sanctioned genocide is so saliently about moral transcendence, in other words, that its confound with “doing high-stakes things” or “attending to matters where death is involved” is relatively irrelevant.

Relatedly, the scenarios were designed to induce people to agree with the sentiments expressed in each condition's passage, which required making each passage credibly relevant to the moral intuition we wished to evoke. It would have been difficult to cue higher-transcendence reasoning with a morally trivial dilemma (like receiving an unwanted Valentine's Day card), and, likewise, it would seem odd to endorse rescuing a Jewish family, at risk to one's life and in violation of the law, for primarily selfish or conventional reasons. The

circumstances under which people will readily justify their clearly selfish interests as morally right are likely to be more anodyne ones, circumstances like those used in the Personal Interest condition. As preliminary analyses indicated, eliciting the desired selfish response in a moralizing context proved relatively difficult, even when the stakes were low. It likely would have been considerably harder if the stakes were higher.

Finally, agreement with schema-consistent items for each condition uniquely predicted CDSI, and in theoretically predicted ways. The effect of condition was especially acute for those who agreed more with the respective moral sentiments. This result can be interpreted in one of two ways, both consistent with neo-Kohlbergian theory: either cued transcendence reduced support for CDSI especially among those for whom the manipulation was more successful, or did so especially for those who were inclined to agree with more morally transcendent sentiments. It would seem particularly difficult to argue that any of the other possible confounds introduced by our manipulations would sufficiently explain this pattern of moderation, especially insofar as most other demographic variables did *not* moderate the relationship.

Although the confounds related to scenario content may threaten the internal validity of our study, this threat is manageable, and not more problematic than confounds affecting some classic social psychology studies. If a manipulation plausibly arouses multiple psychological processes at once, but one of those psychological processes makes the most theoretical sense of the manipulation's effect on the dependent variable, then this minimizes the significance of the confound. If neo-Kohlbergian theory plausibly explains our results but severity and mortality salience, for example, do not, then these confounds can be considered worth the cost of having a strong and relevant manipulation.

For our particular results, the most transcendent schema produced (1) diminished association between punitiveness, information concern and support for torture, (2) diminished inclination to seize and freeze on commitments to support abstractly conceived severe interrogation when deciding which concretely described severe interrogation techniques were appropriate to use on detainees, and (3) diminished mean support for torture with regard to both detainees. Whether or not our decision to maximize impact at the expense of cross-scenario consistency was warranted, it is difficult to see what other factors would fully explain our pattern of results. These results are consistent with neo-Kohlbergian expectations that moral transcendence would increase integration and differentiation, and move individuals to include a wider variety of perspectives when making judgments, including the perspective of the tortured.

In contrast, mortality salience, severity, and foreign context all provide no theoretical grounds for expecting our particular pattern of results. In fact, mortality being made salient in the Postconventional condition likely made our tests of moral transcendence more conservative because people are more likely to derogate and aggress against outgroups (e.g. people with "foreign" names like Malik and Farid) under conditions of mortality salience (Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008).

Future studies may address these and other alternative explanations with conceptual replication incorporating a critical test. Any such studies, however, would again have to contend with the likely trade-off between impact and consistency among conditions. One potential conceptual replication, for instance, would be to simply invite participants to tap their own memory and imagination for each condition. Participants could be asked to imagine or recollect an example of (a) someone doing something self-interested or even

selfish that ultimately accomplished moral good (Personal Interest), (b) someone doing something in contradiction to self-interest and in conformity with laws or cultural norms that ultimately accomplished moral good (Maintaining Norms), or (c) someone doing something in contradiction to both self-interest and the law or cultural norms that ultimately accomplished moral good. Participants could then generate their own statements morally applauding either (a) a willingness to act in one's own self-interest, (b) a willingness to overcome selfishness to obey the law and cultural norms, or (c) a willingness to overcome selfishness, conventionality and even the law to do what is actually right.

This conceptual replication would allow for more consistency among conditions, but would sacrifice some control over content of the scenarios and statements that participants would bring to mind, potentially increasing noise and the influence of idiosyncratic differences. Moreover, many of the same confounds that weaken the current manipulation might emerge: for example, participants would likely spontaneously describe more banal scenarios in the Personal Interest condition and higher-stakes scenarios in the Postconventional condition.

Another means of replication might be to compose multiple Personal Interest, Maintaining Norms and Postconventional scenarios, select several of those that informed raters code as most relevant to preconventional, conventional and postconventional reasoning, and then conduct a conceptual replication of our study with a very large sample size to accommodate the multiple conditions. Doing so would allow researchers to treat the analysis in a nested framework and investigate whether there are greater differences among average support in transcendence groupings than variance within scenario groupings. However, this approach might simply diversify the confounds, rather than eliminate them. Moreover, Personal Interest, Maintaining Norms and Postconventional schemas may be inherently confounded with other features of the conceptual contexts in which they are most effectively evoked (e.g. cuing transcendence might be most effective precisely among the types of scenarios we have chosen to use in the current study).

Attrition

Another limitation of our study is that many unsupervised participants dropped out. However, much attrition came from those who did not proceed beyond the cuing manipulation and perhaps should not even be counted as participants. We acknowledge that those who finished the survey are likely to differ systematically from those who did not. It is also unlikely, but not impossible, that those who did not complete the survey are precisely those whom Personal Interest would have moved to oppose torture and those whom Postconventional reasoning would have moved to support it. We see no theoretical grounds to expect this, however, and the lack of subsample differences or differential attrition makes this concern a threat to external rather than internal validity. Concerns about attrition could best be corrected through replication, and likely corrected more effectively than concerns about confounds in our manipulations. One way to prevent such attrition in future replications would be to conduct the study only with monitored laboratory participants, rather than online participants, minimizing the number of participants who might fail to complete all of the most relevant dependent variables.

Naming and identity

Another limitation is that our results may not generalize beyond the War on Terror context in which Muslim men are predominantly the targets of interrogation, including “enhanced” interrogations. As we noted earlier we modeled our detainee scenarios after the Muslim-named hypothetical target of severe interrogation used in published research (Carlsmith & Sood, 2009).

We have since conducted four subsequent studies, again assessing willingness to use torture techniques on two detainees: one informed but innocent of violence, and another guilty of violence but extremely unlikely to have critical information (functionally, the same two used in the current study). These additional four studies did not manipulate moral transcendence, but they did have a theoretically relevant variation with regard to the names used for detainees. In two studies, we again used the names Malik and Farid, but in the other two we simply referred to the detainees as, respectively, “a detainee whom interrogators believe to be innocent of any violence, but who is considered highly likely to have information about those who might attack US troops”, and “a detainee whom interrogators believe to be guilty of serious violence, but who is considered highly UNlikely to have information about those who might attack US troops”. Subsequent measures abbreviated these descriptions to IHLI and GHUI, respectively.

The average proportion of coercive techniques supported for Malik in the two studies using this name ($n = 406$) was 14.8%, while the average proportion of coercive techniques supported for the IHLI detainee in the two studies using this description ($n = 571$) was 18.2%. The respective figures for Farid and the GHUI detainee were 18.9% and 22.9%. In other words, and contrary to our expectations, using brief conceptual descriptions rather than Muslim male names and scenario stories seemed, if anything, to *increase* support for torture. It is possible that giving detainees names (even Muslim names) implicitly humanized them for participants, and thus depressed overall levels of supporting torture against them. The scenario stories putting them in a particular life situation might have contributed to this humanization also.

It is plausible, though, that alternative detainee scenarios with non-Muslim names belonging to terror suspects from, for example, a violent right wing group in the USA would have yielded lower overall mean support for torturing the two detainees. Since 9/11, attacks by radicalized US right-wing groups have constituted the largest proportion of domestic terrorist attacks in the USA; yet those convicted in such attacks have received more lenient sentences than those with a Muslim background convicted of comparably deadly attacks (Plucinska, 2015).

We see no theoretical reason to believe, however, that there would be a significant interaction between moral transcendence cues and detainee religio-national identity or sex of the detainee. If anything, we imagine that the anti-torture effect of moral transcendence might be increased with detainees from groups considered inherently less “torturable”, given that baseline levels of endorsing torture would be lower under such circumstances. Recall that even with regard to the hypothetical detainees of our study, there was a nominally stronger effect size of moral transcendence cuing for Malik than for Farid and participants implicitly treated Malik as less torturable than Farid. Arguably, US discourse and mass media treat Muslim men as particularly torturable after 9/11 (Flynn & Salek, 2012), and our use of Muslim male names for hypothetical detainees offered a particularly conservative test of

our hypothesis. Nevertheless, it may be fruitful for future research to replicate our study using detainee scenarios involving other religio-national identities as well as women detainees and teenage or child detainees.

Other recommendations

Future research may also benefit from extending the methods of the current study to address different moral and political issues, like support for mass incarceration or police shooting of unarmed suspects. Moreover, though previous research (e.g. Carlsmith & Sood, 2009; Homant & Witkowski, 2011) led us to choose information concern and retributiveness as the most relevant potential predictors of torture support, future research might formally measure others as well, like a broad-based fear of terrorism in general, as distinct from a specific concern for obtaining information to anticipate and prevent the next attack.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that exposure to more incrementally transcendent moral schemas can (1) reduce the relationship between the motivation to obtain information or punish wrongdoing and the motivation to support specific abusive interrogation techniques, (2) disentangle the relationship between informational and punitive motivations, and (3) elicit more opposition to using said techniques on both morally culpable and potentially informative detainees. We argue that these results are consistent with our theorizing that moral transcendence should encourage cognitive processes that better allow people to incorporate new morally relevant evidence (such as the effects of torture) or perspectives (such as that of a Muslim torture victim) and to reassess such evidence and temper otherwise automatic associations among, for example, the desire to gain information to protect innocent lives, the desire to punish wrongdoers, and the appropriateness of torture. Ultimately, cuing such transcendence seemed to reduce overall support as well.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture, perhaps to shift the debate regarding torture towards an overarching sense of morality or decency, popularized the slogan “torture is a moral issue” (www.nrcat.org). Consistent with this strategy, our results raise the possibility that “elevating” – in a moral sense – discussion on a controversial topic can potentially change the terms of the debate, especially when it is framed in a way that makes both the objects of controversial treatment and the consequences of that treatment more concrete.

Our findings potentially imply methods for reducing people’s heuristic inclinations to align torture support with otherwise legitimate moral priorities like seeking life-saving information or administering just and reasonable punishment for serious wrongdoing. In order to increase the likelihood that individuals will cognitively process arguments against the utilitarian or retributive case for torture, those planning to make these arguments might first prompt their audience to activate their capacity for moral transcendence.

For instance, when training interrogators, police officers and military personnel, it might help to precede discussion on the appropriateness of various interrogation and persuasion techniques with a film or reading about some act of postconventional moral heroism, for instance about the 2003 women’s peace movement against the civil war in Liberia (Disney & Reticker, 2008), the sheltering of Chinese residents during the World War II “rape of Nanking” (Leonsis & Guttentag, 2007), or the Muslim community rescues of Tutsis and moderate Hutus

during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 (Doughty & Ntambara, 2005). Presentation of this material might be followed by discussion about the occasions during which it is right to stand in opposition to government, police and military authority, and what kinds of moral principles and norms such resistance could be rooted in.

Then the audience, with its capacity for differentiation and integration thus activated, might be more receptive to arguments against the likely effectiveness of torture as an elicitor of truth, as well as arguments that torturing detainees contravenes rights-respecting and generally civilized norms when used for punishment or any other purpose. Whether one wishes to influence others' opinions on torture or not, those who approach the issue under such circumstances may at least be expected to do so with a more sophisticated moral lens. Importantly, those who nonetheless find utilitarian and punitive arguments for torture as more appealing than those against it would presumably do so with a greater degree of differentiation, integration, and thoughtful consideration. Just as Kohlberg (1984) drew parallels between military atrocities (the Mai Lai Massacre) and moral development, we believe that such a transcendence intervention may hold important implications for preventing unconstitutional treatment of detainees, such as those uncovered more recently in detention centers such as Abu Ghraib.

It is not clear how long the effects of such an intervention would last, or indeed how long-lasting were the effects of our simpler manipulation for the present research; we did not follow up with participants after they completed the study. Without a regular habit of cultivating a morally transcendent orientation, its effects any one time may be quite fleeting. Nevertheless, our findings give us some confidence that when the recipients of coercive interrogation are given names and histories, and the coercive techniques themselves are referred to by name, rather than a vague umbrella term such as "severe" or "enhanced" interrogation, becoming more attuned to moral transcendence appears to have the potential to change the way we think about torture.

Note

1. Internal reliability for the other variables combined ranged from $\alpha = .49$ to $.65$.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Experimental conditions, scenarios, decisions expected, and schema-consistent statements evaluated with biased Likert scales.

Condition	Scenario and decision expected	Schema-consistent statements
Personal Interest	<p><i>Scenario:</i> A classmate that you find unattractive and whose presence is annoying is following you around and clearly in love with you. You do not want to spend any time with this classmate, but other friends of yours feel sorry for the person and tell you to be nice so as to not hurt anybody's feelings – and it is the social norm to be nice. The classmate gave you a Valentine's card the day before Valentine's Day, and you are very aware there is a social norm to reciprocate the gifts of others. You feel socially pressured both by the classmate and by your friends, but you don't really care for the person at all. There is someone else you actually like, and you would like to give a Valentine's gift to that person instead. It would be agony having to spend more time with the classmate, which you would inevitably have to do after giving a Valentine's card. Also, in the long run, giving the card might send the wrong message and cause both you and the classmate more pain and headache later. You think that early coldness may be kinder than playing with the classmate's feelings. <i>Decision expected:</i> The best thing to do is to not give the classmate a Valentine's card (vs. giving the classmate a Valentine's card).</p>	<p>1. Individuals know better than anybody else what is in their own best interests, and everyone might be better off if everyone valued their own well-being before anybody else's. 2. Abstract moral principles and vague concepts such as "social obligation" are impossible to measure or objectively observe; therefore, the only concrete standard for right action is your own wants and needs. 3. Like all animals, humans should follow the natural order of things, which is based on people looking after themselves first and foremost. 4. Often, actions taken in one's own interest end up benefiting everybody (e.g. computer companies making billions of dollars while providing society with technology that improves everyone's lives). 5. Ultimately, everyone acts in his or her own best interest, even when the motives are seemingly altruistic – for example, people give to charity more to feel better about themselves than to help others.</p>
Maintaining Norms	<p><i>Scenario:</i> It is three o'clock in the morning, and you are driving home on a deserted street. You come to an intersection with a red light. You don't see anyone else (including police) on the road, and traffic lights don't have cameras in your state. It seems like a waste of time to slow down and stop for the light, and you are pretty sure there would be no immediate negative effects of driving through the intersection without stopping in this particular situation. It is also late, you are tired, and you are in a rush to get home to your spouse. However, you feel uncomfortable with breaking the law. You know that if everybody treated traffic lights as a suggestion rather than a law, chaos would ensue: many more traffic accidents and deaths on the road. Even though there will probably be no immediate ramifications for breaking the law in this instance, you are wary of making an exception. You don't want to feel like a lawbreaker, and you respect the value of this law for holding society together. <i>Decision expected:</i> The best thing to do is to stop and wait at the traffic light (vs. driving through the traffic light).</p>	<p>1. Sometimes, one must make sacrifices for the good of his or her community. 2. Society as a whole would collapse if everyone were given the power to choose which rules to follow and which ones to violate. 3. Sometimes, it is necessary to prevent people from doing what they want in order to maintain order in society. 4. Without strictly enforced laws, society will descend into chaos. 5. If one person gets away with breaking the law, then other people will be more likely to try to do so also.</p>
Principled Norm-Transcendence	<p><i>Scenario:</i> You own a small cottage in Nazi-occupied France at the height of the Holocaust during World War II. One day, another villager – whom many of the more pro-Nazi villagers consider to be a trouble-maker and traitor – comes to you with a request. He wants you to shelter a family of Jews from the SS, who will kill the family if they discover them. He tells you the only way to save this family from certain death at the hands of the Nazis is to hide the family in your basement at considerable inconvenience and risk to you. You would be responsible for meeting their basic survival needs, such as food and water, and you may even be put in the unenviable position of having to lie to a Nazi patrol. Furthermore, hiding the family would make you a criminal, as you would be violating laws that Nazi authorities tell you every day are essential for holding society together. However, your conscience says that Nazi law is wrong, and that sheltering the family is the right thing to do. The villager has brought one of the children with him and you can see the terror of death in her face and her cheeks are stained with tears. <i>Decision expected:</i> The best thing to do is hide the family (vs. not hiding the family).</p>	<p>1. Some values and principles – such as liberty, justice, freedom, or the right to life – transcend personal interests and even the mandates of society. 2. Society and its laws are sometimes wrong. 3. It is your duty to violate an unjust law. 4. You should follow your conscience first and foremost. 5. There are certain rights and dignities that every human being deserves, regardless of what the law says.</p>



Appendix B. List of interrogation techniques considered by participants, with percent of sample indicating a technique is “not acceptable under any circumstances.”

Type	Interrogation technique	% NA ^a
Non-coercive	Asking standard questions of the individual	5.49
	Being friendly with the individual to establish rapport and encourage disclosure	10.75
	Telling the individual (deceptively) that s/he is charged with a serious crime, when s/he is in fact suspected of a more minor crime or not suspected at all	22.69
Coercive	Isolation as severe interrogation – e.g. removing the individual from all human contact to induce psychosis and regression	44.64
	Leave-no-marks physical assault (e.g. slapping, shaking) as severe interrogation	53.87
	Exploitation of fears, phobias or psychopathology as severe interrogation – e.g. putting insects on someone known to have a fear of insects	55.61
	Sleep deprivation as severe interrogation – e.g. making the individual go so long without sleep that he or she experiences disorientation, psychosis or regression	55.86
	Threats of harm (e.g. threatening mutilation) or death (e.g. threatening execution) as severe interrogation	56.11
	Stress positions as severe interrogation – e.g. forcing the individual to maintain stances that quickly become excruciatingly painful	64.59
	Cultural or religious humiliation as severe interrogation – i.e. deliberately making the individual endure things that might be commonplace in your own culture or religion but that are deeply humiliating and psychologically agonizing in his/her culture or religion	68.25
	Threatening harm or death to family members of the individual as severe interrogation	70.32
	Sensory deprivation or overstimulation as severe interrogation – e.g. blocking or bombarding bodily senses to induce disorientation, psychosis and regression	70.82
	Severe physical assault that leaves marks, bruises or lacerations, as severe interrogation	78.55
	Induced hypothermia as severe interrogation – e.g. exposing the individual to stimuli so cold that he or she develops hypothermia	80.05
	“Water boarding” or any other form of simulated drowning or suffocation as severe interrogation – e.g. making the individual undergo the physical and psychological experience of drowning to death	80.30
	Electric shocks, especially to genitals and other sensitive areas, as severe interrogation	82.79
	Sexual humiliation as severe interrogation – e.g. forced nudity, making the individual do things that are sexually humiliating (in his or her cultural/religious tradition or in general)	83.04
	Pulling out fingernails or toenails as severe interrogation	87.03

^a% NA = percentage of participants who considered the interrogation method as “not acceptable under any circumstance.”