

“It would have been worse under Saddam:” Implications of counterfactual thinking for beliefs regarding the ethical treatment of prisoners of war

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Abstract

In response to criticism following news of the mistreatment of Iraqis at the US prison in Abu Ghraib, some media personalities and politicians suggested that the treatment of these prisoners “would have been even worse” had former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein still been in power. It was hypothesized that the contemplation of this argument has undesirable consequences because counterfactual thinking can elicit both contrastive and assimilative effects. In the reported study, participants considered how the prisoners at Abu Ghraib would have been worse off under Saddam. The results revealed that generating downward counterfactuals made participants feel better about Abu Ghraib (thereby evidencing contrast), and also lowered ethical standards regarding how the US should treat prisoners of war in the future (thereby evidencing assimilation).

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In January 2004, an internal criminal investigation was launched by the United States Army in response to accounts of abuse and torture of prisoners that had allegedly occurred in the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. The acts were committed by personnel of the 372nd Military Police Company, CIA officers, and contractors involved in the occupation of Iraq. Reports of the abuse, as well as graphic pictures showing American military personnel in the act of abusing prisoners, came to public attention when a *60 minutes* news report broke the story on April 28th. Ultimately, the Department of Defense removed seventeen soldiers and officers from duty, and seven soldiers were charged with dereliction of duty, maltreatment, aggravated assault, and battery.

Arguably, the resulting political scandal damaged the credibility of the United States and its allies with regard to their ongoing military operations in the Iraq War. In an effort to lessen the rising tide of criticism being leveled against the Bush Administration, a number of individuals, some employed by newspaper, radio and television media, others by the US government itself, drew a comparison in public statements between American treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the even more severe treatment these prisoners “would have” received if former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had still been in power. For instance, during a US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the treatment of Iraqi prisoners, Senator James Inhofe (R - Oklahoma) remarked,

I have to say that when we talk about the treatment of these prisoners that I would guess that these prisoners wake up every morning thanking Allah that Saddam Hussein is not in charge of these prisons. When he

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was in charge, they would take electric drills and drill holes through hands, they would cut their tongues out, they would cut their ears off. We've seen accounts of lowering their bodies into vats of acid. All of these things were taking place (Washingtonpost.com, 2004).

Thinking about how the treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib “would have been worse under Saddam” exemplifies *downward counterfactual thinking*—the consideration of imagined alternatives that worsen reality (e.g., Markman & McMullen, 2003; Roese, 1994; Sanna, 1996). Empirical studies have documented how downward counterfactuals can enhance one's evaluation of an outcome, whereas *upward counterfactual thinking*—the consideration of imagined alternatives that improve reality—can devalue one's evaluation of an outcome (e.g., Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993; Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995; Mellers, Schwartz, Ho, & Ritov, 1997). Clearly, Senator Inhofe intended to deflate the criticism directed against American treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib by contrasting it with a less desirable standard of treatment.

Although some exceptions have been noted (see Markman & McMullen, 2003), to the extent that individuals evaluate present reality by comparing it to a counterfactual reference point, the default reaction tends to be affective contrast—upward counterfactuals elicit negative affect, whereas downward counterfactuals elicit positive affect (e.g., Markman et al., 1993; Roese, 1994; Roese, Sanna, & Galinsky, 2005). We further speculate, however, that even in cases where counterfactuals elicit contrastive effects on outcome evaluations, expectations regarding future outcomes may actually assimilate to the counterfactual standard. In other words, counterfactual generation may *shift the standard* by which future outcomes are evaluated (see also Biernat, 2005). Thus, although upward counterfactual thinking (e.g., “I got a B...if only I had gotten an A”) may elicit negative outcome evaluations via contrast, the standard by which future outcomes are evaluated may be elevated—the individual now perceives oneself as a potential A student. Similarly, although downward counterfactual thinking (e.g., “At least I didn't get a C”) may elicit positive outcome evaluations via contrast, the standard by which future outcomes are evaluated may be lowered—the individual now perceives oneself as a C student who was fortunate to have obtained a B.

In the present study, participants considered how Americans' treatment of Iraqi soldiers at Abu Ghraib could have been either better or worse. Consistent with the notion that counterfactual thinking can elicit shifting standards effects, it was predicted that in comparison to generating upward counterfactuals or no counterfactuals at all, generating downward counterfactuals would lead participants to feel better about Abu Ghraib, thereby evidencing contrast, and would lower ethical standards regarding how the US should treat prisoners of war in the future, thereby evidencing assimilation.

Method

Participants and design

Forty male and female introductory psychology students at Ohio University were recruited in exchange for course credit and randomly assigned to the conditions of a one-way (*Argument*: control vs. downward vs. upward) between-subjects design. Participants were run in classrooms in groups no larger than nine.

Procedure

Participants received a packet of materials as they entered the classroom. The first page of the packet, entitled “Argument Essay”, began with a paragraph describing a 60 minutes television broadcast from April 2004 that showed photographs of the “abuse and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners” by a small group of US soldiers at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. After reading this paragraph, participants in the *control* condition were prompted to describe their reaction to the event in writing.

In the *downward* condition, participants read a second paragraph that described how thousands of political prisoners had been tortured and executed at Abu Ghraib during Saddam Hussein's tenure as Iraqi President, and were then prompted to, “make an argument that being at Abu Ghraib under Saddam's control would be worse than being there under US control.” The instructions also noted that, “You may or may not support this view, but we are interested in your ability to make political arguments regardless of your personal opinions.” In contrast, participants in the *upward* condition read a second paragraph that described the ethical treatment of Iraqi prisoners by a small contingent of Danish soldiers in a military prison based in the city of Al Quma, and were then prompted to, “make an argument that the ethical standards employed by the Danish in their treatment of Iraqi prisoners were better than the standards employed by the US in treating Iraqi prisoners.” These participants also received the “You may or may not support this view...” disclaimer.

Dependent measures

Participants first responded to two items that assessed their feelings toward the events that transpired at Abu Ghraib (i.e., “feelings”). Employing a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale, these items were: (1) “I am morally outraged by the events that took place at Abu Ghraib,” (reverse-scored) and (2) “I feel good about what happened at Abu Ghraib.” In addition, participants were asked to “provide a detailed written explanation” for their response to the “moral outrage” question.

Next, participants completed a four-item questionnaire designed to measure participants' attitudes toward how the US should treat prisoners of war with respect to human rights in the future (i.e., “human rights”). These items (all

reverse-scored) included: (1) “The US military should be allowed to punish captured combatants of enemy forces if they do not reveal information that is critical for the security of the US,” (2) “Under exceptional circumstances or public emergency, some form of torture may be justified to use against combatants of enemy forces,” (3) “In future conflicts, I believe that US soldiers should do whatever it takes to gain information from the enemy,” and (4) “In future conflicts, to what extent should the US employ interrogation tactics that include the use of torture?” The first three items employed 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales and the fourth item employed a scale anchored at 1 = *never* and 7 = *frequently*, with scale point 3 labeled “*infrequently*” and scale point 5 labeled “*occasionally*.”

Participants then completed Sidanius (1999) Conservatism Scale (1991 version), a 36-item measure (employing a 1 = *Very negative* to 7 = *Very Positive* scale) designed to assess individual levels of politically conservative attitudes and beliefs (e.g., “Tougher measures against criminals,” “Belief in authority,” “Increased aid to the poor”). Following completion of this measure, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results and discussion

Evidence for affective contrast

Initial analyses were conducted on the two-item “feelings” measure ($\alpha = .72$). A one-way ANCOVA conducted on feelings with scores on the Conservatism scale ($\alpha = .88$) serving as a covariate revealed a significant effect of *Argument*, $F(2,36) = 4.35$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .20$ [this effect was also significant without including the covariate, $F(2,37) = 4.61$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .20$]. Participants in the *downward* condition indicated feeling better about the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.40$) than did participants in either the *control* condition ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(36) = 2.13$, $p = .04$, $d = .60$, or the *upward* condition ($M = 1.85$, $SD = .80$), $t(36) = 2.80$, $p = .008$, $d = 1.34$. Although in the predicted direction, the difference between the *control* and *upward* conditions was not significant, $t < 1$, $d = .53$. One possible explanation for the failure to find a significant difference here is a floor effect: exposing participants to information about Abu Ghraib, even without counterfactual comparison information, may have evoked substantial levels of moral outrage and thereby lowered the likelihood that exposure to additional upward comparison information (i.e., the Danish prison) would move participants significantly further along the feelings dimension. In support, a content analysis performed on *control* participants’ reactions to the description of the events that occurred at Abu Ghraib indicated that 86% of these participants spontaneously responded to the described events as being either “wrong,” “immoral,” “disgraceful,” “shameful,” “unacceptable,” or “inhumane.”

In order to provide additional evidence that responses to the “feelings” measure indicated genuine affective reactions

following contemplation of the downward counterfactual argument, content analyses were conducted on participants’ open-ended explanations of their responses to the “moral outrage” question. Two coders, blind to experimental condition, coded the verbal protocols along a 1 (*Little moral outrage expressed*) to 5 (*A great deal of moral outrage expressed*) scale. Interrater reliability was high ($r = .92$), and thus the ratings were averaged. A one-way ANCOVA conducted on these ratings revealed a significant effect of *Argument*, $F(2,36) = 9.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .36$. Participants in the *downward* condition expressed less moral outrage in their verbal responses ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.18$) than did participants in either the *control* condition ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.29$), $t(36) = 2.75$, $p = .009$, $d = .88$, or the *upward* condition ($M = 4.35$, $SD = .85$), $t(36) = 4.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.98$. Moreover, the difference between the *control* and *upward* conditions was marginally significant, $t(36) = 1.72$, $p = .09$, $d = .88$.

Evidence for shifting standards

Analyses were then conducted on the four-item measure of participants’ attitudes toward how the US should treat prisoners of war in the future with respect to human rights ($\alpha = .90$). Analyses revealed a significant effect of *Argument*, $F(2,36) = 9.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$ [this effect was also significant without including the covariate, $F(2,37) = 10.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .36$]. Consistent with predictions, participants in the *downward* condition indicated lower standards with respect to human rights ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.18$) than did participants in either the *control* condition ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(36) = 2.32$, $p = .03$, $d = .71$, or the *upward* condition ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(36) = 4.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.73$. Moreover, participants in the *upward* condition indicated higher standards with respect to human rights than did *control* participants, $t(36) = 2.12$, $p = .04$, $d = 1.02$. Thus, considering how the treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib could have been worse had the effect of lowering participants’ standards regarding how the US should treat their prisoners of war in the future relative to a no-alternative control condition, whereas considering how the treatment of these prisoners could have been better had the effect of elevating participants’ standards relative to a control condition.

One question that might be asked is whether the feelings and human rights variables are essentially two different measures of the same construct. Although the effects of *Argument* on the human rights measure remained significant after controlling for responses to the “feelings” measure, $F(2,35) = 7.02$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .29$, a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the “feelings” and “human rights” measures in order to examine this question more thoroughly.¹ The

¹ Responses to the feelings and human rights measures were negatively correlated, $r(38) = -.40$, $p = .01$.

analysis yielded a clear two-factor solution. The first factor—“human rights”—accounted for 58% of the variance (eigenvalue = 3.49), with factor loadings among the four items ranging from .81 to .88, whereas the second factor—“feelings”—accounted for 20.5% of the variance (eigenvalue = 1.23), with factor loadings ranging from .85 to .92. Thus, it appears that the feelings and human rights measures were tapping independent constructs.

Political conservatism

Two regression analyses were conducted to examine whether political conservatism scores ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .72$) moderated the effects of *Argument* on responses to the feelings and human rights variables. To create the interaction term, conservatism scores were first centered (Aiken & West, 1991) and then multiplied with a dummy-coded *Argument* variable (*upward* = 1, *control* = 2, *downward* = 3). In the first analysis, conservatism was positively related to feelings about Abu Ghraib, $\beta = .32$, $t(36) = 2.27$, $p = .03$, but the *Argument* \times *Conservatism* interaction was not significant, $t < 1$. In the second analysis, conservatism was negatively related to respect for human rights, $\beta = -.31$, $t(36) = 2.49$, $p = .02$, but the interaction was not significant, $t < 1$. Thus, although political conservatism was found to be an independent predictor of feelings toward US soldiers' actions at Abu Ghraib and respect for the protection of human rights, the influence of the experimental manipulation on the key dependent variables was not moderated by differences in political conservatism.

Discussion

According to the results of the present study, comparing what happened at Abu Ghraib to how “it could have been worse” elicited affective *contrast*—participants subsequently felt better about what happened at Abu Ghraib. Additionally, however, standards for future behavior toward prisoners of war appeared to *assimilate* to the counterfactual standard—participants exhibited lower moral standards with regard to how prisoners of war should be treated in the future. In our view, the assimilation effect reported here can at least partially be accounted for by the types of shifting standards models proposed by Biernat and others (e.g., Biernat, 2005; Biernat & Manis, 2007; Parducci, 1963; Upshaw, 1962) that assume that when called upon to render judgments along subjective rating scales, individuals fix the endpoints of the rating scale to reflect the expected distribution of targets on the judgment dimension. As depicted in Fig. 1, consideration of the downward (i.e., “it would have been worse under Saddam”) counterfactual may lead individuals to recalibrate their scales of moral standards and enhance the relative standing of a range of behaviors that they may have previously deemed unethical. In this way, behaviors that seriously violate default standards of moral behavior may come to be seen

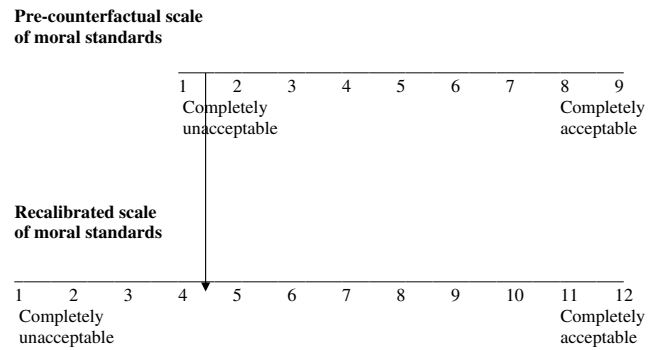


Fig. 1. Schematic depiction of how comparison to a counterfactual reference point recalibrates a scale of moral standards.

as relatively benign in light of the new standard and thereby lower expectations regarding how the US should treat prisoners of war in the future.

More generally, we speculate that the present results provide supportive evidence for the notion that counterfactual thinking has informational consequences that differ as a function of whether one is evaluating the present versus judging the future (Markman & McMullen, 2003; Mussweiler, 2003). Whereas individuals often make use of counterfactual reference points in order to evaluate and contextualize present outcomes (cf. Festinger, 1954), judgments about future outcomes and behaviors do not require evaluation and contextualization because, by definition, they have yet to occur. Rather, judgments or projections about future outcomes may be influenced by standard-consistent knowledge that has been rendered accessible following consideration of counterfactual alternatives. Thus, measures calling for an evaluation of the present may lead individuals to draw comparisons to counterfactual reference points, thereby evoking contrast, whereas judgments about the future may be influenced by the enhanced accessibility of standard-consistent knowledge, thereby evoking assimilation.

We also acknowledge that the materials used in the present study may have activated self-presentational concerns—to some extent, at least, participants may merely have been reporting attitudes in line with the positions they were asked to argue. Although our coding of free responses to the moral outrage question suggests that participants were expressing genuine attitudes, such an alternative explanation cannot be ruled out entirely.

Whatever the mechanism that underlies these effects, however, we maintain that the consequences of the “it would have been worse” argument are insidious. Although it is likely that individuals understand the intent of the argument—to mitigate the harsh criticism that has been directed against the American soldiers and the Bush Administration more generally—they may be less aware of the subtle yet significant effect that the promulgation of such an argument can have on lowering personal standards. Just as exposure to violence can desensitize subse-

quent reactions to violence (e.g., Geen, 1991), consistent and chronic exposure to downward counterfactual arguments of the kind described here may have a numbing or dampening effect on the likelihood of expressing negative attitudes toward human rights violations in the future. In other words, the consideration of such arguments might have the effect over time of raising thresholds for expressing moral outrage.

A final caveat is in order. It is not our intent to argue that the treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib under Saddam Hussein's control would not have been worse than the treatment they received under American control. Indeed, recently discovered videotapes of the torture and executions that routinely occurred at Abu Ghraib when Saddam was in power (National Review On-Line, 2004) provide stark evidence to the contrary. Rather, our point is to question the usefulness of drawing a comparison between Abu Ghraib under American control and Abu Ghraib under Saddam's control. Based on the results of the present study, at least, it appears that the contemplation of such a comparison lowers personal standards toward the very comparison standard against which one is seeking to contrast.

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