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Status quo framing increases support for torture

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Does describing torture by America's agents as a longstanding practice—part of the status quo—increase people's acceptance of the practice? A representative sample of U.S. adults, randomly assigned to conditions in which these practices were described as new or as having been used for more than 40 years, read about the use of torture in questioning of detainees. Torture described as a longstanding practice had more support and was seen as more effective and justifiable than the same torture described as new. Characterization of practices as longstanding—even if unpopular or disgraceful—enhances their support and increases their perceived justification.

Keywords: Status quo bias; Torture; Justification.

Tradition can exert powerful influence. There is a strong tendency to stick with the familiar and endow what *is* with moral goodness (Hume, 1739/ 1992). Although often unaware of its allure, people rely closely on the past as a guide for future social, culinary, economic, and political behavior (Lewin, 1947). Characterizing a practice—even a despicable and loathsome practice—as traditional, long established, or part of the status quo may make that practice seem more appealing and acceptable (Eidelman & Crandall, in press). In this paper we test whether presenting torture as a status quo practice increases public support for it.

Sticking with options and practices from the past has been labeled *status quo bias*, the proclivity for doing nothing or maintaining one's current or previous decision (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Status quo bias has been widely documented, not only with experimental scenarios but with real-world decisions of significant financial consequence as well (Samuelson

& Zeckhauser, 1988; see also Doane, Hartman, & Woo, 1991, Fernandez & Rodrik, 1991, Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991, Neipp & Zeckhauser, 1985). Status quo bias research has focused on the framing of alternatives in the context of personal and financial choice, and explanations for these effects have centered on loss aversion and preference for inaction (Anderson, 2003; Kahneman et al., 1991; Ritov & Baron, 1992). Unlike previous research, we examine the attitudinal consequences of status quo framing in a context that lacked explicit alternatives. We test whether describing a practice as part of the status quo enhances its legitimacy and evaluation, in the absence of choice, loss, or action.

We test the power of status quo bias in the context of a significant and current debate, the use of torture in the gathering of information from detainees. Interrogation practices at Abu Ghraib were made public by Seymour Hersh (2004), which involved humiliation, sleep deprivation, water-boarding (simulated drowning), hanging detainees by ropes in painful positions, threats by dogs, and sexual humiliation. A significant debate evolved in the USA and around the world as to whether these practices were unique to Abu Ghraib, or if the USA and its agents had used these techniques before (e.g., Phoenix program in Vietnam, in Central and South American conflicts from the 1950s to the 1980s) or since (e.g., at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp).

Americans do not favor torture as a general tactic, and the public response to the report of conditions at Abu Ghraib was primarily of shock and disgust (Friedman, 2004; McKelvey, 2007). But once governmental elites have chosen a particular policy, people are often interested in making this choice seem acceptable, reasonable, or inevitable (Tavris & Aronson, 2007). We tested whether characterizing the practice of torture of prisoners of war or criminal suspects would enhance the acceptability of the practice. If long-standing practices are simply understood to be good, then description of torture as part of the status quo should make it seem more acceptable. We tested this hypothesis using a representative sample of U.S. adults.

METHOD

Participants

The study sample (*N*=486, reflecting a 70% within-panel response rate) was drawn from a panel maintained by Knowledge Networks (KN). KN recruits panel members using random-digit-dialing methods; the characteristics of the panel closely match those of the U.S. Census. Once a panel member agrees to participate, they are given a free interactive device to access the World Wide Web and free Internet access in exchange for participation. About 50% of the KN panelists had no prior access to the Web before

becoming KN members; the KN panel is currently the only Web-enabled household panel that is representative of the American public.

Sample characteristics

The sample was 46% female, between 19 and 97 years old ($M=47.6$, $SD=16.2$), and 79% White, 5% Black (non-Hispanic), 10% Hispanic, 3% biracial, and 3% otherwise classified. A total of 10% of the sample had less than a high school education, 31% graduated high school with no college, 32% had some college, and 28% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Because this was a nationally representative sample, sampling weights can be applied to adjust for any deviations from what would be expected based on current census statistics. All analyses are reported using the weighted data.

Procedure

Panelists were contacted by e-mail to alert them to the survey, which included a URL to link directly to the survey.[1] When they linked to the survey on-line, panelists were randomly assigned to a paragraph that described the interrogation tactics as unique to the current conflict (*New*), or to one that described them as a long-standing practice (*Status Quo*).

Status quo manipulation. All participants read a paragraph that described interrogation techniques being used by American forces or contract employees in the Middle East. The description of interrogation techniques was adapted directly from several news sources. The *New* version read:

> The use of stress by U.S. forces when questioning suspects in the Middle East is in the news. This kind of stress interview is new; according to some reports, it is the first time it has been widely used by the U.S. military. American forces have used many different methods, including strapping detainees to a board and dunking them underwater, stuffing detainees face-first into a sleeping bag, and long periods of hanging detainees by ropes in painful positions. Detainees are also kept awake and alone for days at a time.

The *Status Quo* version of the paragraph was identical, except that the second sentence in the paragraph was replaced with "This kind of stress interview is not new; according to some reports, it has been used for more than 40 years by the U.S. military."

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[1] The survey was protected from access by non-KN panelist members.

Measures. Seven items formed the basic set of dependent variables; the exact text is displayed in Table 1. These items were responded to on 7-point "button" scales, with the point labels of *very much disagree*, *moderately disagree*, *slightly disagree*, *uncertain*, *slightly agree*, *moderately agree*, *very much agree.* All items were reverse scored so that higher scores reflected greater agreement with each item.

A principal components analysis of these items revealed two factors; orthogonal and oblique rotations converged on similar results. As can be seen in Table 1, one factor appeared to represent *Justification of Torture*, and another represented participants' perception of the *Acceptability of Torture*. The item labeled *Support* cross-loaded, and because it is the purest attitude measure and deserves scrutiny by itself we separated it from the other two scales, and created three dependent variables. Justification of Torture includes items that give reasons *why* these methods might be used, and Acceptability of Torture measures the sense that techniques are indeed torture and are therefore unacceptable. In each case, scales were created so that high scores reflected stronger support of torture (i.e., that torture was justified, acceptable, and supported).

RESULTS

To test for the effects of status quo on torture attitudes, we analyzed the three attitude measures as a within-participants effect, and the status quo manipulation as a between-participants effect, resulting in a 3 (Attitude Measure) $\times$ 2 (Status Quo vs New) mixed model ANCOVA, controlling for

TABLE 1
Attitudes toward torture, dependent measures

Support ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.93$)
I support the use of these methods.

Justification of Torture ($M=4.43$, $SD=1.36$, $\alpha=.70$)
These methods are effective ways of getting information.
These techniques must be used when otherwise people refuse to talk.
Use of these techniques says a lot about the need of U.S. forces to adapt to difficult
    circumstances in interrogations.

Acceptability of Torture ($M=3.67$, $SD=1.61$, $\alpha=.85$)
I consider the use of these techniques to be un-American.
I think that these techniques should be considered torture.
Use of these techniques says a lot about the character of U.S. forces who are involved in
    interrogations.

All items in the Acceptability of Torture scale were reverse scored for the purpose of the hypothesis testing. Because we hypothesize that status quo effects should increase support and increase justifications, we coded the scale in terms of how status quo should increase acceptability.
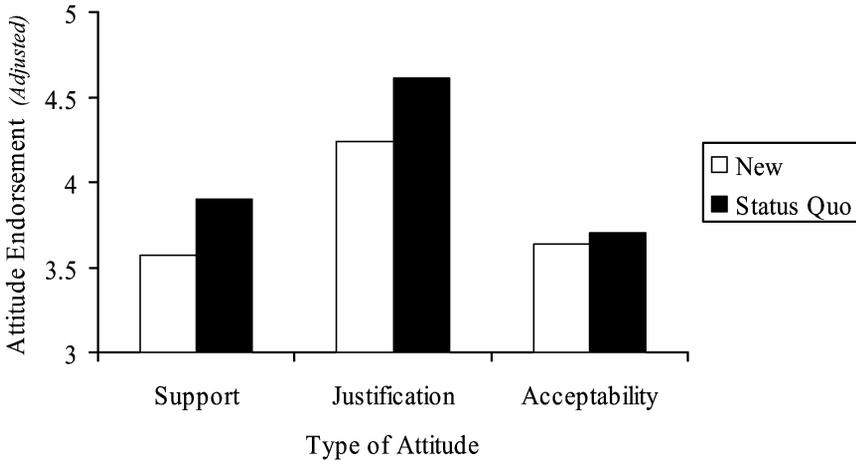
Figure 1. Evaluation of torture by status quo.

participant age, gender, education, and income.[2] The status quo manipulation had an effect on overall evaluation of torture—when described as a long-standing rather than new practice, torture was evaluated more positively, $F(1, 474)=7.38$, $p<.0075$ (see Figure 1). There were no significant within-participant differences on the mean level of the three attitude scales ($F<1$), and the interaction of Attitude Measure and Status Quo was modest, $F(2, 948)=2.25$, $p=.11$. Because significance tests of interactions terms can underestimate the reliability of the effect (McClelland & Judd, 1993), we analyzed each of the attitude measures separately by Status Quo, using the same covariates. There were Status Quo differences on both Support $F(1, 475)=3.79$, $p \leqslant .05$, and Justification, $F(1, 475)=8.34$, $p<.005$, but not with a willingness to explicitly accept these practices, $F<1$. Making torture appear to be the status quo for interrogations increased individual support and justifications for using it as a tactic, but did not affect the degree to which people perceived the practice to be acceptable.

Political attitudes, status quo, and torture attitudes.

The status quo hypothesis is formed as a main effect; that is, status quo biasing should affect people equally across the political spectrum. To test this, we analyzed attitudes using the same mixed model ANCOVA as above, but added a factor for political identification. Participants who had

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[2] Demographic differences rarely contribute much to error estimates when one uses homogeneous samples of college students, but can introduce a great deal more noise in more heterogeneous samples, such as the random national sample we used here.

identified themselves as Republicans ($N=150$), Democrats ($N=162$), or Independents ($N=92$) were included. Because people who have no party affiliation, or do not explicitly identify as an ''independent,'' often lack central or important attitudes related to politics and ideology (e.g., Converse, 1964, 1970; Krosnick, 1990), we excluded people who neither identified themselves with a party nor explicitly as an Independent ($N=77$, 15%). Thus we calculated a 3 (Attitude Measure) $\times$ 2 (Status Quo vs New) $\times$ 3 (Party Identification) ANCOVA.

This analysis yielded the Status Quo effect, $F(1, 394)=10.49$, $p<.0015$, and a Party Identification effect, $F(2, 394)=6.73$, $p<.005$; the means are displayed in Table 2. There were no interactions between Party Identification and the other factors. Overall, Republicans supported the use of torture and endorsed justifications more strongly than Independents, who in turn supported and justified more than Democrats. The effect size of Status Quo, $\eta=.16$, was closely comparable to the effect of Party Identification, $\eta=.18$, which is recognized as an important contributor to the acceptability of stressful and punitive interrogation techniques (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988; Stiles, 2006; Summerfield, 2003).

DISCUSSION

Presenting torture as a status quo practice enhances its support and justifications, although apparently not its acceptability. This experiment, using a representative sample of American adults, shows the power and reach of describing actions as business as usual—it has the power to generate support for the use of torture in the Middle East. When characterized as part of a long-standing tradition, not only did Americans

TABLE 2
Mean attitudes toward torture, by status quo and party identification

	Attitude measure		
	Support	*Justification*	*Acceptability*
Republicans			
New	4.04	4.67	3.67
Status Quo	4.75	5.31	3.66
Independents			
New	3.45	4.17	4.82
Status Quo	3.83	4.37	4.57
Democrats			
New	3.16	3.88	4.49
Status Quo	3.54	4.22	4.70

Status Quo effect, $\eta=.16$; Party Identification effect, $\eta=.18$.

increase their support for the use of torture in the Middle East, they also increasingly endorsed attitudes that justified it, increasing the agreement that torture was necessary given the circumstances.

The increase in support and justification of torture occurred regardless of party identification. For Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, describing torture as the status quo increased support for and justifications of the practice. Although party identification was independently related to torture attitudes, the effect size for status quo framing was nearly equal to that of party identification. Given the importance ascribed to party identification in matters of social attitudes (Hamill, Lodge, & Blake, 1985), voting behavior (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), and attitudes toward punishment (Altemeyer, 1988), our small framing manipulation is impressive. The mere suggestion of a practice as traditional and long-standing seems to create in people a willingness to defend it, and appears to increase support for it independent of other potentially conflicting attitudes and values (cf. Tetlock, 1986). A simple framing manipulation effectively increased people's willingness to sacrifice certain cornerstones of a liberal democracy.

Because status quo framing exerted its influence in a domain without choice between alternatives, the typical explanations for status quo bias, including loss aversion and preference for inaction, seem inapplicable (cf. Anderson, 2003; Kahneman et al., 1991; Ritov & Baron, 1992). Another possibility is that our status quo manipulation changed people's standards for labeling a practice as torture. A participant may come to the conclusion that, if what's being described has been going on for 40 years, it is not "really" torture; in this case the standard for calling a behavior torture shifts to a higher level for longstanding practices (Biernat, 2005). If the manipulation directly affects standards of judgment, we might expect the largest effect to occur on the Acceptability of Torture items, whose content is more consistent with standards (e.g., I think that these techniques should be considered torture). However, this scale was the *least* affected of all by the status quo manipulation, and effects on this variable were not statistically significant. Therefore, the status quo effect does not seem to be due to standards shifting in this case.

We offer three potential explanations for these data. First, status quo framing may have led participants in our study to assume that a long-standing practice was relatively intractable, and this obstinacy led to rationalization on its behalf. Second, status quo framing may have led people to believe that others supported the practice, and this perceived consensus led to a corresponding shift in their own attitudes. Third—and our preferred explanation—is that status quo effects work heuristically. People equate existence with goodness in a relatively intuitive and automatic manner (Eidelman, Crandall, & Horstman Reser, 2008)—the status quo

heuristic is a "fast and frugal" rule of thumb that affects judgment rapidly, with little effort. Representing any a practice, standard, or belief as an existing, long-standing cultural component will lead to a more positive appraisal than a representation of novelty and innovation, all other things being equal.

Although provocative, our data cannot distinguish among these three possibilities. Nor can the current data distinguish whether representing torture as an "old" practice enhanced its support, whether representing torture as a "new" practice decreased its support, or both processes occurred simultaneously. Fortunately this experiment was carried out with a nationally representative sample, and showed substantial and significant effects. To refine the theoretical account we can move into the laboratory to pin down the specifics of status quo manipulations in future research (e.g., Eidelman & Crandall, in press).

Status quo effects are fundamental to system justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994). SJT holds there is a fundamental tendency to see existing social arrangements as fair and legitimate (see also Lerner, 1980), and thus to defend the status quo. SJT hypothesizes that the social, political, and economic status quo tends to be preferred, explained, defended, and justified (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), even when the status quo is as objectionable as the use of torture.

This work extends the reach of status quo bias. Most existing work focuses on prior commitment to choices or attitude positions and the justification of the status quo resulting from one's choices or actions (e.g., Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Our data demonstrate a more "pure" status quo effect; in the absence of choice, loss, or action on the part of participants, a status quo option was evaluated more favorably than something represented as "new."

Status quo effects, although widespread and powerful (see Eidelman & Crandall, in press), do not go unchecked. They can apply across many, many domains, and can affect judgment, decision making, aesthetics, and policy preferences. Still, there are countervailing processes that lead toward innovation, creativity, and novelty, and these can work in balance and conflict with status quo preferences (e.g., Berlyne, 1970). It may be that these countervailing processes led our civilian leaders to eschew the Geneva Convention and innovate in the domain of interrogation techniques. Neither the status quo bias nor its counterpart innovation is inherently good or bad; both decision-making processes and the results of those processes deserve scrutiny by psychologists and citizens.

These data extend the large literature on framing of political debate (e.g., Iyengar, 1991) and status quo bias (Ritov & Baron, 1992; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), and join the two. To the extent that an advertiser, political actor, or any other persuader wishes to make a practice or product

acceptable, framing their preferred alternative as the status quo is likely to enhance its position and increase its support. We do not know the limits of how framing affects either economic or political thinking (see Ariely, 2008; Kahneman & Tversky, 2000; Lakoff, 2002; Westen, 2007). But research in the last two decades has shown the impact of priming and framing, and that relatively modest changes in the way ethical choices and value dilemmas are presented, framed, or put in context can have profound effect on political choice and policy (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Landau et al., 2004). We must urgently learn more about the lengths and limits of the cognitive and emotional influences on people's willingness to defend versus sacrifice key aspects of civil liberty.

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