



## Demons with firepower: How belief in pure evil relates to perceptions and punishments of gun violence perpetrators



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### ABSTRACT

Mass shootings have received widespread media attention due to their extreme violence. People who report greater belief in pure evil (BPE; the tendency to attribute harmdoing to dispositionally sadistic individuals) generally favor harsher criminal punishment, regardless of whether criminals exhibit stereotypically “evil” traits. We examined whether BPE predicted evaluations of gun violence perpetrators despite different situational factors related to the shooter's and crime's circumstances. An online, national sample ( $N = 275$ ) read an allegedly real *USA Today* article about a mall shooting. We manipulated the shooter's evilness; whether the shooter exhibited a brain tumor, which could have accounted for his violent behavior; and, whether the event was a mass shooting. Results showed that individuals who reported greater BPE demonized, dehumanized, and punished the shooter more across all experimental conditions. Thus, results indicate that stronger pre-existing beliefs in pure evil may override key situational information when punishing violent offenders.

### 1. Introduction

Each year U.S. gun violence claims approximately 33,000 lives and costs \$229 billion (directly and indirectly; Fullman, Lurie, Lee, & West, 2015). Mass shootings particularly have received widespread media attention due to their extreme violence. Why do some people commit such senseless acts of violence? One simple answer may be that they are purely evil. People are predisposed to believe that antisocial actions are due to internal factors/personality (Malle, 2006); thus, “behind evil actions must lie evil individuals” (Darley, 1992, p. 202; see also Baumeister, 1999, chs. 2–3). Baumeister (1999) highlights that cultures worldwide have developed and maintained a similar “archetype of evil”: there are people who fulfill egotistical and sadistic tendencies by intentionally inflicting harm on others. Because evil is unmalleable and is the antithesis of order and peace, we cannot reason with or understand evildoers; rather, we should eliminate evildoers from society. However, not everyone equally believes in this archetype.

Webster and Saucier (2013; see also Campbell & Vollhardt, 2013; Webster & Saucier, 2015, 2017) developed an individual differences scale of belief in pure evil (BPE) assessing the degree to which individuals believe in this archetype. Individuals who more strongly believe in pure evil (who score higher on the BPE scale) exhibit a more

antisocial/aggressive orientation toward others. Such individuals believe that the world is a viler, more dangerous place and report more aggressive (vs. peaceful) attitudes, from matters about foreign policy to the criminal justice system. Two studies have shown that people who believe more in pure evil overall recommend harsher punishments for a variety of crimes (murders, assault, stealing), more greatly support the death penalty, and more greatly oppose criminal rehabilitation, even after controlling for attributional complexity, just-world beliefs, and pessimism (Webster & Saucier, 2013).

Webster and Saucier (2015) examined whether people who score higher in BPE would uniformly derogate all criminals or just criminals that exhibit stereotypically evil traits. Participants read one of two newspaper articles about a murderer who confessed to killing a woman with a knife (van Prooijen & van de Veer, 2010). One article portrayed the murderer as stereotypically evil (as an isolated individual who liked to torment children, which highlighted the sadistic component of pure evil); the other article described the murderer in more neutral terms (as a family man who enjoyed camping). Webster and Saucier (2015) assessed how much participants demonized (i.e., believed that the murderer was wicked and immoral), felt retributive toward (e.g., how much violent perpetrators deserve to be punished), and punished (e.g., jail time and support for his execution) the murderer.

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Participants did demonize and punish the stereotypically evil perpetrator overall more. However, individuals scoring higher in BPE more greatly demonized the murderer and reported stronger feelings of retribution, which increased the murderer's punishment (i.e., demonization and retribution statistically mediated the relationship between BPE and punishment), *regardless of whether the murderer exhibited stereotypically evil traits*. Indeed, the additive effects of BPE were much stronger than the evilness manipulation.

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine whether BPE predicted evaluations of violent—specifically, gun violence—perpetrators despite varying additional situational factors related to the perpetrator and crime. In addition to manipulating the shooter's evilness, we manipulated whether the shooter had a brain tumor. There are documented cases in which people with no criminal history have committed violent actions after having a tumor grow on their prefrontal cortex (Burns & Swerdlow, 2003), the brain region responsible for reasoning and planning. Further, over the past 12 years, criminal defendants are increasingly using neuroscientific evidence to help deflect blame and lessen punishment (Farahany, 2016). Multiple studies using mock cases confirm that a neurological (vs. psychological or no) explanation for criminality—including murder—do lessen blame and punishment (e.g., Gurley & Marcus, 2008; Schweitzer et al., 2011). A neurological mechanism likely provides exculpatory evidence; the aggression is beyond the control of the perpetrator, so participants are more lenient (see Alicke, 2000). However, these studies did not examine the effects of key individual differences, such as BPE, or test possible mediators (dehumanization/demonization or retribution).

Perhaps introducing a neurological explanation would even help lessen the effect of BPE on harsher evaluations of a criminal perpetrator. However, it is entirely possible that the tumor manipulation would not moderate the effects of BPE. Those who score higher in BPE perceive the world as a much more wicked place and do not think as deeply about the causes for others' behaviors (score lower on attributional complexity; Webster & Saucier, 2013). Thus, their perceptions about the potential for pure evil to exist in the world and limited attributional capacity may overpower any situational constraints about the shooter, as Webster and Saucier (2015) demonstrated.

Lastly, we mention one more major modification. Webster and Saucier (2015) assessed how much participants demonized the murderer; but, they did not measure dehumanization, per se. Demonization (i.e., seeing people as demons) is likely a form of dehumanization (i.e., stripping away others' humanness). Haslam (2006) has proposed two different types of dehumanization: mechanistic (i.e., perceiving others as robotic or emotionless) and animalistic (i.e., perceiving others as savage and primal). Webster and Saucier (2015) hypothesized that perceiving or characterizing others as pure evil would engender both mechanistic and animalistic dehumanization. The stereotype of pure evil includes a lack of both self-control and concern for other people's well-being. As dehumanization of the perpetrator increases, the intensity of aggression exhibited toward the perpetrator likely increases, and demonizing and dehumanizing a perpetrator in *both* mechanistic and animalistic terms may justify greater punishment of the perpetrator (see Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, & Castano, 2012).

In sum, the current study increases our understanding of how an important individual difference (BPE) predicts perceptions and evaluations of gun violence perpetrators across different situational contexts (manipulating the shooter's characteristics). Specifically, we predicted participants scoring higher in BPE will report greater demonization, dehumanization, and retribution, which will then

increase punishment, regardless of the situational context—that is, regardless of whether the shooter is portrayed as purely evil (vs. not) or has a tumor (vs. not).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We recruited a national sample of American participants (final  $N = 273$ ; 146 women, 127 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.88$ ; 77.3% Caucasian) via Mechanical Turk (MTurk, an online recruitment website). MTurk workers tend to be “slightly more demographically diverse than are standard Internet samples and are significantly more diverse than typical American college samples” (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011, p. 3). We used MTurk “Master” workers who have previously demonstrated a history of excellent work on the MTurk platform. However, we removed 15 participants because they did not fully complete the study; we also removed two participants because of very fast response time ( $< 2$  s per item; Curran, 2016). Participants received \$1.50 for completing the study. To reduce the possibility of reactivity and demand characteristics, we titled the study “Perceptions of Media Coverage on Crime”.

### 2.2. Materials and procedure

After reading the informed consent, we randomly assigned participants to read one of eight allegedly real *USA Today* articles about a shooting at a mall. We manipulated two key variables: Presence of Tumor (Tumor Present on Shooter's Brain vs. Not Present) and Shooter's Evilness (Stereotypically Evil vs. Not Evil). We also manipulated the Number of Victims (Single Victim vs. Multiple Victims) for exploratory purposes. Thus, we had a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-groups design. We redacted the location and name of the mall “for confidentiality reasons”; in actuality, we did this so that location would not unduly influence participants' responses. We designed the article to look an article on *USA Today's* website to increase ecological validity (see Appendix A).

#### 2.2.1. Number of victims

The shooting was portrayed in the articles as either a mass shooting (“...six wounded and three dead...”) or a shooting claiming one victim (“...one person dead...”). We did not explicitly use the term “mass shooting” in the article because the term may itself provoke harsher reactions.

#### 2.2.2. Presence of tumor

In both manipulations, the news article reported that the perpetrator fainted during his trial and went to the hospital for a MRI brain scan. The article then reported a (fictitious) quote by Dr. Adrian Raine (a real, esteemed neuroscientist), who stated the importance of the prefrontal cortex on regulating self-control, as well as how a trauma or lesion to this area can increase risky and aggressive behavior. To keep the manipulation clean, we changed the wording as little as possible between conditions. In the tumor condition, the news article stated: “...it was found he had a tumor growing from a layer of protective tissue on the prefrontal cortex of his brain... Dr. Raine would not definitely conclude whether the tumor was entirely responsible for J.F.'s actions”; in the no tumor condition, the article stated: “...was found to be in good health....Dr. Raine concluded that J.F.'s brain scans looked normal, so neurological abnormalities could not help explain J.F.'s actions”.

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