

Study identifies why re-educating torturers may not work

November 21 2014, by Audrey Breen



Rachel Wahl, an assistant professor of social foundations of education at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education

Many human rights educators assume – incorrectly, as it turns out – that police and military officers in India who support the torture of suspects do so because they are either immoral or ignorant. This incorrect assumption weakens efforts to educate officers about human rights violations.

These findings from a recent study by Rachel Wahl, an assistant professor of social foundations of education at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, were published this month in the journal *Law & Society Review*.

"It turns out there is a fundamental flaw in many human rights educators' approach to training programs aimed at reducing the support for, and use of, torture," Wahl said.

In a 12-month field study, Wahl found that officers in India have strong moral convictions related to violence.

"The officers believe that providing equal protection to all people would undermine justice. In their minds, justice is served by harming or protecting people depending on who they are and what they have done," Wahl said. "So they believe that it is wrong to torture the wrong people, but not that torture is wrong."

This does not mean that officers live up to their own ideals; by their own admission, they do not.

"But even if they did uphold their ideals, they still would not protect human rights," Wahl said. "Understanding this is important to the design of human rights education and other torture prevention efforts."

In Wahl's interviews of 33 officers, nearly all agreed that torture is the right thing to do in specific circumstances. Several even admitted to participating in torture. In contrast, every officer emphatically agreed that corruption is wrong, though according to statistics, the majority of officers engage in corrupt behavior during their service.

The officers in Wahl's study were each voluntarily participating in, or had graduated from, a human rights education program for which they were paying their own money. The program leads to a master's degree in human rights.

Wahl found that many human rights educators were approaching their instruction in two main ways. The first tactic the educators used was moral persuasion, assuming that everyone operates on the same fundamental understanding of what is right and what is wrong, and that the officers lack any strong moral orientation.

The second type of instruction used was providing technical information with the assumption that officers lack knowledge. For example, instructors would explain how torture is defined and that it is outlawed under international and national laws.

These lessons did not alter the officers' belief that in their line of duty, torture is sometimes the right thing to do.

"The core of the disconnect between the educators and the officers is that the officers inhabit a very different moral universe than those conducting the training," Wahl said.

Wahl also clarifies that this disconnect is different than a "cultural" difference. The human rights educators and advocates were from the same location as the officers and have much in common in regard to religion and culture.

According to Wahl, the study has wide implications for human rights education programs – and there are many worldwide. Currently, the United Nations website lists 28 funding sources for human rights education and advocacy programs around the world, many of which fund multiple programs.

"It is critical for human rights educators to understand their students' beliefs and the context of those beliefs," Wahl said. "It is essential to understand the moral identity of the people you are trying to change and then reach out to them.

"For example, it would be great in this case if the educators began their program by recognizing the way officers wish to see themselves: as defenders of the innocent and punishers of the guilty. Acknowledging their moral aspirations might better encourage buy-in to educators' messages," Wahl suggested.

Moreover, she suggested that officers need practical coaching in how to do their jobs without using torture.

"They know that it is illegal, and they know that human rights activists think it is wrong. But most believe that even if they wanted to stop using torture, it would be impossible to do their jobs successfully" without it, Wahl said, noting that some torture prevention projects are indeed attempting to provide this kind of training.

Wahl recognizes that the [human rights](#) educators have a challenging job. The officers in India receive the message that torture is appropriate from nearly all levels of policy and military.

"The good news is that we have new information that can hopefully help advocates and [educators](#) be more effective in reducing the support for and number of incidents of [torture](#)," Wahl said.

The research was funded by a Shearwater grant from New York University and the David L. Boren National Security Education Program Fellowship. Wahl worked as a research scientist at New York University, where she received her Ph.D. in 2013, and as a visiting scholar at the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University. She joined the U.Va. faculty this fall.

Provided by University of Virginia

Citation: Study identifies why re-educating torturers may not work (2014, November 21)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-11-re-educating-torturers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.