

Prisoner Abuse: The Blame Game

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I'm sure that most of us have been horrified by the revelations of prisoner abuse by US forces or contractors in Iraq. As I write in late May, 2004, fewer people are aware that similar abuse has been identified in US-run facilities in Afghanistan. For a distressing list of human rights violations of this kind, visit the Human Rights Watch Web site[1]. For reports about US policies and behavior, see the particular list of torture and mistreatment[2].

For the time being, some of the soldiers directly involved in the physical and emotional abuse of prisoners are being put on trial both in a court-martial and in the court of public opinion. The focus is primarily on the individuals involved; US society and the occupation of Iraq are largely exculpated in public discussion of these crimes. For example, commentators have aimed particular vitriol at specialist Sabrina Harman, shown in widely-circulated pictures smiling over the corpse of an Iraqi prisoner who died in custody [3] as well as leering at a camera from behind a pile of naked Iraqi men [4]. One writer ends a sarcastic article with, "This unbridled, twinkling joy at the death of another human being is what rockets Sabrina onto the all-time most evil women list[5]."

Is it that easy? Can we simply dismiss the abuse of prisoners by people we would have assumed were ordinary, wholesome American boys and girls as peculiar aberrations due entirely to their own, individual, dark and corrupt souls? Are we dealing here with individual evil alone?

Such an analysis certainly underlies George W. Bush's response to the situation. For example, when Mr Bush expressed his regrets to Jordan's King Abdullah II on May 7, 2004 over the abuse, he said he was "sorry for the humiliations suffered by the Iraqi prisoners and the humiliations suffered by their families." A CNN news story reported that he continued, "I told him I was equally sorry that the people that have been seeing those pictures did not understand the true nature and the heart of America, and I assured him that Americans like me didn't appreciate what we saw and it made us sick to our stomachs." He added, "[T]he troops we have

[1] <http://www.hrw.org>

[2] http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=usai_torture

[3] Prisoner abuse scandal widens. *The Age*. May 20, 2004.
<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/05/20/1084917694110.html?from=top5>

[4] Charged soldier claims she just followed orders. *CTV News*.
http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/1084063495923_5

[5] Sabrina Harman: putting the sex back into death.
<http://www.lnreview.co.uk/links/001853.php>

in Iraq are the finest of the fine, fantastic United States citizens who represent the very best qualities[6].”

Is there no responsibility beyond that of the individual? Such a stance certainly fits an ideology that traces all behavior and all success or failure in life exclusively to individual choices. Is someone poor? Their fault, no one else's – certainly no historical, cultural or sociological issues involved. Drug addict? Individual stupidity at work, nothing else. Thief? Individual moral corruption – no familial or economic factors to discuss. Sadistic torturer in a foreign prison? Can't be anything else than an individual aberration.

Such judgments are examples of the fundamental attribution error: the easy supposition that human behavior is best explained by reference to stable, internal factors: character, disposition and ability. Social psychologist David Myers writes, “When explaining someone's behavior, we underestimate the impact of the situation and overestimate the extent to which it reflects the individual's traits and attitudes[7].” Myers gives several examples of how difficult it is to shake the fundamental attribution error:

- Listeners to debaters praising Fidel Castro described the speakers as pro-Castro even when they knew that the speakers had been *ordered* to take the pro-Castro position by a the *debate coach*;
- When *the subjects themselves* actually told speakers to express a particular opinion, they were still unable to resist concluding that the speakers held those opinions;
- Many people are surprised to discover that an actor may be nothing like the character he or she plays in a long-running series even though rationally, they admit that such an interpretation is nonsense;
- Even subjects *informed* that a graduate student had been *instructed* to act either warm and friendly or cold and aloof were unable to avoid feeling that the person they interacted with really *was* warm and friendly or cold and aloof.

We also know that the social situation can have profound effects on human behavior. Three classic experimental series have challenged the individualist ideology for decades: the conformity studies of Solomon Asch, the prisoner experiments of Philip Zimbardo and the electric shock experiments of Stanley Milgram.

In 1951, Solomon Asch began a series of experiments to study conformity by placing subjects in the position of being the last person to answer a question after hearing several other people give counterintuitive responses[8]. The questions included such issues as the length of lines on a screen, the relative area of symbols, and so on. Other experimenters extended his work by

[6] Bus ‘sorry’ for abuse of Iraqi prisoners: President expresses apology to Jordan’s king. CNN.com. May 7, 2004. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/05/07/bush.apology/>

[7] Myers, D. G. (1993). *Social Psychology, Fourth Edition*. McGraw-Hill (ISBN 0-07-044292-4). P. 79

[8] Solomon Asch experiment (1958): A study of conformity. http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/psychology/social/asch_conformity.html

looking at agreement with extreme political positions[9]. In all of these experiments, a surprisingly high proportion of the subjects agreed with the patently wrong or extreme answers simply because the experimenters' confederates gave those answers. There was no obvious coercion or reward involved; the desire to avoid standing out from the crowd was enough to influence conformity.

In the autumn of 1971, Stanford University social psychologist Philip Zimbardo used role-playing to explore the power of social context on behavior. He set up an experiment assigning randomly chosen volunteers, mostly Stanford students, to play the roles of either prisoners or prison guards[10]. Both groups were assigned appropriate uniforms and told the rules of the game. As is widely known among those who have studied social psychology or criminal justice administration, the experiment quickly degenerated into a scandalous disaster. David G. Myers summarizes the events as follows [11]:

After little more than a day, the guards and prisoners, and even the experimenters, got caught up in the situation. The guards devised cruelly degrading routines. The prisoners broke down, rebelled, or became apathetic. And the experimenters worked overtime to maintain prison security. There developed, reported Zimbardo . . . a "growing confusion between reality and illusion, between role-playing and self-identity. . . . this prison which we have created . . . was absorbing us as creatures of its own reality." The simulation was planned to last two weeks. But [Zimbardo writes]:

At the end of only six days we had to close down our mock prison because what we saw was frightening. It was no longer apparent to us or most of the subjects where they ended and the roles began. The majority had indeed become "prisoners" or "guards," no longer able to clearly differentiate between role-playing and self. There were dramatic changes in virtually every aspect of their behavior, thinking and feeling. In less than a week, the experience of imprisonment ended (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged, and the ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys ("guards") treat other boys as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys ("prisoners") became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival, and of their mounting hatred of the guards. . . .

Myers continues his discussion of dehumanizing roles with a reference to the effects of slavery on both slaves and slave masters. He quotes Frederick Douglass, who wrote about his experiences after emancipation, in a description of how a friendly weaver who married a slave

[9] Myers, *op. cit.* p. 228

[10] The Stanford Prison Experiment: Still powerful after all these years.
<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/relaged/970108prisonexp.html>

[11] Myers, *op. cit.* p. 203

owner changed over a course of months from a kindly woman into a brutal taskmaster. “The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of the demon[12].”

Similar dehumanization has been noted in current times among middleclass and wealthy people who abuse or even enslave servants. For example, in Hong Kong in July 2000, a Filipino maid was burned with a hot iron by her employer for failing to respond quickly to a call; another employer was imprisoned after burning her maid for scorching a shirt[13]. Indonesian maids in Singapore, Malaysia, and some Arab states have been bitten, burned, raped, and subjected to other abuse so horrific it defies belief[14].

These abuses occur in the United States as well as overseas. Foreign maids in the US have been forced to work as much as 20 hours a day for pennies an hour; enslaved without payment from the age of 14; forbidden to bathe; verbally abused; physically assaulted; terrified by death threats; and repeatedly raped[15]. It is noteworthy that many cases of abuse involve foreign diplomats who can escape punishment through diplomatic immunity.

Prisoner abuse is complicated by pressures to comply with direct orders or with peer pressure. There is nothing new about prisoner abuse; for example, commentators have noted parallels between the Abu Ghraib incidents and abuse in the Brazoria County Detention Center in Texas in 1996, where prisoners were also photographed “lying on the floor, being dragged and menaced by dogs[16].”

The work of Stanley Milgram bears directly on these questions. In the mid 1960s, Yale University psychologist Milgram organized a study of compliance.

The subject and an actor pretending to be another subject are told by the experimenter that they were going to participate in an experiment to test the effectiveness of punishment on learning behavior. Two slips of paper marked “teacher” are handed to the subject and actor, and the actor claims that his says “learner”, so the subject believed that his role has been chosen randomly. Both are then given a sample 45-volt electric shock from an apparatus attached to a chair into which the actor is strapped. The “teacher” is

[12] Myers, op. cit. p. 204

[13] Gittings, J. (2000). Filipino maids burned by Hong Kong employers. *The Guardian*. July 25,2000. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,346721,00.html>

[14] Indonesian Maids Commit Suicide in Singapore. *Laskamana.net*. May 6, 2002. http://www.laskamana.net/vnews.cfm?ncat=40&news_id=2662

[15] Sun, L. H. (2004). 'Modern-Day Slavery' Prompts Rescue Efforts: Groups Target Abuse of Foreign Maids, Nannies. *Washington Post*. May 3, 2004. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A61457-2004May2?language=printer>

[16] Javers, Eamon (2004). Eerie reminders of old prison abuse case: Abu Ghraib bears resemblance to Texas incident under then-Gov. Bush. *CNBC*. May 28, 2004. <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/5086647/>

then given simple memory tasks to give to the “learner” and instructed to administer a shock by pressing a button each time the learner makes a mistake.

The “teacher” is then told that the voltage is to be raised by 15 volts after each mistake. He is not told that there are no actual shocks being given to the actor, who feigns discomfort. At “150 volts”, the actor requests that the experiment end, and is told by the experimenter “The experiment requires that you continue. Please go on.” or similar words. He continues, and the actor feigns greater discomfort, considerable pain, and concerns for his own safety as the shocks continue. If the teacher subject becomes reluctant, he is instructed that the experimenter takes all responsibility for the results of the experiment and the safety of the learner, and that the experiment requires that he continue[17].

Contrary to the almost universal predictions of everyone who was asked about how the subjects would behave, 65% of the subjects administered the supposedly fatal 450 volt shock. Nobody stopped before administering the supposedly painful 300 volt shock[18].

Further work by Milgram and others suggested that compliance with such orders could be influenced by a number of factors[19]:

- Depersonalization of the victim: the more distant the victim, the more likely the abuse. Subjects almost all applied maximum shocks to remote, invisible, inaudible victims. In contrast, compliance dropped severely when the victims were in the same room and even more if the subject was obliged to force the victim's hand onto an electrode. It is not for nothing that we see pictures of prisoners with hoods on their heads. Most people interpret this as abuse of the prisoner; it is just as likely to be a mechanism that increases compliance with outrageous practices by depersonalizing the victim.
- Authority: the social status of the authority influenced obedience. For example, switching the experiment from Yale University to Bridgeport Connecticut reduced compliance from around 65% to around 50%. Removing the lab-coat-wearing experimenter and substituting a clerk instantly reduced compliance from 65% to around 20% . When the “clerk” attempted to continue the shocks himself, some now-belligerent subjects actively interfered: “Some tried to unplug the generator. One large man lifted the zealous shocker from his chair and threw him across the room[20].”
- Resistance to authority: When two of Milgram’s confederates resisted the supposed authority, compliance with the “experimenter” fell to only 10%. In other words, resistance rose from around 35% to 90% simply because someone else took the first step in questioning authority.

[17] Milgram experiment. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment

[18] At 300 volts, the programmed response to the shock was, “(*Agonized scream*) I absolutely refuse to answer any more. Get me out of here. You can’t hold me here. Get me out. Get me out of here.” -- Myers, *op. cit.* p. 231 citing Milgram’s own texts.

[19] Myers, *op. cit.* pp. 231 ff.

[20] Myers, *op. cit.* p. 233

- Fragmentation of evil: "...[S]ituations can induce ordinary people to agree to falsehoods or capitulate to cruelty.... [E]vil situations have enormous corrupting power. This is especially true when, as happens often in complex societies, the most terrible evil evolves from a sequence of small evils. German civil servants surprised Nazi leaders with their willingness to handle the paperwork of the Holocaust. They were not killing Jews, of course; they were merely pushing paper.... when fragmented, evil becomes easier. Milgram studied this compartmentalization of evil by involving yet another 40 men more indirectly. Rather than trigger the shock, they had only to administer the learning tests; 37 of the 40 fully complied[21]."

I think these classic studies in social psychology bear directly on today's interpretation of the prison scandals in Iraq and Afghanistan. If we permit established authority to focus *solely* on the individual responsibility of the soldiers and other government agents who acted badly, we will miss the crucial opportunity to analyze the social circumstances that have made it too easy for ordinary people to behave cruelly. Worse, if we think that these are purely isolated expressions of individual evil, then we will persist in ignoring the inevitability of such descent into perversion in similar circumstances. What do you think is happening in Guantánamo Bay outside the supervision of independent observers?

No, we must apply the body of well-established knowledge to our own public policies. The argument is not that we should abolish all prisons and release all prisoners; the argument is that we must apply vigilance in the day-to-day supervision of prison life everywhere -- in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Guantánamo Bay, and in every prison in America. One of the most powerful tools for changing behavior is self-awareness[22]; I would have prison guards become aware of the issues raised by generations of social psychologists. Soldiers should be briefed on the work of Asch, Milgram, Zimbardo and others so that they can be personally on guard against a descent into depravity. We should assign *pairs* of soldiers with responsibility to be the prisoner's ombudsmen; they would be ordered to provide a dissent against depravity and would be following orders in so doing. By having at least two of them together, they could support each other against peer pressure to participate in, condone and conceal abuse. By demonstrating such resistance, they would motivate the decent soldiers and guards to join in resistance to illegal behavior and illegal orders.

But most important of all, those in positions of responsibility and authority must address fundamental issues and not simply pick individuals as the sole targets of attention and punishment.

It's time to stop the blame game.

[21] Myers, *op. cit.* p. 239

[22] Myers, *op. cit.* p. 538 cites work by Arthur Beaman and colleagues showing that lectures on altruistic behavior actually increase the likelihood of that behavior.

POSTSCRIPT:

July 2004

The Progressive magazine published an issue focusing on the prisoner abuse problem in July 2004. In particular, Anne-Marie Cusac wrote, "Abu Ghraib, USA" which reviews similar abuse in US prisons.[23]

August 2004

Extensive reporting in August focused on possible involvement of high levels of the US military and of the Bush administration in the scandal.[24] Headlines included

- Army links top officers to prisoner abuse in Iraq
- Army lists failures at Abu Ghraib
- Intelligence unit to blame for abuses
- CACI employees among those referred to prosecutors for Iraq prison abuses
- Rumsfeld escapes criticism in prison probes
- CIA 'poisoned' Iraq prison: Army
- Blame Without Punishment
- Widespread US Army involvement in Iraqi prisoner abuse
- Investigations find no evidence that Rumsfeld encouraged prisoner abuse

[23] *The Progressive* 68(7):19-23. Also available at < <http://www.progressive.org/july04/cusac0704.html> >

[24] U.S. Politics Today < <http://www.uspoliticstoday.com/news/IraqPrisonerAbuseScandal> >