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Torture, Interrogation, and Daily Hassles: Good Thoughts and Bad Thoughts

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Author: Editor

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Abstract. This article elaborates on some psychological stress reduction research in a political psychological and moral context.

Although terms like stress, stressor, coping, and adaptation have been employed to the extent that their meanings are many and approaching meaningless, one might still concur that good and bad experiences are intrinsic to one's life. Most people seem to prefer the good to the bad--those preferring the bad may be merely preferring their version of the good so that good and bad, too, are added to the meaningless litany in the opening sentence. But assuming there is a good and a bad--after throwing out all residues of postmodernism, cultural relativism, nihilism, solipsistic Talmudism, and sophistry--and that the good is preferred to the bad, how does one best experience the experience of the bad?

Boden & Baumeister (1997) recently published a study describing how two groups of people react to a bad experience. One group--the repressors--seem to distract themselves from the bad by focusing on good thoughts, e.g., happy memories. Another group--the nonrepressors--focus on yet other bad thoughts when confronted with a bad experience at hand. Both groups often seem to employ these strategies unconsciously, yet both--to differing degrees between and among groups--may be able to be taught to reinforce either or both strategies.

Along with other intrapsychic phenomena--employing beliefs that one is responsible or not responsible for what is occurring, that one can effect or not effect change in an environment, that one can be different or the same in different or the same situations, that one should and does care about one's own standards or those of others to varying degrees--what are the implications for living the good and bad in one's life?

Psychological research on daily hassles, stress, and coping seems to be based on a notion that being largely unaware of and unaffected by negative stimuli and their consequences is a good thing--that approaching the Panglossian ideal of the best of all possible worlds is how to cultivate one's garden. The notions of empathy with the suffering of others, of resonance with those fighting against injustice, of choice to enter a life or situation that appears doomed but morally or ethically compelling seem foreign to common notions of psychological health. These notions seem at best to be some sublimation of sado-masochistic tendencies or a reaction formation against the most wanton proclivities. In this context, the repressors' repression seems to be somewhere among Epicureanism, Buddhism, and the totalitarianism of political repression.

The same psychological research, however, may be useful to those who choose to live the hard life. Incorporating the various cognitive, behavioral, and even covert psychophysiological strategies that attenuate the noxious effects of torture and interrogation--two experiences usually thought of as bad by those who have had the opportunity of learning about them without the need for reading or viewing mass media exposes and simulations--may make the difference between physical and psychological survival and a living or actual death. So, though Boden and Baumeister focus on unpleasant events in daily life--the concern of many consumers of scientific psychology--the value of their work may be more

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profound as well. (See Boden, J.M., & Baumeister, R.F. (1997.) Repressive coping: Distraction using pleasant thoughts and memories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 45-62; McGorry, P. (1995.) Working with survivors of torture and trauma: The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture in perspective. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 29, 463-472; McIvor, R.J., & Turner, S.W. (1995.) Assessment and treatment approaches for survivors of torture. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 166, 705-711; Priebe, S., & Esmaili, S. (1997.) Long-term mental sequelae of torture in Iran--who seeks treatment? *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 185, 74-77.) (Keywords: Coping, Stress, Interrogation, Torture.)