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# Jamal Khashoggi: Assassination, Abattoir, and the Law of Small Numbers

Editor

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**Title:** Jamal Khashoggi: Assassination, Abattoir, and the Law of Small Numbers

**Author:** Editor

Much has been, is being, and will be written about a tragedy—the assassination of the journalist, author, editor, and speaker of truth to power Jamal Khashoggi (1). This article describes psychological research and analysis relevant to the often-remarked observation that the tragedy of one person can arouse the global masses to heights of despair and indignation far beyond the tragedy of thousands and millions. Perhaps, this is why Sophocles wrote tragedies of Oedipus and Antigone, Shakespeare on Macbeth and Lear, neither on the Greeks nor Scots, nor Celts.

The most often used construct is the *collapse of compassion*. It is applied to two intertwined psychological phenomena—that we can, indeed, care about the tragedy of large numbers of people, but also fear about being emotionally overwhelmed so somehow minimize emotional response. And somehow we can *intellectually* understand tragedy of the one and the many, but the latter is too great a challenge for *emotional* resonance. What still seems to be at issue is where and for what situations the tipping point against an expansive emotional response may be—two, fifty, hundreds of victims?

Significant research on *collapse of compassion* seems to have been carried out by Daryl Cameron and B. Keith Payne, singly and together, as well as associates. Findings suggest that *collapse of compassion* seems to activate when people expect to be asked to donate money to victims; for people who are skilled in emotional regulation; and for people who are asked to engage in minimization of emotion, but not for those who are asked to experience emotion. And people seem to engage in *collapse of compassion* proactively, so they seem insensitive to mass suffering (2). Such findings seem to contradict many people's expectation about how they would and should respond to mass tragedy. The contradiction may involve either or both of human limitations for feeling compassion and strategic gambits to avoid compassion (3). In addition, findings suggest that people seem to attribute less 'mind' to groups than individuals or 'people within a group'. In turn, perceiving less 'mind' is correlated with experiencing less sympathy and compassion (4). As well, less 'mind' is also attributed to stigmatized groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, and so on, and correlated with less compassion experienced towards these groups (5).

So much of scientific psychology applied to experiencing tragedy is founded on theories of limitation—memories needing to be repressed (6), perceptions eluding consciousness through dissociation and denial (7)—as if actor Jack Nicholson's quote from the film, *A Few Good Men*, "You can't handle the truth", were the truth. What's innovative about the research described above is that theories beyond limitation are at least seriously considered—viz., attributions of mind and stigma, avoidance of post-tragedy obligation, and constraints on compassion not on perceiving the tragedy.

Back to Jamal Khashoggi and his tragedy, as of this writing most probably assassination accompanied by dismemberment like an animal at the abattoir. No collapse of compassion here. Not yet. Not until the next allegedly unspeakable tragedy to the next individual or small number of victims.

**References.** (1) Obituary: Jamal Khashoggi was a 'good man and a fine journalist'. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/profile-jamal-khashoggi-saudi-writer-missing-turkey-181007184026645.html>. (2) Cameron, C.D., & Payne, B.K. (2011). Escaping affect: How motivated emotion regulation creates insensitivity to mass suffering. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 1-15. (3) Cameron, C.D. (2017). Compassion collapse: Why we are numb to numbers. In E. M. Seppala, E. Simon-Thomas, S. L. Brown, M.C. Worline, C.D. Cameron, , & J. R. Doty (Eds.). *Oxford Library of Psychology. The Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science*. (pp. 261-271). NY: Oxford University Press. (4) Cooley, E., Payne, B. K., Cipolli, W. III, Cameron, C. D., Berger, A., & Gray, K. (2017). The paradox of group mind: "People in a group" have more mind than a "group of people". *Journal of Experimental Psychology, General*: 146(5), 691-699. (5) Cameron, C. D., Harris, L. T., & Payne, B. K. (2016). The emotional cost of humanity: Anticipated exhaustion motivates dehumanization of stigmatized targets. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7(2), 105-112. (6) Patihis, L.; Lilienfeld, S. O.; Ho, L. Y.; & Loftus, E. F. (2014). Unconscious repressed memory is scientifically questionable. *Psychological Science*, 25(10), 1967-1968. (7) Berry, K; Fleming, P; Wong, S; & Bucci, S. (2018). Associations between trauma, dissociation, adult attachment and proneness to hallucinations. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 46(3), 292-301; Cohen, S. (2001). *States of denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity.

**Keywords:** ~~Keywords:~~ Assassination. Compassion. Denial. Dissociation. Emotion arousal. Tragedy.

**Abstract/Description:** This article describes psychological research on why tragedies of individuals and small numbers of people elicit more global emotional arousal than tragedies of large numbers of people.

**Disciplines:** Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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