

2-16-2005

Psychological and Sociopolitical Factors Contributing to the Creation of the Iraqi Torturers: A Human Rights Issue

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2005) "Psychological and Sociopolitical Factors Contributing to the Creation of the Iraqi Torturers: A Human Rights Issue," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 1. Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol16/iss2/1>

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Title: Psychological and Sociopolitical Factors Contributing to the Creation of the Iraqi Torturers: A Human Rights Issue

Author: Editor

Volume: 16

Issue: 2

Date: 2005-02-16

Keywords: Abu Ghraib, Haritos-Fatouros, Iraq, Torture, Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment

Abstract: This article was written by Dr. Mika Haritos-Fatouros, Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessalonica, Greece. She can be reached at mikahar@otenet.gr.

The author discusses the human rights context of torture in Abu Ghraib from a political psychological perspective.

A few months ago, a series of shocking images were beamed to TV sets and newspapers around the world. They depicted the brutal sexual abuse and the physical and psychological torture of Iraqi detainees by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These pictures were taken by the American soldiers themselves; one memorable scene shows two soldiers—one—male and one female—posing over corpses and grinning.

There are some particularities worth noting. A) In all studies on the subject of torture, the vast majority of torturers have been male; women torturers, such as those in the Nazi concentration camp system, were generally present only in womens' cellblocks. But at Abu Ghraib, women soldiers were active and regular torturers of men. It is likely that women torturers were selected to increase the humiliation of the Muslim male prisoners. B) The incidents at Abu Ghraib mark one of the few times in modern history where torture was not performed in total secrecy by the perpetrators. On the contrary, hundreds of acts of torture were recorded on digital media, shared with other soldiers, and left haphazardly in full view. C) The types of torture and humiliation—the use of attack dogs, the peculiar focus on (homo) sexual abuse—are quite startling.

It should also be pointed out that some photographs show certain acts of torture that require some sophistication on the part of the torturer. One method used in Abu Ghraib involved standing a prisoner upright and hooded with the threat of electrocution, for hours on end. This particular torture—a long, drawn-out, agonizing process of steadily increasing pain—has a long pedigree in the 20th century. In his book *Torture and Modernity*, Darius Rejali records that the Nazi Gestapo commonly practiced this method which was also practiced by Stalin's secret police and that the threat of electrocution was probably a Brazilian innovation. A similar method, minus the electric wires and the hood, was used by the military police torturers in Greece in the 1970s. This technique and its variations are described in further depth in my studies of the Greek torturers, (1988 & 2003). It seems apparent that one or more people at the prison had a special knowledge of torture techniques and taught them to the low-ranking soldiers who have all been court-martialed, convicted, and sentenced. These techniques were clearly not impulsive acts, nor were they a learned part of daily life in Appalachia where many of the soldiers involved grew up. As Senator Patrick Leahy told Donald Rumsfeld: "I don't think they're getting their techniques over the Internet. There's obviously some systematic training" (World News, May 14, 2004).

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All this was a huge blow to the image of a democratic nation like America—killing any remaining sympathy for the 9/11 victims and producing new numbers of religious fundamentalists ready to sacrifice themselves for a just cause.

What kind of people are these torturers? Are they the bad apples of the American military, as the Bush administration has alleged, or is it the whole barrel that is bad, as Philip Zimbardo, former president of the American Psychological Association, declared?

Back in 1975, one year after the fall of the military dictatorship in Greece, I received special permission to attend the trials of the Greek military police's torturers. I thought I was going to study sadistic personalities. But what I discovered was a carefully planned system of training. I discovered that these state torturers were probably not dispositionally marked individuals—sadists who thrived on torturing prisoners—but that they were “ordinary” people who, under particular socio-political circumstances, were systematically trained to become torturers by obeying an “authority of violence.” These torturers were made, not born, to torture.

The Greek paradigm involved tough initiation processes, physical and psychological abuse, special rewards and punishments, and group bonding in which the pressure to conform is enormous. All these contributed directly to the acquisition of a new, special identity. These young men, who were doing their mandatory military service, were trained to believe, with absolute conviction, in the higher cause of their state-directed mission and to blame and dehumanize their potential victims. This allowed a high degree of disengagement from their past values and beliefs. Only by these means were they able to perform such atrocious acts, acts that were ordered by what I have called the “authority of violence.” These transformations from “ordinary” young men to fierce perpetrators are paralleled in other studies that I and my colleagues have carried out on Brazilian military and civil policemen and on elite special forces training in the US and elsewhere (Haritos-Fatouros 2003; Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros & Zimbardo 2002; Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros 1986).

But who are these American torturers? Why did they do it? At present we only know these people from the daily news reports, but these do provide a useful initial profile (Time Magazine, Special Report, May 17, 2004). All the soldiers charged belong to the 372nd Military Police Company—a unit of reservists based in Cresaptown, Maryland. Most members of this company are from small, low-income towns in Appalachia, where military recruitment advertisements appear frequently in the local media. People there often join the military as teenagers—in order to earn money, to see the world, or just because it's a way to leave the town where they grew up. The members of the 372nd say they are a tight-knit group.

Some Notes:

Private First Class Lynndie England appears in one of the photos holding a leash strapped to the neck of a naked, prone Iraqi man. She joined the military at age 17 to save money for college, where she intended to major in meteorology. According to her family, Ms. England was always an independent, tomboyish girl. She married impulsively at 19 and divorced amicably two years later. She was well liked in her company and often volunteered for tasks outside her official job as a company clerk. She is physically small but strong for her size—a quick study, very sharp. She liked proving herself to the men. She wasn't afraid to be strong and to train hard. She was not afraid to break a nail or get as dirty and stinky as the guys. Currently, she is pregnant with the child of a fellow soldier, Charles Graner, who is also charged.

Corporal Charles Graner is 35 and a former Marine and Gulf War veteran. In one of the Abu Ghraib photos, Graner is seen grinning triumphantly over the dead body of an Iraqi man. In civilian life, he worked as a prison guard. (The prison where he worked has a history of prisoner abuse, but Graner has not been implicated). He has two children. His ex-wife has filed three orders of protection against him since 1997.

Sergeant Ivan (Chip) Frederick joined the military to see the world. He is 37 and was soon to retire after serving 20 years with his company. He is the most senior member who faced charges. He's married with two stepchildren. In his civilian life, he was a guard at a low security, small Virginia prison. He is described as a tough guy, a practical joker who likes to be in charge. E-mails he sent home suggest he took pride in "softening up" prisoners for MI's (military intelligence officers). He received 8 years in prison, was demoted to private, lost all his back pay, was dishonourably discharged, and will get no retirement pay after 20 years in the army reserve.

Specialist Sabrina Harman is 26 and wanted to be a police officer but did not pass her exams. In a sworn statement, she says Graner and Frederick's job was to "get those people to talk" for MI. Her job was "to stress detainees by keeping them awake." We saw her in a photo smiling happily and pointing at the dead body of an Iraqi prisoner.

Specialist Megan Ambuhl is 29 and is described by a friend as "always being a very kind person."

Sergeant Javal Davis is 26 and is from Roselle, N.J. He was a power-tool salesman in civilian life and was a track star in high school. He is a devout Baptist and father of two children. He claims that he only did "traffic stops" in Iraq—i.e.—pulling people over and questioning them—but has admitted witnessing prisoners being forced to "do things" that he found morally disagreeable. He said that he was simply obeying orders and that he followed the intelligence officers' lead when asked to "prepare" prisoners—i.e., "rough them up, get them scared" for questioning. Davis also said he could not name the officers who gave these instructions because they were not easily identified. ("...They said, 'Call me agent or mister,' or they gave a fake name").

Specialist Joseph Darby is 24 and was a strong boy—a tackle on his high school football team. He came from a poor family. His stepfather was a disabled ex-marine and ex-truck driver. Neighbours said that his father passed on to his son "good moral values." It was Joe Darby who tipped off his superiors after seeing some of the photos from Abu Ghraib. (The information was given anonymously). He said that he was worried about retaliation from other members of his company, and then he made a sworn statement. It was his tip that brought the Abu Ghraib story into the open. He never served in that prison. He found out about the events from Graner's CD with the photos that Graner showed him. He is now in protective custody. So are his wife and mother, because, apparently, there are people who want to kill them.

Only a few soldiers refused to obey orders relating to prisoner abuse. Jason Kennel declined to "do MI's dirty work" without formal paperwork. David Sutton says he tried to stop the abuses he witnessed. William Kimbro refused to allow his dogs to attack prisoners. But these men behaved like most citizens anywhere—as bystanders, neither heroes nor villains. They did not participate in torture, but they did not do much to stop it happening. This kind of behaviour, or non-behaviour, has been described repeatedly in psychological research (Latane & Darley, 1970). A similar bystander—a military policeman trained but not practiced in violent interrogation—assisted my research on torturers after the fall of the Greek dictatorship.

In the case of Abu Ghraib, many, including nurses and medical doctors, were guilty of the evil of inaction by knowing about these immoral behaviours, watching, and doing nothing about it. There were no complaints, reports, or open challenge of such behaviours.

These meagre biographies of some of the American soldiers involved in the Abu Ghraib crimes are not enough information for specific observations. It is far too early to reach any conclusions as to whether these people's backgrounds contributed as dispositional factors in their evolution into torturers. However, it is interesting to note that, with the exception of Charles Graner (who had shown prior violent, abusive behaviour towards his ex-wife), these are all stories of "ordinary," "everyday" people. They are not lunatics. They are not serial killers, and they are not considered perverts or social lepers. They are strikingly similar to the stories of the Greek torturers whose detailed personal histories were recorded at length in my study. Those men, too, were raised in poor, semi-urban, or rural communities with little or no history of violence or abuse. The commonly held stereotype of torturers—as "sick" or somehow "abnormal" people—does not apply. Ivan Frederick, according to Philip Zimbardo who interviewed him, is as ordinary and normal as can be imagined—an American icon. There was not a single sign of pathology in his psychological assessment.

Similarly, none of the Greek torturers whom I interviewed reported experiencing childhood abuse to an extent that would legitimize a catharsis or frustration-aggression hypothesis. Inflicting torture did not seem to reduce aggression towards the victim. On the contrary, torture was a habituation process—gradually becoming a routine act. Hannah Arendt (1963) reached similar conclusions on the perpetrators of the acts of murder that became the Holocaust. She observed that those men were not people whom she could call "sadists"—people whose individual character led them to acts of violence as a source of satisfaction. She discovered that an institutional, systematic effort was made to actually exclude all those who derived personal pleasure from torture and murder. Such people were likely to lose control of their actions.

Later works on the Nazi killers as "ordinary men" have given convincing evidence for the decisive influence of situational factors. Daniel Goldhagen (1996) analyzed the means and methods by which German public opinion was influenced to prepare for the eventual slaughter of European Jews—a massive undertaking that was carried out by "ordinary" German citizens. Therefore, it is not surprising if we discover these American torturers are also "ordinary" men and women.

Stanley Milgram's (1969) famous "shocking" experiment is illuminating in this context. Milgram demonstrated that if "normal" human beings are placed in a particular situation where the binding forces caused by experiences which make people obey authority figures are greater than the strain that is associated with the unpleasant experience of obedience, then these "normal" people will do as they are told. That is, they will harm people. Sixty-five percent of the individuals whom he tested inflicted what they thought were dangerous levels of electric shock to a victim—played by an actor in the experiment—when they were told to do so by the experimenter. They ignored cries of protest from the victim and even increased the voltage.

Indeed, obedience to authority figures counted as the only single dispositional factor we found among Greek torturers. For some, this was due to low self-esteem. For others, it was due to a need to maintain the favour of authority figures and to accept unconditionally new values issued by the authority of violence. There was also the need to live up to a personal model of behaviour—to be the "right hand" of authority or the "good boy" of the family. Altemeyer (1988) has shown that those people who are

highly submissive to authority tend to become highly aggressive when they think established authorities will approve.

It is likely that we may find these dispositional factors among the American torturers, but we must wait for an examination of the entire prison environment of Abu Ghraib. It is noteworthy that some of the people charged with prisoner abuse and torture were already experienced in guarding prisoners prior to their posting in Iraq—either as prison guards in the US or as part of the 372nd company's earlier posting in Bosnia. They must have acted as social models to the younger ones of the group.

The Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment on dehumanization and deindividuation (1970; 1974) is also extremely relevant. As in Milgram's experiment, the Zimbardo studies revealed how "ordinary" people can become victimizers. But while Milgram showed that they will behave this way under orders, Philip Zimbardo showed something even more disturbing. Under special conditions, such as in a prison, it is sufficient simply to give people the role of victim or victimizer for them to quickly assume the appropriate behaviour for their role without previous training.

Zimbardo built a mock prison in the basement of the Psychology Department at Stanford University. A homogeneous set of twenty-one white male student volunteers were brought in. They were told they were taking part in a "life in prison experiment" and had been evaluated as "normal average," emotionally stable, and physically healthy. They were randomly assigned to one of two groups—guards or prisoners. The latter were given a contract to sign in which they accepted that some of their basic civil rights would be suspended as part of the experiment. The guards were instructed that under no circumstances were they to inflict physical punishment or aggression on the "prisoners." They were required to file a report after every shift, to conduct a daily call-roll of the prisoners, and to maintain a reasonable degree of order in the prison. The guards were given khaki uniforms and batons. The prisoners were obliged to wear long uniform dresses and were told that they would be addressed only by their assigned number. The guards were allowed to go home after their daily shift. The prisoners could not leave their cells, and they had further restrictions on toilet use, meals, and free time. It was a situation resembling the "total institution" described by Goffman (1984), like the prison of Abu Ghraib, like a military police training camp in Greece or Brazil, or like a US marine boot camp.

Zimbardo described the circumstances under which he was forced to stop the experiment after only 6 days. There was an escalating level of violence and degradation by the guards against the prisoners—five of whom suffered "emotional breakdowns" from acute stress. Other prisoners, who appeared to adapt better to the situation, demonstrated total obedience to the authority figures—just as Greek military police recruits obeyed the irrational orders given by their instructors at boot camp. This was a survival mechanism that led to a state of learned or acquired helplessness facilitating instant obedience to orders to commit violence. I suspect something similar may have happened with the American torturers at Abu Ghraib.

The conversion of an "ordinary" person into a torturer is not achieved by altering his personality but by the restructuring of his/her moral values. Obedience to the authority of violence is, then, largely facilitated by what Albert Bandura (1990, 2004) has called mechanisms of moral disengagement. These are cognitive mechanisms which facilitate the behaviour of the perpetrator by (a) altering his/her perception of his/her own reprehensible conduct through the use of justifications (fighting for a higher moral cause, saving the nation from external danger, fighting for democracy or for good vs. evil); (b) using euphemistic language for the act ("soften up" instead of kick, punch, beat, or torture); (c) minimizing and misconstruing the consequences (war is no picnic, isolated instances of atrocities will

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happen sometimes); (d) minimizing his/her responsibility through displacement or diffusion (I was only following orders); (e) altering his/her own view of the victim through dehumanization (they're animals, they're terrorists, rape is a message they understand) along with blaming the victim (it's his own fault for being a terrorist). These mechanisms of moral disengagement were all clearly manifested by Greek and Brazilian torturers. These mechanisms are not unknown in the American military today.

One crucial element of moral disengagement is the bonding of the group of perpetrators with its leaders. Relentless propaganda through mass media plays a major role and such propaganda has been used in abundance since the attacks of September 11th, 2001—"softening up" the populace, so to speak, for steadily increasing doses of aggressive behaviour. Philip Zimbardo (2003) has maintained that the American sense of vulnerability to terrorism—sustained and magnified by the Bush administration's repeated issuing of false alarms for imminent terrorist attacks on the homeland—was purposefully mollified by the march to war in Iraq. A sense of group unity is created that identifies the leaders' actions, however extreme, with the will of the population by channeling the fear and insecurity of a nation into military confrontation, This obliges "ordinary" soldiers to find various means for justifying their own acts.

Craig Haney, one of the leading researchers in the Stanford experiment, said to J. Schwartz of The New York Times (May 7, 2004) "What is regarded as appropriate treatment may shift over time, so they don't realize how bad they are behaving--the smiling faces in those pictures suggest a total loss of perspective." This is the "banality of evil"—one more mechanism of moral disengagement. Indeed, the mistreatment of prisoners was widely known at Abu Ghraib and apparently tolerated without trouble. Many images of naked detainees were found on computers in the Internet café at the prison. They were not hidden. Torture and abuse had become "normal" behaviour. Zimbardo said to the same reporter that he was not surprised at the atrocities committed there. He had parallel pictures from his 1971 study.

I must admit that I was not surprised either. In lecturing and presenting my work on torturers at universities and Amnesty International gatherings in many parts of the world, the typical statements and questions from the audience are of two kinds:

A) "I would never do such things!" to which I would respond by asking, "How do you know? If you have never experienced a similar situation, how can you be so sure?"

B) "Could YOU have done it?" My answer is "Yes, probably. You, your neighbour's son, or I could all have done it under similar socio-political circumstances and situations. We can't know until we're in it."

I believe that any explanation of the behaviour of the torturer that relies on sadistic impulses—or, indeed, on the biological basis of aggression—is a fallacy and a comfortable rationalization. The torturer is an ordinary person who acts normally in an abnormal situation. Human actions can be construed in many ways. It is in the torturer's interest—and that of his/her supporters—to construe his/her actions in a way that enables him/her to continue to torture. Indeed, if the torturer were permitted to view his/her actions with the repugnance that most outside observers feel, it would be very difficult for the torturer to continue. Every day he/she would be confronted with the repulsive nature of his/her actions and the abhorrence of society until he/she broke down. Perhaps, we can say that evil is not innate in human beings in general and, perhaps, not even in specific human beings. Rather it resides in ideas and policies that create opportunities for it to flourish and these ideas and policies are tolerated by most and followed by many "ordinary" people.

I am sure that in the future that the Ghraib veteran soldiers will probably show Posttraumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD), and they will need counselling for re-entering normal society. In our study with Brazilian torturers and killers, social and professional isolation combined with emotional or physical health problems tended to characterize the most burned out policemen of our sample (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros & Zimbardo 2002). Albert Bandura (2004) suggests that these people—at the individual level—could be helped by promoting empathic humaneness through moral engagement and—at the national level—by the Nelson Mandela policy of displacing hatred for apartheid with reconciliation by affirming common humanity.

Here is a final thought or possibly an avenue for further research into this awful subject. It is my hypothesis that PTSD, first described in veterans of the Vietnam War, will strike doubly hard on the women soldiers taking part in the war in Iraq. Despite a century of feminism and 60 years of women's liberation, women around the world are still brought up to fit with the social stereotypes of looking after the weakest people in their society. They are the primary caregivers to the children, the elderly, and those who are ill. But in Iraq, women soldiers have been active participants in the killing of children and old people and in the torture and sexual abuse of adolescent boys. How will these women return to their assumed gender roles and look after their own children and parents back home? How will American society respond?

Obviously, the Abu Ghraib torturers should be punished for their actions, but the blame should go all the way up the ladder. It is a monstrous crime to turn young men and women into torturers. These young people simply had no idea what they were signing onto when they volunteered to serve their country. If they found themselves in an impossible situation, shouldn't we ask who put them there? Who gave the orders to these people? Who gave the orders to torture? Who is responsible for so many ruined lives?

At the Athens trials of 1975, one of the fathers of the Greek military police torturers addressed the tribunal this way:

"I am a poor but honest citizen. I sent my son to serve his country, and now I see him on the defendant's bench, accused of torture. I had a good boy, everybody said so. Can you tell me who turned my son into a torturer and destroyed him and my family psychologically?"

Indeed, research suggests that all of us are more vulnerable to social conditions than we wish to admit. We need to identify the situational forces acting on these American soldiers in Tier 1A of the Ghraib prison, many forces of which were like those in the Stanford prison, but, in addition, extreme stress and fatigue and exhaustion. Frederick in his interview with Philip Zimbardo testified that he worked 12 hours on the night shift, 7 days a week with no day off for 40 days, with the prison under constant bombardment, and with escape attempts and riots. The prison was totally chaotic going from 400 to 1000 prisoners in a few months; a mixed population with adults and children, prisoners with chronic diseases, mental illness, etc.

Philip Zimbardo suggests that systemic forces are the broader features and processes that created the situational dynamics. The immoral war; the rush to war without post-war preparation; encouraging soldiers to "soften up" detainees; the use of nakedness, dogs, sensory and sleep deprivation; and stress positions were all standard policy not initiated by these soldiers. Investigations have shown that abuses could probably have been prevented, if there had been proper leadership. At least one investigation mentions the officers by name—high-ranking officers, against whom little or nothing will be done.

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The obvious conclusion is that the perpetrators of evil in the Abu Ghraib prison have also become its victims who will suffer disgrace, imprisonment, and mental disorders in the years to come. This is a human rights Issue of the highest order.

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(Sep 26, 2003). Three questions on torture. IBPP, 15(5).

http://pluto.pr.erau.edu/~ibpp/read.php?kind=html&article_volume=15&article_Issue=5&article_Title=Three%20Questions%20on%20Torture

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(July 25, 1997). Torture, interrogation, and daily hassles: Good thoughts and bad thoughts. IBPP, 2(13).

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Volume=2&article_Issue=13&article_Title=Torture%2C%20Interrogation%2C%20and%20Daily%20Hassles%3A%20Good%20Thoughts%20and%20Bad%20Thoughts](http://pluto.pr.erau.edu/~ibpp/read.php?kind=html&article_Author:Richard%20W.%20Bloom&article_Volume=2&article_Issue=13&article_Title=Torture%2C%20Interrogation%2C%20and%20Daily%20Hassles%3A%20Good%20Thoughts%20and%20Bad%20Thoughts)

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Volume=2&article_Issue=7&article_Title=The%20Psychology%20of%20Torture%20and%20Ticking%20Bombs](http://pluto.pr.erau.edu/~ibpp/read.php?kind=html&article_Author:Richard%20W.%20Bloom&article_Volume=2&article_Issue=7&article_Title=The%20Psychology%20of%20Torture%20and%20Ticking%20Bombs)

(Keywords: Abu Ghraib, Haritos-Fatouros, Iraq, Torture, Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment.)