

Torture? But This Is Different!

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Recently, the CBS news magazine 60 Minutes interviewed Roy Hallums, the former U.S. contractor, who was kidnapped and held hostage in Iraq for 10 months. In his interview with Leslie Stahl, Hallums recounted his experience in captivity including accounts of beatings and torture. There is no doubt that the treatment of Roy Hallum was abhorrent and deeply disturbing. Certainly, when one speaks of the torture of a U.S. citizen or soldier, it is usually discussed with profound concern and expressions of horror. Yet, when one discusses allegations of torture in relation to “foreign detainees” held in prisons in Guantanamo Bay, Iraq, or Afghanistan, one is often confronted with the statement, “But, this is different.” So, what makes the allegations of torture at the hands of the U.S. military different from those purported claims of torture perpetrated by foreign countries?

Unfortunately, the issue of prisoner torture highlights the idea that destructive actions are often taken for all of the “best” reasons. Thus, it is important to understand the moral disconnect that occurs as well-meaning individuals move down a path towards destructive violence. We have proposed a risk analysis model aimed at preventing and understanding instances of mass violence (see Woolf & Hulsizer, 2005) that includes an analysis of many factors such as group cultural history, situational factors (e.g. destabilizing crisis; centralization of power), social psychological factors, and the role of bystanders. This model, particularly the seven stages and parallel processes on the path of mass violence, can be used to examine the seeming acceptance of prisoner torture.

Stage One: Hate Crimes and Institutionalized Forms of Violence—Parallel Processes of Culture of Violence and Ideology of Supremacy

It is not unusual for individuals to divide the world into “us” and “them”. Over time, these arbitrary divisions become institutionalized within a culture resulting in the formation of stereotypical norms and roles

specific to an outgroup. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been increased anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment in the U.S. However, the increase in enmity towards these groups does not represent a new phenomenon. Indeed, the United States has a long history of bias against various groups based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. In addition, although not as extreme in other countries, the U.S. has a well documented culture of violence and ideology of supremacy.

Stage Two: Loss of Opportunity and Privilege—Parallel Process of Stigmatization

This stage is characterized by a loss of privilege and opportunity for the outgroup. Individuals may be denied access to certain services, excluded from organizations, or limited in their ability to move past a glass ceiling in relation to educational opportunities or jobs. This stage is facilitated by the process of stigmatization. Beginning with an increase in stereotypes and derogatory images of the outgroup, the process continues when the targeted group becomes further identified with negative attributes. For example, Arabs have long been portrayed negatively in venues as disparate as Hollywood (Shaheen, 2004) and comic books (Shaheen, 1994). Unfortunately, these negative portrayals have not changed since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and one could argue that the representation of Arabs as terrorists has only increased in the media.

Stage Three: Loss of Civil Rights—Parallel Process of Dehumanization

During this stage, members of the outgroup may be denied citizenship, may be profiled or detained without due process, or may find that certain laws apply differently to themselves relative to the ingroup. Today, for individuals of Middle-Eastern descent, this loss of civil rights has been selectively applied based simply on suspicion of terrorist connections - a suspicion that may be based solely on a lack of disconfirming information.

To facilitate movement towards loss of civil rights in relation to a target group, leaders and other elite will promote increasing levels of dehumanization. This process of dehumanization begins with increased promotion of stereotypes and negative images of the

outgroup. Today, the association of terrorists with Arabs and Muslims creates a climate of fear and dehumanizes all individuals of Middle-Eastern descent or Muslim religious roots. Dehumanization is often a necessary tool to reduce the cognitive dissonance that may occur when individuals behave negatively toward other human beings (Berscheid, Boye, & Walster, 1968)

Stage Four: Isolation—Parallel Process of Moral Disengagement

If little protest is raised concerning the loss of civil rights, it becomes easier to force isolation upon an outgroup. Isolation is not necessary when the outgroup already exists outside of national or regional boundaries. However, ghettoization, deportations, and removal to detention/internment camps are examples of outgroup isolation strategies from within a pluralistic culture.

This process of isolation could not occur without the underlying process of moral disengagement. As the outgroup is perceived as increasingly different or sub-human through the process of dehumanization, there is a concomitant willingness among the populace to disengage morally (Bandura, 1998). Euphemistic language can facilitate the process of disengagement making it easier to turn a blind eye to “foreign detainees” as opposed to “forced imprisonment of people without due process.” Palliative comparisons can reduce the seeming severity of committed destructive actions. For example, a commonly heard argument is that torturing someone is better than allowing a city to be bombed. In addition, the process of moral disengagement is facilitated by the natural tendency for individuals to blame the victim via a belief in a just world (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2001). Therefore, individuals sent to Guantanamo Bay or to various prisons without representation must have done something wrong to be deserving of such treatment.

Stage Five: Loss of Human Rights—Parallel Process of Moral Exclusion

Individuals in the outgroup may be denied basic human rights such as access to adequate food and shelter, and relegated to subsistence living. Moreover, they may be subjected to treatment that would be considered horrific and unacceptable if applied under other circumstances. For example, the torture of

prisoners would be considered unacceptable without this movement down the path of violence and the isolation involved at this stage. Certainly, the more isolated the targeted outgroup has become, the easier it is for the majority population to feign ignorance of these events:

Facilitating the willingness of the population to ignore torture or other forms of destructive violence is the process of moral exclusion (Opatow, 1990). In other words, the moral principles that may be applied to one's own group no longer pertain to those outside of the group. For example, it becomes acceptable to torture a dehumanized "detainee" who has been identified as a potential threat to the United States. Moreover, it is much easier to kill someone who has been defined as existing outside of the human and thus moral realm. Words such as "terrorist" or "insurgent" resonate more as curses than identifiers of human beings. The process of moral disengagement becomes complete as the victim becomes excluded entirely from the normal moral realm.

Stage Six: Loss of Existence—Parallel Process of Impunity

Finally, members of the outgroup may find their very existence threatened. Whether a group or nation moves down the path to destructive violence to mass murder is decided in part, by whether the aggression will be met with acceptance or punishment. An atmosphere of impunity increases the probability of violence (Roth, Bolton, Slaughter, & Wedgwood, 1999). Individuals have already died within the various prisons housing individuals identified by the U.S. government as suspected terrorists, insurgents, and foreign detainees. It is imperative that vigilance be paid to the circumstances of these deaths and the responsibilities of those involved.

Stage Seven: Denial—Parallel Process of Perpetuation of Violence

The final insult in the path to destructive violence is the denial that any of these events even occurred. In its extreme, a total denial of atrocity extends the original assault, as it is one last attack on the initial victims. Not only can the victims' lives be erased from history but also the memory of these victims. Other forms of denial can include minimization of harm, glorification of the actions taken, and further rationalizations.

Denial in its extreme is a continuation

of hatred and has as its base destructive motivations. On its most banal level, it is a further assault and it does nothing to resolve unhealed group trauma but rather adds to the suffering, and inhibits any sort of future reconciliation. Additionally, the individual perpetrators of such violence are themselves harmed simply by the action of having engaged in injuring or ending the lives of other human beings. Failure to look into the abyss of one's own actions inhibits any form of healing on the part of perpetrator and perpetrator groups.

Conclusion

It is important to bear in mind that with each stage along the path to destructive violence, intervention becomes more difficult. Early on, leaders of groups or nations may be more amenable to intervention and the population may be more open to other forms of societal change, revised public policies, or new leaders. However, later in the process, intervention becomes more difficult. Leaders and the elite with a sense of impunity will have little motivation to change. Additionally, over time the population will be more strongly committed to the path to destructive violence due to factors such as cognitive dissonance. Finally, it should be noted that a destabilizing crisis, such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, could propel a culture quickly down the path of violence—making intervention very difficult.

It is therefore imperative that reports of coercive interrogation and torture of prisoners including the use of cruel, inhumane, and degrading forms of treatment against prisoners not be ignored. Indeed, researchers examining the effectiveness of torture or coercive interrogations have found that such aggressive techniques rarely produce accurate information but rather provide a strong incentive for the detainee to provide misinformation (e.g., Arrigo, 2004). Regardless, we must work against the notion that somehow the torture of the "other" is acceptable; that torture is just simply "different" when applied to someone imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay or identified as the "enemy."

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From the Editor

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the Divisions for Social Justice (DSJ) and through other structures. Reading about the work and achievements of individuals also reminds us of what each of us can do on our own through activism, research, organizing, teaching, and all the other ways we contribute. Perhaps a simple act such as duplicating and distributing the flyer "Peace is Possible" on the center page can be your contribution towards peace, today.

Mary Robinson said: "The task now is to re-double our efforts to move the broad human rights agenda forward together". Enjoy this edition and please let us know what you are doing to work for peace, human rights and ultimately our collective security, in your part of the world. Please submit your reactions, responses and contributions for our next edition. Please send your submissions to the address below by March 15, 2006.

Peace to you,

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