

HOD KNOWLEDGE AREA # 6

Title: Social Psychology

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The recent Social Psychology Intensive led by Charlie Seashore, Marsha Miller, and Cathy Royal in Columbia, Maryland was a classic example of a 'practicum' or learning model designed in the 'action research' tradition. Our temporary learning community entailed both, 'collaborative inquiry' and 'group work' which are important elements of action research. Not only was the intensive a glowing tribute to the 'action research' concept developed by seminal theorist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), but also an important testimony to the value of group dynamics and participatory inquiry in social settings.

"Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out. The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realize that action research of the

group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members” (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 5-6).

There are several critical components of this assessment, as outlined below:

- An overview of Social Psychology concepts and constructs through contemporary readings and case studies, particularly the Abu Gharib Iraqi Prison Abuse and the Stanford Prison Experiment, with some reference to the Mass Suicide at Jonestown.
- Presentation of a case situation (attached separately) from the author’s professional practice, to a small group, and that group’s critique and feedback.
- A chance to practice listening and reflecting on the case situations (presented by self and others), while connecting the dots and exploring the interrelationships with important social psychology concepts and constructs.

This reflective paper will also serve to highlight some post seminar reflections and key learning experiences from the intensive, including, but not limited to the attitudes and behavioral responses of ‘self’ and ‘others’ to issues of race and diversity in simulated settings.

Given this author's interest in the psychodynamics of groups and organizations, it might be appropriate to view the Iraqi Prison Scandal through a psychodynamic lens. One of the best known essays recently written on this controversial topic is entitled 'Abuse at Abu Gharib, The Psychodynamics of Occupation, and The Responsibility of Us All' by Stephan Soldz. We are well aware of the prison atrocities, the dehumanizing conditions imposed by Coalition Forces on the Iraqi inmates, and the flagrant violations of all norms of decency and legal conduct in the name of US occupation, containment, and 'prisoner' interrogation. Here are some selected excerpts from the essay that point to the troubling aspects of twisted group behavior and the manifestation of evil and sadistic tendencies in the event of uncontrolled authority, excessive power, and unregulated control vested in an occupying force. It also speaks very eloquently and candidly to the use of 'rationalization' as a defense against the fear and persecutory anxiety (both real and imagined) that are pervasive in times of war. This virulent anxiety is usually not verbalized and must then be acted out:

"A 53-page Pentagon report completed in February listed some of the abuse:

'Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape; allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being slammed against the wall in his cell; sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick, and using military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee.'

Other evidence in Hersh's piece indicates that in at least one instance, a prisoner was tortured to death under interrogation, then his injuries were disguised and body disposed of. Other deaths have also been referred to.

As Hersh documents, the Pentagon was well aware of the abuses at Abu Ghraib. An internal report by the Army's chief law-enforcement officer last November documented that the Military Police (MPs) guarding the prison faced tension between their responsibility to maintain an orderly prison and the involvement of the same MPs in softening up prisoners for interrogation. Yet, no action was taken.

One of the six military defendants in this case has emphasized the lack of any training or guidance in how to treat the prisoners, and the absence of any orientation to responsibilities under the Geneva Convention. While it is easy to dismiss this complaint as an attempt to avoid responsibility for reprehensible actions, the complaint does raise an important issue. The MPs were not provided any orientation or guidance because protecting Iraqi detainees was simply not of interest to anyone in charge. Further, no doubt the attitude, common among prison guards, was that the detainees must have done something bad to be detained there. So protecting their rights or their bodies was not important and protecting their spirit was a hindrance to the important task of extracting intelligence about resistance activities.

As a final example, the Iraqi blogger "Riverbend", in her blog [Baghdad Burning](#), included in her March 29, 2004 entry: [Tales from Abu Ghraib...](#), the story of a young woman, M., who had recently been released in mid January from Abu Ghraib, after being arrested with her mother and four brothers. While in detention, she herself was beaten and she witnessed several other beatings, including that of her mother, and 'the rape of a male prisoner by one of the jailors.' Riverbend concludes the heart wrenching tale with:

'By the end of her tale, M. was crying silently and my mother and Umm Hassen were hastily wiping away tears. All I could do was repeat, 'I'm so sorry... I'm really sorry...' and a lot of other useless words. She shook her head and waved away my words of sympathy, 'It's ok -- really -- *I'm one of the lucky ones... all they did was beat me*' (italics added).

These stories are among the many I have included on my web page: [Iraq Occupation and Resistance Report](#) over the last year of Iraqi occupation. If I, a single individual maintaining a web page in my spare time, was well aware of the abuses being reported in the US prisons in Iraq, the only way the top generals, Pentagon officials, senior Administration policy-makers such as the President and Vice-President, and U.S. reporters could be ignorant of them is if they willfully chose to be ignorant. Much more likely, they were aware but considered these abuses -- like the ones documented among detainees in Afghanistan, and those reported by the few released detainees from Guantanamo -- to be the inevitable costs of war and occupation, especially, as is the case in Iraq, when that occupation now is opposed by the majority of the occupied.

Under conditions of occupation, the occupier is faced with the task of attempting to win the support of the occupied population when possible and of instilling fear and a sense of hopelessness when winning them over is not possible. Further, the occupation must be justified to the soldiers of the occupying power, who may have reservations about the role they are expected to play. Humiliation of the occupied is an important element in both of these tasks. The occupying army learns to view the occupied as inferior, as not as "civilized" as the occupiers view themselves. Thus, Hersh quotes the testimony of Specialist Mathew Wisdom, an MP at Abu Ghraib as he described one of the scenes of coerced sex between detainees depicted in the

photographs: 'I saw SSG Frederick walking towards me, and he said, *'Look what these animals do when you leave them alone for two seconds'* (italics added). In case we are tempted to dismiss this as simply the aberration of a sick individual, consider the comments of a senior British officer in Iraq to a reporter from the *British Daily Telegraph* on April 12, 2004 ("[British commanders condemn US military tactics](#)") about the attitude of the U.S. military toward the Iraqi populace: 'They don't see the Iraqi people the way we see them. They view them as untermenschen. They are not concerned about the Iraqi loss of life in the way the British are.' (Of course, recent revelations of torture of detainees at British hands raise questions as to the degree of concern the British have for Iraqi life. And the over 100,000 Iraqis killed in the British occupation earlier in the century make clear that Iraqi life was cheap when Britain was the dominant colonial power" See Hussein Askary: [Lessons To Be Learned: Iraqi Resistance to British Occupation 80 Years Ago](#)).

(Excerpted from Stephen Soldz's essay entitled 'Abuse at Abu Gharib, The Psychodynamics of Occupation, and the Responsibility of us All')

In an attempt to examine some principles of social psychology, as they apply to groups in positions of power (both real and simulated), it might be useful to reflect on the Iraqi Prison Abuse and the 'simulated' Stanford Prison Experiment from years past. What might be the similarities and differences between being thrust in a 'real life' prison situation vs. a 'simulated' experiment? Can individuals in power maintain their sense of decency, propriety, and respect for human values when they become a part of a larger group with conflicting objectives? Are they able to fend off covert and subtle group pressure to conform and homogenize with the group's ideals (both good and bad), or do they easily succumb to it? What basic assumptions are triggered in us when we become part of a 'work' group? How do these unconscious assumptions derail and undermine the 'primary task' and our own sense of ethics and values?

The prospects for reform and correction within the prison system are not good. The system has miserably failed, and neither rehabilitates inmates nor acts as a deterrent to future crime. (Zimbardo et. al., 1973) Can the failure of

the system be attributed to the atrocities committed by prison guards who often carry a 'guard mentality' and negative traits, or should some blame also be placed on the inmates whose life histories are fraught with crime, disrespect, and disregard for the law? Surely, the problem is systemic; a product of the oppositional forces of 'control' and 'resistance' that are brought to bear in correctional institutions. Attributing the problem to the guards or the inmate population deflects the anxiety and concerns away from the 'root' of the problem, which may have little to do with either the 'bad seeds' or the 'corrupt prison soil' in which the seeds of dysfunction are sown. "Such an analysis directs attention away from the complex matrix of social, economic, and political forces that combine to make prisons what they are---and what would require complex, expensive, revolutionary actions to bring about any meaningful change."

(Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo, 2000)

The Stanford Prison Experiment involved a simulated exercise in which students were randomly assigned to the role of either 'inmate' or 'prison guard' over a period of one week. The physical setting was constructed so as to give the appearance of a prison on the Stanford University campus. The prison inmates were required to live behind bars during the experiment, provided with bare minimum facilities, and were instructed to obey the orders of the prison guards who had far better living conditions, and were allowed time for rest and relaxation.

The behavior and interactions of both, inmates and guards were recorded on audio and video tapes (dependent measure # 1) and individual reactions to the prison experiment, mood inventories, post experimental interviews made up dependent measure # 2. Although it is difficult to surmise from the data how individuals would react when subjected to incarceration, or given charge of its maintenance, the experiment does illuminate and support the commonly held beliefs about life in prisons. It also brings to light the dramatic change in mood, outlook, and affective states of both inmates and guards. Both parties reported heightened negativity and a dismal attitude as the experiment progressed. To make matters worse, some inmates started reporting episodes of severe panic and depression, and were asked to leave the experiment prematurely.

Upon reading this very interesting and extremely popular case study in social psychology literature, it makes me wonder how I would react if I were either a prison guard or an inmate in a simulated experiment. Would I unconsciously assume the role that was thrust upon me and act as though I was in a 'real life' setting? Or, would I 'pretend play' and carry out the assigned role, while keeping my emotions and affective state in check? Could I maintain my sense of values and decency under group pressure to conform (in the role of prison guard)? What would be my tolerance threshold if I were enacting the role of an inmate and was subjected to dehumanizing treatment, albeit in an 'experimental' setting? These are very troubling questions, and a deeper understanding of these social issues is in order. We know from early childhood

and adult experiences that 'pretend play,' fantasy and perception are sometimes more powerful than reality, and may even shape the way we act and react in certain situations. Therefore, how can learning from the Stanford Prison Experiment inform the brutality and torture we have seen recently at the Abu Gharib prison in Iraq?

To understand this better, it might be helpful to explore the 'Pathology of Power' and the 'Pathological Prisoner Syndrome' as discussed by Philip Zimbardo et. al in their essay entitled 'A Study of Prisoners and Guards in a Simulated Prison' (in Readings about the Social Animal, Elliot Aronson, 1995).

"The use of power was self-aggrandizing and self-perpetuating. The guard power, derived initially from an arbitrary and randomly assigned label, was intensified whenever there was any perceived threat by the prisoners and this new level subsequently became the baseline from which further hostility and harassment would begin. The most hostile guards on each shift moved spontaneously into the leadership roles of giving orders and deciding on punishments. They became role models whose behavior was emulated by other members of the shift" (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo, 1995: 63-66).

It is important to understand that a feeling of omnipotence that often comes with the vesting of power in an individual or group is quite prevalent among prison guards. In many ways, the correctional institution is totalitarian; the correctional officers and guards who are running the institution get to define

the happiness of inmates. They decide what is appropriate behavior on the part of inmates, and any deviance from this norm is often brutally punished or reprimanded. What makes this process noxious is that the definers of the inmates' happiness are not the individuals whose own happiness is being defined (Schwartz, 2000). It is not easy to shake off these feelings of authority, control, and power over others, even when an individual is removed from that position. From the inmates' standpoint, there is a great deal of envy around power, and the inadequacy and impotence they often feel around their own 'powerlessness' and submission to authority figures, may help explain why many return to a life of crime after they are discharged from prison.

When we study the pathology of inmates in the Stanford Experiment, it becomes painfully evident that 'real' or 'perceived' authority just might have the same profound effect on those that are subjected to it. In an interview with Edward Krupat, Robert Cialdini Ph.D., a distinguished Social Psychologist who has written and researched extensively on the power of influence and persuasion shares some time tested principles that have the character of universal mechanisms of influence across diverse groups of population, professions, and even different cultures. Here is what Dr. Cialdini has to say about the principle of 'authority'...

"Authority is next. I think here we have seen good evidence that people who are in positions of legitimate authority, experts for example, are able to get people to comply to their requests. People tend to defer to the

directives of legitimate authority, and that makes all kinds of sense because legitimately constituted authorities typically have attained their positions by virtue of greater wisdom or experience or training. However, we often fall victim to authority directives even when they make no sense at all, it seems to me, because it is such an automatic response” (A Conversation with Robert Cialdini, in *Psychology is Social: Readings and Conversations in Social Psychology*, Edward Krupat, 1994: 80-85).

Dr. Cialdini’s comments may help partly explain why the reaction of inmates in the Stanford Prison Experiment quickly turned from disbelief to dismay as they experienced a ‘perceived’ loss of personal identity and arbitrary control of their lives. The invasion of privacy, coupled with constant surveillance and a loss of control invoked frustration, anger, and increasing levels of anxiety in the inmates. Even though they knew that it was all an experiment, the act of falling victim to authority by ‘voluntarily’ subjecting to it, produced some of the same affective states and self deprecating attitudes that perhaps ‘real’ inmates often experience. Furthermore, the establishment of ‘dependency’ relations by the prison guards set off primal tendencies in the prisoners.

“These low level dependencies engendered a regressive orientation in the prisoners. Their dependency was defined in terms of the extent of the domain of control over all aspects of their lives which they allowed other individuals (the guards and prison staff) to exercise (...)

These and other tactics all served to engender in the prisoners a lessened sense of their masculinity (as defined by their external culture). It followed then, that although the prisoners usually outnumbered the guards during line-ups and counts (nine vs. three) there never was an attempt to directly overpower them” (Zimbardo et. al, 1995).

In an interesting simulation at the social psychology intensive in Columbia, some of these same feelings were invoked during the exercise led by Cathy Royal. The feelings around Cathy’s brash and authoritative commands to our small group met with very minimal resistance. My casual and light hearted demeanor upon joining the exercise soon gave way to frustration and anger. I knew it was only pretend play. Why then did I start to feel slightly dehumanized as I perceived a loss of freedom and control? Why did I not just storm out of the group, like one of the other members did?

There is yet another, extremely controversial reading in social psychology which deals with the analysis of the Jonestown mass suicide, and speaks to some of the same dynamics we have observed at Stanford and Abu Gharib. It is entitled ‘Making Sense of the Nonsensical: An Analysis of Jonestown’ by Neal Oshrow. This tragic case helps illuminate how ‘conformity’, ‘persuasion’, and ‘self-justification’ can often become powerful ingredients for disaster. It is now common knowledge that Jim Jones had so powerfully influenced his Temple followers into subjugation and conformity, that they had even begun to surrender their free will to their leader. What is not so clear, and requires

further analysis is how the defense mechanisms of 'rationalization' and 'self-justification' were set in motion. What were the inner struggles, the frustrations, and the anxieties that the followers were defending against? What drove a group of mentally sane, law abiding citizens to take the drastic and highly 'irrational' step of taking their own lives, and the lives of innocent children?

"Several classic studies from social psychological research investigating processes of self-justification and the theory of cognitive dissonance (see Aronson, 1980, chapter 4; Aronson, 1969) can point to explanations for such seemingly irrational behavior (...)

According to dissonance theory, when a person commits an act or holds a cognition that is psychologically inconsistent with his or her self-concept, the inconsistency arouses an unpleasant state of tension. The individual tries to reduce this 'dissonance' usually by altering his or her attitudes to bring them more into line with the previously discrepant action or belief" (Osherow, 1995).

As the theory of cognitive dissonance suggests, people go out of their way, sometimes to great lengths, in order to justify the choices they make in life. The pressure to conform with, and commit to these choices, is even greater when we become members of any group. Group membership may provide both, a strong sense of communitarian attachment, as well as a platform for validating our ideas. It is a giant, 'multifaceted' mirror that faithfully reflects back many images all at once. As group members, we also unconsciously project onto the

group-as-a-whole, things about ourselves that we find difficult or painful to hold inside.

At the recent intensive, I had an invaluable opportunity to present a case to a small group, involving my membership in the International Society for the Psychoanalytical Study of Organizations (ISPSO). The group included the following students from Fielding: Tamara Fuller, Ka Flewellen, Jan Schnapper, and Anil Behal. The case situation that was presented by me is entitled 'Subtle Barriers to Group Membership and Acceptance' and is separately attached with the assessment materials. My case did evoke some strong feelings in the group, primarily around issues of power, coercion, authority, and obedience. A couple of group members felt that perhaps I had not 'paid my dues' as a newly appointed member of ISPSO, who found it difficult to accept that a 'newbie' could enter and start actively participating in the affairs of the society. Another group member felt that perhaps as a new member of ISPSO, I was expected to respect and revere the so called 'experts' within the society, who were either founding members, or past officers of the board. There seemed to be a lot of discomfort around a new member trying to find his voice in the society. Some society members even felt that I wasn't playing by the rules and likely perceived my 'showing up' in the group as a sign of disrespect to others. The public attacks and ridicule were also seen as a way of silencing my voice on the list serve.

I cannot help but wonder if my ethnicity had anything to do with the perception of the group. After all, ISPSO is predominantly white. What also strikes me as noteworthy is that my constant sharing and disseminating valuable resources in the community may be producing some feelings of inadequacy among some members. Their lashing out at me could be viewed as highly defensive, and a means of projecting their anxieties onto me. All the intensive group members have felt unanimously that my relationship with Manfred Kets de Vries has triggered a lot of insecurities within the group. Kets de Vries is a 'household' name in organizational psychodynamics and for him to pay attention to my fledgling little firm must be very disconcerting to ISPSO members. Like I mentioned in my case situation, it was the first time Kets de Vries posted a message on the ISPSO list in years, in response to my announcement for an 'online' seminar that he wanted to be a part of.

Marsha Miller commented that I do come off as slightly standoffish in group settings, almost as though I want to see myself as 'apart' from the group. This has been critical feedback for me, because I have often wondered what it is about my demeanor that sets off hostilities in certain groups. I am neither disrespectful, nor insensitive to the needs of others. I do not take more than my fair share of space in the group. Why then am I considered by some as emotionally disconnected from the group? Why is it that my participation in groups is viewed by some as a covert way of 'stirring the pot'...of drumming up conversation? I had made a comment in the intensive that I did not want to be

perceived as 'different' from the mainstream majority. Marsha Miller felt that it may have something to do with my cultural heritage and that it might be time for me to begin opening and sharing my wounds. Cathy Royal had a different take on it. She felt that because I wanted to so blend in and be accepted in society, I might in the process be losing my own true voice and individuality. Charlie Seashore too has commented earlier about my 'use of self' and I find that I need to work on these aspects of my psyche more consciously in the future. Like my PhD journey at Fielding, I too am a 'work in progress' and will never be afraid of looking at honest and well meaning feedback as a gift and opportunity for personal growth and transformation.

During the small group break out sessions at the intensive, I had an opportunity to reflect on the case situations presented by Jan, Tamara, and Ka. I especially share Jan's discomfort around authority, and was struck by her case in which she described how she and her husband were coerced and bullied into leaving a townhouse community that they loved and enjoyed. The board members were pressuring her into cutting down a tree that had been planted by her husband before they got married. When she refused, they threatened to cut it down in the middle of the night, and created unnecessary stress for her; so much so that she even decided to resign from her position on the board. The townhouse community expected 'obedience' and conformity, and created a situation which Jan and her husband found intolerable. Rather than fight on, they decided to leave the community. It was a shocking account of the

excessive use of authority and control in the name of conformity. The board alleged that Jan and her husband refused to offer any 'cooperation' and it makes me wonder if what they were really seeking was 'collusion' instead. There is a very heavy price to pay in groups when a member refuses to 'toe the line.'

By contrast, Tamara's case situation was a solemn reminder that many mainstream whites still perceive African Americans as incapable and incompetent. They are looked upon as mostly on welfare, not well educated or savvy, and incapable of doing business with white folks. Tamara owns an apartment complex in a fairly affluent neighborhood in Columbia, MD. She is educated, astute, and competent, and has been successfully managing the business for some time. Yet, when it came to influencing certain careless tenants to maintain the property as agreed upon in the lease, she sought the help of an 'older', 'Caucasian' gentleman to pay a visit to the tenants. Tamara refused to do it herself because she believed that she would not have been taken seriously by the tenants. As it turns out, the Caucasian gentleman was able to produce the result Tamara was seeking. Was this 'coercion' or was it 'influence?' I believe that Tamara could have produced the same effect, had she personally visited the tenants. However, her challenge was probably in the way she perceived herself; young, female, and of African American descent.

I do not have all the facts of the case situation presented by Ka, but I do remember that uncannily enough, her situation too was somewhat like our own, where we were up against social psychological pressures within our communities.

She too felt that issues of authority, obedience, conformity, control, and incarceration were alive and well. The intensive has been a wonderful opportunity to look at social psychology through a different lens and what has been extremely compelling for me, is the boldness and candor with which some very difficult issues around gender, race, and diversity were teased out. During the showing of the video on diversity, I could sense the discomfort and sadness of my Caucasian friends. It sometimes felt as though we were stereotyping them, based simply on the color of their skin; with disregard for the fact that not all Caucasian people have either persecuted the minorities, or put themselves on a self-created pedestal of supremacy. Nonetheless, the learning that occurred for me through this very unique intensive will continue as I explore the other reading and resources in more detail. I owe a debt of gratitude to Charlie, Cathy, and Marsha for giving me such a wonderful opportunity to delve into a subject that I love dearly.

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