How could psychology explain atrocious acts towards humans, such as during war times?

'When you do murder trials, you realize that we are all susceptible, and you wouldn't even dream you would ever commit this act. But you come to understand that everyone is [susceptible]. It could happen to me, it could happen to my daughter. It could happen to you.'
Nicole Bergevin

Many of us may feel inclined to believe that surely no average, sane person could commit acts such as those carried out by the Nazis in World War II or the American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, that there would have to be some sort of disorder or pathology to render someone capable of carrying out such unimaginable crimes. But what if the truth is more terrifying- what if anyone is capable of committing these atrocities? What if it is merely a matter of time, place and environment?

'The Lucifer Effect' is a term coined by Philip Zimbardo, used to describe the process through which 'good people turn evil'. In his infamous study, the Stanford Prison Experiment; he found that 21 'emotionally-stable' men, assigned roles of either 'prisoner' or 'guard', ended up conforming to these roles with disturbing consequences (Haney et al, 1963). The guards became increasingly aggressive over the 6 days[1] that the study ran for; frequently punishing and humiliating the prisoners and seeming to enjoy the process. This study bore shocking similarities to the real-life events that took place in Abu Ghraib prison years later, demonstrating that whilst the experiment took place in a simulated environment, the findings and conclusions drawn from it provide valuable insights into the human and environmental factors that could lead to such violent acts. For example, in times of war, it is possible that conscripted soldiers who have no desire to be there, who are afraid, hungry and treated poorly may be more susceptible to violence and brutality in reaction to the extreme situation they find themselves in.

It is also possible that some people are just more likely than others to commit acts of violence. The importation model argued that prisons are aggressive places because many prisoners are aggressive/violent before they enter them (Irwin and Cressey, 1962). This may also hold true for some people who become soldiers, for example the Wagner group of mercenaries in the current Russia invasion of Ukraine, but in general is insufficient to explain why atrocious acts are committed.

Societal factors

Social influence is a powerful mechanism in defining the focus of hate and prejudice and the likelihood someone will act out. In-group out-group theory dictates that if someone feels threatened by perceived outsiders their survival instinct is to turn toward their own

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[1] Originally 14 days, Zimbardo had to finish the experiment early due to the severity of the behaviour.

group. The psychologist Henri Tajfel conducted pioneering research on prejudice, revealing that people favour those in their own groups, even when those groups are designated randomly (Tajfel et al, 1971). This research was the basis for Social Identity Theory—that self-esteem is in part derived from group membership (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

Hatred of individuals or groups may be used by some as a distraction from their own feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness or injustice. The hate itself, and the identity of belonging to a group with a shared hatred, can be an easier way of filling this void than the challenge of actually confronting and addressing these feelings directly. They may also believe that the only way to regain some sense of control and power is to act out against others (Aujoulat et al, 2007). Additionally, research has shown that when people feel powerful they are more likely to oppose a system that does not benefit them, but feelings of powerlessness can lead those same individuals to feel dependent and subdued so that they end up supporting an authority even if it disadvantages them (van der Toom et al, 2015).

Deindividuation theory points to a loss of individual identity (moral viewpoints etc.) and controls when someone is part of a group. If an individual thinks that aggressive acts to others would be accepted or even welcomed by the group, they may be more inclined to demonstrate these behaviours without necessarily considering whether they would behave in such a way outside of the group (Festinger, 1952).

Beyond social influence there are many other fields in psychology that contribute to our understanding in this area, for example Attachment theory. Bowlby discovered a link between early maternal deprivation and affectionless psychopathy. Affectionless psychopathy– characterised as a lack of empathy and guilt– could contribute to an ability to commit atrocious acts towards other humans (Bowlby, 1944). It is often the case that violent criminals and serial killers (such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Aileen Wuornos) experienced maternal deprivation during their formative years, which supports this theory. However, whilst this may explain select cases, it obviously lacks generalisability and is largely unrepresentative of what we see in times of war, where 'normal' people resort to horrific acts of violence. As Zimbardo found, 'mentally-stable', 'ordinary' individuals were capable of committing such atrocities; so although maternal deprivation could explain certain circumstances, it cannot be the sole cause for atrocious acts.

Biological factors

The biological approach provides another possible explanation. Sleep deprivation is linked to a loss of ability in decision-making and has been shown to impair the integration of emotion and cognition to guide moral judgments (Killgore et al, 2007). The chemical compound Adenosine Triphosphate (ATP), an important source of cellular energy, is produced during sleep. Without it, our brain and body cannot function properly. Of particular relevance here, a lack of ATP affects the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for making decisions. The worst abuses in both the Stanford Prison Experiment and Abu Ghraib occurred during night shifts. This evidence suggests a

correlation between sleep deprivation and brutality, so the lack of ATP and the resulting lack of moral judgement could offer an explanation as to why people are able to commit these acts.

The brain's limbic system is responsible for regulating emotional and behavioural responses, especially in regards to survival- a much more active concern in dire situations such as war. In particular, the amygdala is believed to play a significant role in aggression. In animal studies, stimulation of the amygdala has produced more aggressive behaviours. Removal of the amygdala has been found to reduce aggression in previously violent individuals (Groves and Schlesinger, 1982). This supports the idea that the amygdala provides a biological explanation for aggression. But, I would argue that pure aggression does not provide a sufficient explanation for how people can treat other humans in such horrific ways and often report feeling no remorse. There must be something else at play that can lead humans to commit such atrocities

Dehumanisation

One possible answer is that the oppressive party does not view their enemies as human. Dehumanisation seems to play a crucial role in the ability to commit extreme acts of cruelty and violence. There is much evidence supporting this in war propaganda. In times of war, creating propaganda is essential in dehumanising the outgroup and stimulating hate. A possible explanation as to why propaganda seems to be so effective and easily internalised is that dramatic characterisations of the enemy imprint on the limbic system, where we store deep-seated beliefs and values (Desjardins, 2011). It is common in propaganda for the enemy to be referred to as a small, lower animal: during the holocaust, the Nazis referred to the Jews, Romany, and their other victims as "Untermenschen" (subhuman) and "rats". The Japanese were also referred to as "rats" during WWII, and the Hutus called the Tutsis "cockroaches" in the Rwanda genocide. But dehumanisation is not simply a metaphorical comparison. In an interview with French journalist Jean Hatzfield, a member of the Hutu militia said: "We no longer saw a human being when we turned up a Tutsi in the swamps. I mean a person like us, sharing similar thoughts and feelings."(Hatzfield 2005). The perpetrators literally view their victims as something less than human, therefore below them in the natural order, allowing them to breach the Geneva Conventions so ruthlessly. Psychologist Herbert C. Kelman said that "The inhibitions against murdering fellow human beings are generally so strong that the victims must be deprived of their human status if systematic killing is to proceed in a smooth and orderly fashion." Research shows that people may not consider the minds of a dehumanised group (dehumanised perception) (Harris & Fiske, 2009). This disengagement of social cognition could potentially hint at psychological mechanisms that facilitate inhumane acts of torture and atrocities against humanity (Harris and Fiske, 2011).

Conclusion

As a side-effect of our individualistic society, we have a tendency to focus on dispositional factors– such as the presence of underlying psychiatric conditions– that

may explain our actions. Whilst there are certainly crucial factors to be found by examining individuals, this tendency often comes at the price of underestimating the importance of situational factors. Equally considering both of these factors is important in gaining an understanding of why people can commit atrocious acts, therefore it is crucial that we keep in mind the multiplicity of factors, and their interactions, that may be at play in any given situation where atrocious acts are committed.

I have outlined above some of the main theories in psychology that, in my opinion, may explain the ability to commit atrocious acts towards other humans. In particular, the Stanford Prison Experiment which, despite its ethical notoriety, has provided invaluable insights into why people commit such acts; demonstrated in the unfortunate incident of the Abu Ghraib abuses. Each of us has our own distinct personality, however, societal factors- in particular interactions and dynamics in groups- and extreme situations, such as those that arise in war, influence and shape behaviour affecting our attitudes and actions and can have devastating consequences in the perpetration of acts of violence and even genocide. Understanding these psychological components is key to preventing similar acts occurring in the future, highlighting the importance of psychological research in this area.

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