The Psychology of Prisoner Abuse

Those Awful Pictures

Do you remember how you felt as the Iraq prisoner abuse scandal began to unfold in spring 2004? Maybe you saw the disturbing pictures when they were first aired on CBS television's *60 Minutes II*. Soon they were transmitted around the globe. They greeted you on the front page of your morning newspaper and on the evening news. The stream seemed endless.

You saw naked Iraqi prisoners in various stages of humiliation: hooded, naked men stacked in a pyramid; others lying on the floor or secured to a bed; one in a smock standing on a box with his arms outstretched and wires attached to him. In some of the photos, male and female American soldiers grinned and pointed. In one picture, a female soldier stood holding a leash around the neck of a naked male prisoner. In others, soldiers grinned over what appeared to be a corpse packed in ice.

What feelings did you experience? Shock? Anger? Rage? Disgust? Maybe you felt embarrassed or ashamed. "How could they do such degrading things to other human beings?" you might have wondered. Perhaps you feared how the growing storm might affect the life of your friend or family member serving in Iraq. Or wrestled with how to explain the abuse to your children.

Finger pointing began almost as soon as the story broke. High-ranking military and government officials announced that these were aberrations carried out by a few unprincipled prison guards. Accused military police claimed they were merely following orders of military intelligence officials to soften prisoners up for interrogation. Others insisted soldiers had a

moral obligation to disobey orders to do wrong. The accused countered that the harsh techniques were in place before they arrived for duty at the prison. Ethical arguments surfaced that the war on terror demanded tough methods to help prevent another 9/11.

What factors prompt people to abuse others in such degrading ways? What goes on inside the minds of the abusers? Are there special social forces at work? While this article won't attempt to analyze specific cases in the Iraq prison scandal, it will consider some fascinating psychological experiments that reveal clues to the roots of such behavior. The results -- and their implications -- may disturb you. A biblical perspective will also offer some insight.

The Stanford Prison Experiment

CBS News correspondent Andy Rooney said the Iraq prisoner abuse is "a black mark that will be in the history books in a hundred languages for as long as there are history books."{1}

Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo was not surprised by the Abu Ghraib prison abuse. He had observed similar behavior in his famous 1971 experiment involving a mock prison in the basement of the Stanford psychology building.{2} The experiment showed that otherwise normal people can behave in surprisingly outrageous ways.

Zimbardo and his colleagues selected twenty-four young men considered from interviews and psychological tests to be normal and healthy. Volunteers were randomly assigned to be either "prisoners" or "guards." Guards wore uniforms and were told to maintain control of the prison and not to use violence.

On the second day, prisoners rebelled, asserting their independence with barricades, taunting and cursing. Guards suppressed the rebellion. Zimbardo reports that the guards

then “steadily increased their coercive aggression tactics, humiliation and dehumanization of the prisoners.”{3} He says the worst abuse came at night when guards thought no psychology staff were observing.{4} Zimbardo remembers that the guards “began to use the prisoners as playthings for their amusement…. They would get them to simulate sodomy. They also stripped prisoners naked for various offenses and put them in solitary for excessive periods.”{5} They dressed them in smocks, chained them together at the ankles, blindfolded them with paper bags on their heads, and herded them along in a group.{6} Sound familiar?

It was Berkeley professor Christina Maslach, Zimbardo’s then romantic interest whom he later married, who jolted him back to reality. On Day Five, she entered the prison to preview the experiment in preparation for some subject interviews she had agreed to conduct the next day. Shocked by what she saw, she challenged Zimbardo’s ethics later that evening – screaming and yelling in quite a fight, she recalls. That night, Zimbardo decided to halt the experiment.{7}

Zimbardo feels that prisons are ripe for abuse without firm measures to check guards’ lower impulses.{8} He recommends “clear rules, a staff that is well trained in those rules and tight management that includes punishment for violations.”{9}

An old Jewish proverb says, “Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked man ruling over a helpless people.”{10} Unfettered prison officials -– or most anyone -– can yield to their baser natures when tempted by power inequalities.

The Perils of Obedience

What about those who say they were only obeying authority? How far will people go to inflict harm under orders? In the 1960s, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted classic experiments on obedience.{11} (Ironically, Milgram and Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo were high school

classmates.{12})

At Yale, Milgram set up a series of experiments "to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist." He writes, "Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not."{13}

Milgram's basic design involved a volunteer "teacher" and a "learner." The learner was actually an actor who was in on the deception. The learner was strapped to "a kind of miniature electric chair" with an electrode on his wrist. The teacher sat before an impressive-looking "shock generator " with switches indicating voltages from 15-450 volts.{14}

The teacher asked test questions of the learner and was instructed to administer increasingly large shocks for each incorrect answer. (You say you've known some teachers like that?) The machine here was a fake —- no learner received shocks -— but the teacher thought it was real.

In the initial experiment, over 60 percent of teachers obeyed the experimenter's orders to the end and punished the victim with the maximum 450 volts. Milgram found similarly disturbing levels of obedience across various socioeconomic levels. His conclusions after hundreds of experiments were chilling:

> *…Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.{15}*

Why did they obey? Milgram offers several possibilities. Fears

of appearing rude, desires to please an authority, aspirations to do one's best, and lack of direct accountability can all cloud judgment. But could there be something deeper, something in human nature that influences abuse? A famous novel illustrates how the dark side of human nature can affect group behavior.

Lord of the Flies

Prisoner abuse shows what can happen when power inequalities and inappropriate devotion to authority distort one's moral compass. Nobel laureate William Golding's short novel, *Lord of the Flies,*{16} illustrates through a fictional story how similar flaws can manifest in society. A film version of the book helped inspire the popular television series *Survivor*.{17}

Lord of the Flies opens on a remote, uninhabited island on which some British schoolboys, ages six to twelve, find themselves after an airplane crash. An atomic war has begun, and apparently the plane was evacuating the boys when it was shot down. The island has fresh water, fruit, and other food. The setting seems idyllic. Best of all, the boys discover, there are no grownups (the plane and its crew presumably have washed into the sea).

Four central characters soon emerge. Ralph is elected leader. Piggy, an overweight asthmatic and champion of reason, becomes Ralph's friend. Simon is a quiet lad with keen discernment. Jack becomes a hunter.

At first, the boys get along without much conflict. Soon, though, fears envelop them, and they debate whether an evil beast might inhabit the island. Jack and his followers kill a wild pig and, in frenzied blood lust, dance to chants of "*Kill the pig! Cut her throat! Bash her in!*"{18} When Ralph criticizes Jack for breaking some tribal rules, Jack replies, "Who cares?" His hunting prowess will rule.{19}

One night, some boys see a dead parachutist, which they mistake for the "evil beast" and flee. Jack posts a pig's head onto a stick in the ground as a gift for the beast. The decaying, fly- covered pig's head soon becomes for Simon the "Lord of the Flies," a sort of personification of evil.{20} Later, Simon discovers that the feared "beast" is only a human corpse. Running to tell the group this good news, he encounters their mock pig-killing ritual. The crazed boys attack Simon and kill him. Nearly all the boys follow Jack and, acting like savages with painted bodies and spears, kill Piggy and hunt down Ralph. Only the surprise appearance of a British naval officer, drawn by the smoke from a fire, halts the mad pursuit. Ralph and the boys dissolve in tears. Ralph weeps, as Golding writes, "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart…."{21}

Lord of the Flies is filled with symbolism, both biblical and from Greek tragedy. But Golding's stated purpose was "to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature."{22} Could his point that darkness lurks in the human heart help explain the prisoner abuse?

Animal House Meets *Lord of the Flies*

Prisoner abuse is a sad reality in the U.S. and abroad.{23} The Iraq prisoner abuse scandal smacks of fraternity hazing on steroids, *Animal House* meets *Lord of the Flies.* Consider from this sad episode some lessons for both prison reform and society in general:

- *Establish clear rules for prison staff; train them well and punish them for violations*, as Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo recommends.
- *Educate against blind conformity*. Some of Milgram's experimental subjects found the strength to resist abusive authority.{24} Some psychologists feel that strong moral values and experience with conformity can

strengthen moral courage.{25}

- *Involve external observers and critics*. Often outsiders, not emotionally swept up in a project or event, can through their psychological distance more clearly assess ethical issues. For example, Christina Maslach, Philip Zimbardo's friend and colleague who challenged the ethics of his prison experiment, credits her late arrival on the scene with facilitating her concern. The experimenters who had planned and had been conducting the experiment for five days were less likely to be startled by the developing misconduct, she maintained.{26}
- *Realistically appraise human nature's dark side.* Again, Golding said *Lord of the Flies* was "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature."{27} Jesus of Nazareth was, of course, quite clear on this point. He said, "From within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder,adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within…."{28}

Some dismiss as simplistic any analyses of human suffering that begin with alleged defects in human nature. They would rather focus on changing social structures and political systems. While many structures and political systems need changing, may I suggest that a careful analysis of the human heart is not simplistic? Rather it is fundamental.

Perhaps that's why Paul, a leader who agreed with Jesus' assessment of human nature,{29} focused on changing hearts. Paul was a former persecutor of Jesus' followers who zealously imprisoned them{30} but later joined them and became a prisoner himself.{31} Paul eventually claimed that when people place their faith in Jesus as he had, they "become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is

gone. A new life has begun!”{32} Could this diagnosis and prescription have something to say to us amidst today’s prisoner abuse scandals?

Notes

1. Andy Rooney, “Our Darkest Days are Here,” CBS 60 Minutes, May 23, 2004, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/20/60minutes/rooney/main618783.shtml.

2. Kathleen O’Toole, “The Stanford Prison Experiment: Still powerful after all these years,” Stanford University News Service, January 8, 1997, http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/pr/97/970108prisonexp.html. A slideshow presentation of the experiment is at www.prisonexp.org. See also W. Lawrence Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Third Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 447; Claudia Wallis, “Why Did They Do It?” TIME.com, posted May 9, 2004 (from *TIME* magazine, cover date May 17, 2004), http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101040517/wtorturers.html; John Schwartz, “Simulated Prison in ’71 Showed a Fine Line Between ‘Normal’ and ‘Monster’,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/06/international/middleeast/06PSYC.html?pagewanted=print&position=.

3. O’Toole, loc. cit.

4. Ibid.

5. Wallis, loc. cit.

6. O’Toole, loc. cit.

7. Ibid.

8. Schwartz, loc. cit.

9. Wallis, loc. cit. The words are Wallis’.

10. Proverbs 28:15 NIV.

11. Stanley Milgram, “The Perils of Obedience,” *Harper’s*, December 1973, 62-66, 75-77. (The article is adapted from Milgram’s book, Obedience to Authority [Harper and Row, 1974]). See also Neuman, loc. cit.; O’Toole, loc. cit.; Schwartz, loc. cit.; Wallis, loc. cit.; Anahad O’Connor, “Pressure to Go Along With Abuse Is Strong, but Some Soldiers Find Strength to Refuse,” New York Times, May 14, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/14/international/14RESI.html?ei=5059&en=854c94250243f62d&ex=1084593600&partner=AOL&pagewanted=print&position=.

12. O’Toole, loc. cit.

13. Milgram 1973, op. cit., 62.

14. Ibid., 62-63.

15. Ibid., 75- 76.

16. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (New York: Perigee, 1988). This “Casebook Edition” includes the 1954 novel plus notes and criticism edited by James R. Baker and Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr.

17. http://www.cbs.com/primetime/survivor8/show/episode14/s8story3.shtml.

18. Golding, op. cit., 69; emphasis Golding’s.

19. Ibid., 84.

20. Many have noted that the phrase “lord of the flies” translates the word “Beelzebub.” See, for instance, E.L. Epstein, “Notes on Lord of the Flies,” in Golding, op. cit., 279: “‘The lord of the flies’ is, of course, a translation of the Hebrew Ba’alzevuv (Beelzebub in Greek) which means

literally ‘lord of insects.'” Theologian Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., commenting on Matthew 10:24 ff. says, “Beelzebub (the Gr. has Beezeboul) was a name for Satan, the prince of the demons, perhaps derived from Baal-Zebub, god of the Philistine city of Ekron (2 Kings 1:2). ‘Beelzebub’ means ‘lord of the flies,’ and ‘Beezeboul’ or ‘Beelzeboul’ means ‘lord of the high place.'” (In “Matthew,” John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985], Logos Research Systems digital version.) Biblical references to Beelzebub include Matthew 12:24, 27; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15, 18, 19. In a 1962 interview, Golding himself referred to “the pig’s head on the stick” as “Beelzebub, or Satan, the devil, whatever you’d like to call it….” (James Keating, “Interview with William Golding,” in Golding, op. cit., 192.)

21. Golding, op. cit., 186-187.

22. Epstein, op. cit., 277-278. The words are Golding’s.

23. For example, see “Missouri ‘Rain’ Leads to Toilet Duty,” *Inside Journal: The Hometown Newspaper of America’s Prisoners*, 14:7, November/December 2003, 5. Inside Journal publisher Prison Fellowship, www.pfm.org, and its affiliates seek to help rehabilitate prisoners and promote restorative justice.

24. Milgram 1973, op. cit., 63-64.

25. O’Connor, loc. cit.

26. O’Toole, loc. cit.

27. Epstein, loc. cit.

28. Mark 7:21-23 NLT.

29. For detailed information on Jesus and evidence to support His claims, see www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.

30. Acts 8:3; 22:3-5 ff.

31. E.g., Acts 16:19-40.

32. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

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