Using Social Psychological Constructs to Explain and Predict Inhumane Behaviors

Social psychologists have long been interested in trying to understand the mechanisms behind inhumane behaviors. Psychologists have been particularly concerned in explaining how individuals and groups who usually act humanely can act otherwise in certain circumstances, and they have generated a number of theories and constructs to this end. These concepts can serve to both explain and predict the occurrence of inhumane behavior, and they also suggest that factors inherent to war increase the likelihood that inhumane behaviors will occur during war.

Deindividuation. Gustave Le Bon first wrote about deindividuation in 1895, a process in which the anonymity, suggestibility and contagion provided in a crowd allows for individuals to participate in anti-normative and disinhibited behavior. More recent exploration on deindividuation has found little empirical support for a psychological condition of deindividuation (Diener, 1980), but rather posit that individuals within a group experience reduced self-awareness, which can result in anti-normative and disinhibited behavior (Postmes & spears, 1998.)

Groupthink. Groupthink (Janis, 1972) is a phenomenon somewhat related to deindividuation, insofar as it posits that individuals often make very different decisions as part of a group than they would make individually. Symptoms of groupthink include: 1) Illusion of Invulnerability: group members believe the group is special and morally superior, and therefore its decisions are good ones, 2) Illusion of Unanimity: members assume all members are in concurrence, even when this is not the case, and 3) Direct pressure on dissenters; pressure is brought to bear on those who might dissent.

Dehuminization. Dehuminization is the process in which individuals or groups are viewed as somehow less than fully human...

Enemy Image. Several authors (Brofenbrenner, 1961, Smith and Mackie, 1995) have examined patterns of attitudes that prevail in times of war. The concept of enemy image describes the phenomenon in which both sides participating in a war tend to view themselves as good and peace-loving peoples, while the enemy is inevitably seen as evil and aggressive. These attitudes tend to escalate conflict and are difficult to diminish once established.

Moral Exclusion. Opotow (1991) defines moral exclusion as a process in which one group views another as fundamentally different, which then leads to a belief that the prevailing moral rules and practices apply to one group, but not the other. Through this process, a group may feel justified in treating another group in a manner that would be unacceptable within their own cohort.

Moral Disengagement. In Bandura's (1991) social cognition theory, individuals rely on self-regulatory mechanisms to translate moral reasoning into actions. The moral reasoning of individuals is based on many factors, but self-monitoring and self-regulation are critical to the resulting action according to social cognition theory. Bandura et al (1996) posit that a number of factors can lead to moral disengagement, which can result in aggressive behavior by inhibiting the self-regulatory mechanisms that generally result in moral behavior.

Bandura and his colleagues identify a number of factors that may result in moral disengagement, and may therefore lead to immoral or inhumane behaviors. These factors include:

- *Moral Justification.* "Detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of valued social or moral purposes". Moral justification can make "what was once morally censurable" into "a source for positive self-valuation".
- *Euphemistic Language.* Language affects attitudes and beliefs, and the use of euphemistic language "provides a convenient tool for masking reprehensible activities or even conferring a respectable status upon them". A term such as "softening up" could be an example of euphemistic language.

- *Advantageous Comparison.* "Injurious conduct can be rendered benign" when compared to more violent behaviors. This factor is likely to occur during war, in which abusive behaviors may appear less significant and somehow justifiable when compared to death and destruction.
- *Displacement of Responsibility.* "People view their actions as springing from the social pressures or dictates of others rather than as something for which they are socially responsible". This is consistent with statements from those under investigation for abuses.
- *Diffusion of Responsibility.* Group decisions and behaviors can obscure responsibility; "When everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible".
- *Disregarding or distorting the consequences of actions.* Harmful acts can be minimized or ignored when the harm is inflicted for personal gain or because of social inducements.
- *Dehuminization.* Dehuminization "divests people of human qualities" and results in those dehumanized to be seen as persons "without feelings, hopes and concerns but as subhuman objects". The authors note that it is "difficult to mistreat humanized persons without risking personal distress and self-censure". Dehumanized persons may be viewed as only "being influenceable by harsh means".
- *Attribution of blame.* "Victims get blamed for bringing suffering on themselves", and those causing harm tend to justify their behavior on compelling circumstances.

Detainee and interrogation operations consist of a special subset of human interactions, which are characterized by one group which has significant power and control over another relatively powerless group that must be managed, often against their will. This dynamic presents a unique moral climate in which the characteristics associated with moral disengagement are likely to present. Without proper oversight and monitoring, such interactions carry a higher risk of moral disengagement on the part of those in power, which in turn is likely to lead to inhumane or abusive behaviors against those who are detained/interrogated.