Aggression and Violent Behavior 14 (2009) 388–395

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Aggression and Violent Behavior

Promoting aggression and violence at Abu Ghraib: The U.S. military's transformation of ordinary people into torturers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 August 2008
Received in revised form 16 June 2009
Accepted 24 June 2009
Available online 8 July 2009

Keywords:
Violence
Torture
Organizational behavior
Personnel training
Attitude change

ABSTRACT

The torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib has been characterized as an isolated incident and blamed on a few "bad apples." However, as similar reports of war crimes throughout Iraq continue to surface, it seems increasingly apparent that in the anxious post-9/11 context, the low-level agents who carried out such violence were designed to function in this way. This paper suggests that the U.S. military transformed ordinary soldiers into the cruel and ruthless guards at Abu Ghraib through the use of basic recruitment and training strategies, general authorizations for increased aggression and violence after 9/11, specific authorizations for more aggressive interrogations, a range of pressures and protections, and the dehumanization of prisoners. While the legitimate needs of an effective Army must be preserved, this paper offers several specific ways we might reform the U.S. military and prevent such abuses in the future.

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1. Introduction

In 2003, at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, members of the U.S. military made detainees wear women's underwear on their heads, forced them to bark like dogs, punched, kicked, and slapped them, threatened to execute them, forced them to simulate sex acts, urinated on them, sodomized them, and threatened them with electric shocks by placing them on boxes with wires attached to their fingers, toes, and genitals (Schlesinger, 2004; U.S. Army, 2004).

This torture of detainees has been repeatedly characterized as an isolated incident and blamed on a few "bad apples" or "rogue soldiers" (Associated Press, 2005; Childs, 2005). As Senator Ben Campbell decried, "I don't know how the hell these people got into our Army" (Fox News, 2004). However, the evidence indicates that most of "these people" were actually relatively normal when they entered the military, and they did not have psychological disorders, pathologies, or early life traumas which provide an explanation for their cruel behavior (Mestrovic, 2007). In this sense, the torturers at Abu Ghraib were similar to other past perpetrators of organized aggression and violence. Previous research indicates that the vast majority of those who carry out violence to serve a system are ordinary people, and this finding has been supported by psychological experiments (Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 1972), studies of genocide and mass killing (Browning, 1998; Katz, 2004; Staub, 1989; Waller, 2002), and studies of institutional violence (Johnson, 1986, 1998). It appears that their aggressive behavior is not rooted in their dispositions, but is instead the product of systematic and situational factors.

This social psychological explanation for the torture at Abu Ghraib is supported by growing evidence of widespread U.S. military crimes

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1359-1789/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.avb.2009.06.007

throughout Iraq. Similar brutality was also common in Afghanistan and at the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba (Rumney, 2005), and the frequency of these cruel practices outside Abu Ghraib suggests that the U.S. military's extralegal use of aggression, violence, and torture was not isolated—it was systematic. For instance, members of a highly decorated combat unit stationed near Fallujah have admitted committing "routine, systematic and often severe beatings" of detainees (Lobe, 2005). In a separate case, Corporal Saul H. Lopezromo testified that the Marines in his unit "began routinely beating Iraqis after officers ordered them to 'crank up the violence level'" (ABC News, 2007). He also described the common use of an illegal "dead-checking" tactic, where Marines would shoot wounded people who were lying on the ground to ensure that they were dead, rather than offering them medical aid. "If somebody is worth shooting once, they're worth shooting twice," the Marines rationalized (ABC News, 2007). As recently as August 2008, U.S. soldiers confessed to shooting four blindfolded and handcuffed Iraqi prisoners in the back of the head, then pushing their bodies into a Baghdad canal (Reuters, 2008). And perhaps most disturbingly, in an apparent My Lai moment at the western Iraqi town of Haditha, U.S. Marines allegedly slaughtered 24 men, women, and children in retaliation for the murder of a Marine Lance Corporal (Asser, 2008; Knickmeyer, 2006). There are likely many other cases of brutality that have yet to be reported.

This paper will draw from past research on organized aggression and violence to explain how the U.S. military transformed relatively normal soldiers into the abusive guards at Abu Ghraib. The following review suggests that the combination of (1) basic recruitment and training strategies, (2) general authorizations for increased aggression and violence after 9/11, (3) specific authorizations for more aggressive interrogations, and (4) coercive pressures, protections, and the use of dehumanization at the Iraqi prison led otherwise normal military personnel to abuse and torture detainees without typical moral restraint.

2. Recruitment and training strategies

Modern military forces rely on specific recruitment and training strategies to ensure that their personnel are psychologically prepared to act—no matter what the situation calls for. As Grossman (1995, p.13) explains, "the history of warfare can be seen as a history of increasingly more effective mechanisms for enabling and conditioning men to overcome their innate resistance to killing their fellow human beings." Today, these techniques are extremely effective. With "the proper conditioning and the proper circumstances, it appears that almost anyone can and will kill" (Grossman, 1995, p.4). Although these strategies are not specifically designed to produce torturers, they *are* designed to promote an aggressive military subculture and produce a tight-knit, obedient workforce that will carry out violence on command. Skorodumov (2004, p. 105) explains that "training should not only drill combat performance standards and battle techniques but also steel the will and develop high aggressiveness in combat." As such, these procedures directly increase the likelihood that soldiers will carry out torture if they are ordered to do so. As Staub (1989, p. 245) explains, specific torture training "might be unnecessary in groups with well-established hierarchical systems…the relatively sudden onset of large-scale torture in Argentina suggests that military personnel, who were the perpetrators, did not need special training in obedience. Military training itself aims to produce obedience." As with the Argentinean military's case, it appears that the U.S. military's recruitment and training procedures set the basic foundations for torture.

It is important to point out that the U.S. military's screening process is specifically designed to keep "bad apples" from ever joining the service. Even violent organizations work hard to avoid unreliable employees, who are difficult to control and less likely to conform to institutional norms. For the U.S. military, criminal record checks, psychological evaluations, and basic educational requirements help ensure that new recruits are relatively normal and that they can be successfully trained to serve the system. After 9/11, military recruitment reportedly "hit the ceiling," with many new recruits ready to heed the call for an aggressive response to Al Qaeda (Miles, 2006). As Marine Major Stewart Upton explained, "they feel that they belong to something important. They feel that they are needed in this global war on terror" (Miles, 2006).

Previous research indicates that in other organizational contexts, recruits who are young and male (Grossman, 1995), with shared respect for authority (Staub, 1989; Waller, 2002) and shared values (Johnson, 1986) are the easiest to indoctrinate and the most likely to obediently perform violent tasks. Furthermore, the basic training programs of other violent organizations, including some which have carried out mass killings and genocides, have regularly exploited recruits' fears of an external threat (Johnson, 1986; Staub, 1989), desensitized recruits to violence (Grossman, 1995), and taught recruits the importance of unity (Waller, 2002) and obedience (Baumeister, 1997) in a strategic effort to increase agents' willingness to carry out violence for the system.

There is evidence that the U.S. military system prioritizes these same criteria for this same general strategic purpose. Eighty percent of active Army recruits are male, and the average recruit's age is just 21 years old (Burlas, 2002; Powers, 2002). Army recruiters are explicitly encouraged to incite aggressive responses from young male recruits, challenging them by suggesting that they may be too weak to handle basic training or provoking them with the slogan "Are you Army Strong?" (Savage, 2004; U. S. Army, 2007a). The U.S. military also appeals to recruits on the basis of their common values. The majority of military recruits come from the middle class (Miles, 2005). And recruiters may rightly assume that this demographic is particularly likely to be interested in joining the military, to have strong military traditions, and to have the kind of relentless work ethic required to endure basic training and obey unpleasant orders without quitting.

The U.S. military also targets people who share its aggressive warrior ideology, perhaps because they will most naturally adopt the military's philosophy. The Army defines this code on its public website:

> The Warrior Ethos forms the foundation for the American Soldier's spirit and total commitment to victory, in peace and war, always exemplifying ethical behavior and Army values.
>
> I will always place the mission first.
> I will never accept defeat.
> I will never quit.
> I will never leave a fallen comrade (U. S. Army, 2007b).

The Army does praise ethical behavior. However, the words "always" and "never" are a sign of the inflexible psychological perspective it promotes. Such absolutes imply that winning is always the ethical mission. In reality, ethics and victory are often mutually exclusive. To truly *assure* victory (and your security), one often has to forego ethics (and someone else's liberty). But these important distinctions are not sold to recruits, who seem to be encouraged to enlist on the moral assurance that patriotic warrior aggression is always right.

In order to get their undivided attention, the U.S. military's basic training program capitalizes on recruits' fears. Recruits often attempt to conquer their fears about surviving upcoming missions by seeking out information about the dangers they will face and the best ways to overcome them. As Sergeant First Class McKinley Parker reveals, "The most common question they ask is about Iraq—what's it like" (Powers, 2006). Parker further explains that he and his colleagues "drive home the point that they better pay attention to their training, because we were there and we know it's relevant" (Powers, 2006). As Colonel Bill Gallagher explains, when fears increased in the post-9/11 climate, there was a new "sense of urgency" that made military training especially critical (Shanker, 2004).