
A new approach to understanding the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine a method of predicting and understanding torture during international conflicts by applying and linking two established theoretical approaches to the Abu Ghraib case. The first theoretical approach is based on the circumplex model of family functioning focusing on cohesion, flexibility, and communication (Olson, 1995, 2000; Olson and DeFrain, 1997). In this model, social groups at the extreme points on the flexibility and cohesion dimensions have the highest level of risk for violence. The second approach is based on violentisation theory (Athens, 2003). The four stages of the violentisation process include: brutalisation, defiance, violent dominant engagements, and virulency. Extreme virulency was added as another stage. Using qualitative content analysis, the data demonstrated that the perpetrators moved through the violentisation process as their social environment moved toward the chaotic and disengaged extremes of the circumplex model. Study limitations and suggestions for further research are also addressed.

Keywords: circumplex model; violentisation theory; torture; Abu Ghraib.

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1 Introduction

The Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal brought a great deal of attention to the ‘few bad apples’ versus ‘bad orchard’ debate (Hamm, 2007; Mestrovic, 2006). Public policies failed to prevent torture from occurring during the conflict. This failure in leadership led to multiple cases of prisoner abuse. The goal of this study is to examine a method of predicting and understanding torture during international conflicts using two established theoretical approaches from different disciplines.

Research on torture often focuses on either structural or agency level variables. This study integrates structural and agency approaches by using different theories of human behaviour. Organisational structures may reach critical points that lead to patterns of violent behaviour. The Abu Ghraib prison torture situation is used to demonstrate the different dimensions and applications of the theories.

According to Ortiz (2007), many governments engage in torture and the rates of torture are increasing. Dossey (2007, p.40) stated, “the horror of war distorts the behaviour of everyone who is sucked into its maw. The best of our young men and women, who in peacetime might be model citizens, can behave like beasts in war”. Dossey also pointed out that current US policy and practices regarding torture are ambivalent, contradictory, and chaotic.

It is very possible (see Zimbardo, 2007) that the torturers started their careers as well adjusted, law abiding, and caring individuals who developed their own language and rites and rituals during a violentisation process that led to abusive behaviour (Gibson, 1991). Zimbardo (2007) showed how a chaotic environment, removal of external constraints on deviant behaviour, and encouragement by others to ‘soften up’ detainees led to abuse and torture of the detainees.

The first theoretical approach we use is based on the circumplex model of family functioning focusing on cohesion, flexibility, and communication (Olson, 1995, 2000; Olson and DeFrain, 1997). This model has been extensively researched and supported in the family therapy literature (Olson and Gorall, 2003). The major assumption of the model is that balanced families function better than unbalanced ones.

In this model, social groups at the extreme points on the flexibility and cohesion dimensions have the highest level of risk for violence. Balanced groups and societies exhibit levels of flexibility and cohesion within a functional range. This model will be used to explain the structural dimensions of torture.

Winton (2005) applied this model to 13 genocides with an emphasis on macro level variables. Using this approach, societies with high (chaotic) or low (rigid) levels of flexibility and high (enmeshed) or low (disengaged) levels of cohesion were thought to be at increased risk for a variety of social problems to include genocide (Winton). Winton found that the rigidly enmeshed pattern was present in most of the genocides.

The second approach is based on violentisation theory (Athens, 2003). The four stages of the violentisation process include: brutalisation, defiance, violent dominant engagements, and virulency. Extreme virulency was added as another stage in Winton’s (2008) model. This stage addresses behaviour that goes beyond killing the victims to include torture, mutilation, and sexual violence.

In addition, Athens (2003) considered three different types of communities:

- Civil minor community: A community in which non-violent strategies are used in conflict. This includes psychological, economic, and legal situations.

- Turbulent minor community: A community in which violent and non-violent strategies are used to resolve conflict.
- Malignant minor community: A community in which chaos predominates and ultra-violent behaviour may occur.

Athens' (1992, 2003) theory of violentisation is based on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Cohen, 1981; Longmore, 1998). Athens (2003) developed his theory through detailed interviews with violent individuals to obtain an interpretative approach that addresses the 'recognition that violent criminal action is *situated* and that operates on a model of the violent criminal as an *actor*' [Athens, (1997), pp.25–26]. Similar to the circumplex model, violentisation theory allows one to take a developmental perspective.

2 Methods

2.1 Data sources

We used the Fay/Jones (Fay, 2004) Abu Ghraib report to analyse themes consistent with violentisation theory and the circumplex model. In addition, Zimbardo's (2007) research and analysis is used as a source of information about the Abu Ghraib torture incidents.

2.2 Data analysis

Qualitative content analytic procedures were used to analyse how case study core themes related to violentisation theory and the circumplex model (Feldman, 1995; Winton and Unlu, 2008). This method entails 'the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' [Hsieh and Shannon, (2005), p.1278]. In this analysis, the codes have been constructed before reading the case study texts and are applied and modified as the texts are analysed. The case study narratives were searched for indicators of the circumplex model and violentisation theory. We are attempting to determine if the theory and data fit by using several sources from the same case study.

Cohesion refers to the emotional bonding or closeness of the system. We used Olson's (1995, 2000) model of cohesion and Winton's (2008) and Winton and Unlu's (2008) coding of genocides.

Indicators of enmeshed cohesion included: excessive emotional closeness, high dependence on perpetrator groups, punishment for the expression of dissent, following a strict decision making process, and strong connections and identification with the perpetrator group.

Indicators of disengaged cohesion included: high levels of independence among perpetrator groups, failure to demonstrate group loyalty, and lack of negative consequences for failing to follow the perpetrator leaders.

Flexibility refers to the ability for a system to change. We used Olson's (1995, 2000) model of flexibility and Winton's (2008) and Winton and Unlu's (2008) codes for genocides.

Indicators of rigid flexibility included: authoritarian leadership styles from the perpetrators, following a strict code of conduct, following rigid roles, following strict

codes of rules and regulations, encouraging and reinforcing rigid thinking patterns, and the inability to change when confronted with stressors or crisis.

Indicators of chaotic flexibility included: perpetrator leaders having minimal control over others, leadership styles rapidly changing, low social control, failure to enforce rules, and diverse and disorganised thought patterns.

According to Athens (2003), there are four stages of the violentisation process.

- **Brutalisation:** The brutalisation stage consists of teaching and demonstrating violent behaviour. Some examples of brutalisation include threatening someone with physical force, observing others engaging in violent behaviour, and coaching others how to engage in violent activities (Athens, 2003). Indicators of brutalisation include witnessing violence, being coached on how to use violence, and being told that one has a personal responsibility to use violence (Winton, 2008).
- **Defiance:** Refers to the development of a violence supportive belief system. Leaders present and reinforce their belief system that violence is justified. Indicators of defiance include presentations of situations in which violent behaviour is encouraged and appropriate (Athens, 2003). For example, believing that one must kill or be killed is coded as defiance (Winton, 2008).
- **Violent dominant engagements:** Consist of the actual encouragement and reinforcement for using violence (Athens, 2003). For example, groups are directed to carry out violence against specific individuals or groups based on the violent belief systems taught during the two previous stages. Indicators of violent dominant engagements include engaging in violent acts to the test out the result (Winton, 2008).
- **Virulency:** Focuses on the belief that an individual or group is violent and dangerous (Athens, 2003). In other words, the individual or groups has defined the self as violent. Indicators of virulency include self definitions as being dangerous killers and receiving support for violent actions (Winton, 2008).
- **Extreme virulency:** This was added as another stage in Winton's (2008) model. This stage addresses behaviour that goes beyond killing the victims to include torture, mutilation, and sexual violence. Winton described some of these characteristics as similar to the violent behaviours used by serial killers.

3 Results

Consistent with the violentisation process are the learned predispositions for obedience, binding, and strain reduction factors as discussed by Milgram (1974) and Gibson (1991). In the present case study, the perpetrators that engaged in torture behaviours should have had a predisposition for obedience due to their military training. Second, coaching and reinforcing torture behaviours appeared to bind some of the individuals into the violentisation process. Thus we have photographs of detainees being abused and humiliated within a supportive environment for this type of behaviour. Third, strain reduction was accomplished through support of a violentised environment. For example, detainees were tortured after they were defined as dangerous individuals who could cause great harm to the prison staff specifically, and the military, more generally.

In this first incident, individuals react to a threat within an environment of ambiguous policies by using humiliation:

A milestone event at Abu Ghraib was the shooting incident that occurred in Tier 1A on 24 November 2003...Eventually, COL Pappas was notified, and he did visit the scene. By then the shooting was over, and the MPs were searching the cells. COL Pappas did not remain long but admits to being told by SOLDIER-23 that the Iraqi Police were being interrogated by MI personnel. COL Pappas left LTC Jordan in charge of the situation after the shooting which came to be known as the IP Roundup. The IP Roundup was, by all accounts chaotic. The Iraqi Police, hence the name 'IP', became detainees and were subjected to strip searching by the MPs in the hallway, with female soldiers and at least one female interpreter present. The IP were kept in various stages of dress, including nakedness, for prolonged periods as they were interrogated. This constitutes humiliation, which is detainee abuse. Military working dogs were being used not only to search the cells, but also to intimidate the IPs during interrogation without authorisation. There was a general understanding among the MI personnel present that LTG Sanchez had authorised suspending existing ICRP. Nobody is sure where that information came from, but LTG Sanchez never gave such authorisation... LTC Jordan and the soldiers should have known the interrogation rules would not and could not have been suspended. LTC Jordan should have controlled the situation and should have taken steps to reinforce proper standards at a time when emotions were likely high given the circumstances [Fay, 2004, pp.56–57].

In this situation we have chaotic interactions, failure to effectively communicate, and disengagement of groups and leaders. The Iraqi Police were humiliated by being forced to strip naked in front of female personnel. Dogs were also used to intimidate. The Iraqi Police were threatened (brutalisation). Violence was supported and justified as the prison staff believed that they could gather information from the Iraqi Police using violence (defiance). Violence was carried out with the encouragement and support of others (violent dominant engagements).

Another variable to consider is the presence of nightly mortar attacks (Zimbardo, 2007). Being under constant threat of death would be consistent with the need to defend oneself through violent behaviour (virulency). Zimbardo clearly described an environment of chaos and disengagement.

According to Fay (2004, p.68), several types of detainee abuse occurred to include:

- Physical Abuse: Several soldiers reported that they witnessed physical abuse of detainees. Some examples include slapping, kicking, twisting the hands of a detainee who was hand-cuffed to cause pain, throwing balls at restrained internees, placing gloved hand over the nose and mouth of an internee to restrict breathing, 'poking' at an internee's injured leg, and forcing an internee to stand while handcuffed in such a way as to dislocate his shoulder.
- Use of dogs. When dogs are used to threaten and terrify detainees, there is a clear violation of applicable laws and regulations. One such impermissible practice was an alleged contest between the two army dog handlers to see who could make the internees urinate or defecate in the presence of the dogs.
- Nakedness. Numerous statements, as well as the ICRC report, discuss the seemingly common practice of keeping detainees in a state of undress. A number of statements

indicate that clothing was taken away as a punishment for either not cooperating with interrogators or with MPs. In addition, male internees were naked in the presence of female soldiers. Many of the soldiers who witnessed the nakedness were told that this was an accepted practice. Under the circumstances, however, the nakedness was clearly degrading and humiliating.

In these situations we observe the teaching and coaching of violent behaviour. Additionally, sexual humiliation is used against the detainees setting the stage for sexual violence.

- Photographs: A multitude of photographs show detainees in various states of undress, often in degrading positions [Fay, (2004), p.68].
- Simulated sexual positions: A number of soldiers describe incidents where detainees were placed in simulated sexual positions with other internees. Many of these incidents were also photographed [Fay, (2004), p.69].

The environment continued to be one of disengaged chaos. Confusion was rampant and violentisation had taken place. Examples of brutalisation, defiance, violent dominant engagements, and virulency are present throughout the environment. This is consistent with the turbulent minor community as described by Athens (2003) as a community in which chaos predominates and ultra-violent behaviour occurs.

The following incidents demonstrate sexual violentisation:

- Incident #2: On 7 October 2003, three MI personnel allegedly sexually assaulted female DETAINEE-29... DETAINEE-29 alleges as follows: First, the group took her out of her cell and escorted her down the cellblock to an empty cell. One unidentified soldier stayed outside the cell (SOLDIER33, A/519 MI BN); while another held her hands behind her back, and the other forcibly kissed her (SOLDIER32). She was escorted downstairs to another cell where she was shown a naked male detainee and told the same would happen to her if she did not cooperate. She was then taken back to her cell, forced to kneel and raise her arms while one of the soldiers (SOLDIER31) removed her shirt. She began to cry, and her shirt was given back as the soldier cursed at her and said they would be back each night. CID conducted an investigation and SOLDIER33, SOLDIER32, and SOLDIER31 invoked their rights and refused to provide any statements. DETAINEE-29 identified the three soldiers as SOLDIER33, SOLDIER32, and SOLDIER31 as the soldiers who kissed her and removed her shirt. Checks with the 519 MI BN confirmed no interrogations were scheduled for that evening. No record exists of MI ever conducting an authorised interrogation of her [Fay, (2004), p.72].
- Incident #3: On 25 October 2003 detainees DETAINEE-31, DETAINEE-30, and DETAINEE-27 were stripped of their clothing, handcuffed together nude, placed on the ground, and forced to lie on each other and simulate sex while photographs were taken. Six photographs depict this abuse. Results of the CID investigation indicate on several occasions over several days, detainees were assaulted, abused and forced to strip off their clothing and perform indecent acts on each other. DETAINEE-27 provided a sworn statement outlining these abuses [Fay, (2004), p.72].

In the next incident, violentisation takes place through a variety of behaviours:

- Incident #5: In October 2003, DETAINEE-07, reported alleged multiple incidents of physical abuse while in Abu Ghraib. DETAINEE-07 was an MI hold and considered of potentially high value... DETAINEE-07's claims of physical abuse (hitting) started on his first day of arrival. He was left naked in his cell for extended periods, cuffed in his cell in stressful positions ('high cuffed'), left with a bag over his head for extended periods, and denied bedding or blankets. DETAINEE-07 described being made to 'bark like a dog, being forced to crawl on his stomach while MPs spit and urinated on him, and being struck causing unconsciousness'. On another occasion DETAINEE-07 was tied to a window in his cell and forced to wear women's underwear on his head. On yet another occasion, DETAINEE-07 was forced to lie down while MPs jumped onto his back and legs. He was beaten with a broom and a chemical light was broken and poured over his body. DETAINEE-04 witnessed the abuse with the chem-light. During this abuse a police stick was used to sodomise DETAINEE-07 and two female MPs were hitting him, throwing a ball at his penis, and taking photographs. This investigation surfaced no photographic evidence of the chemical light abuse or sodomy [Fay, (2004), p.74].

Two other incidents illustrate the violentisation process. It appears that extreme virulency is present in these cases.

- Incident #8: On 20 October 2003, DETAINEE-03, was allegedly stripped and physically abused for sharpening a toothbrush to make a shank (knife-like weapon). DETAINEE-03 claimed the toothbrush was not his. An MP log book entry by SSG Frederick, 372 MPs, directed DETAINEE-03 to be stripped in his cell for six days. DETAINEE-03 claimed he was told his clothing and mattress would be taken away as punishment. The next day he claims he was cuffed to his cell door for several hours. He claims he was taken to a closed room where he had cold water poured on him and his face was forced into someone's urine. DETAINEE-03 claimed he was then beaten with a broom and spat upon, and a female soldier stood on his legs and pressed a broom against his anus. He described getting his clothes during the day from SGT Joyner and having them taken away each night by CPL Graner for the next three days [Fay, (2004), pp.76–77].
- Incident #9: Three photographs taken on 25 October 2003 depicted PFC England, holding a leash which was wrapped around an unidentified detainee's neck. Present in the photograph is SPC Ambuhl who was standing to the side watching. PFC England claimed in her initial statement to CID that CPL Graner had placed the tie-down strap around the detainee's neck and then asked her to pose for the photograph [Fay, (2004), p.77].

The following two cases demonstrate the documentation of violent behaviours. This is another case in which extreme virulency is used. The detainee is led to believe that his fingers and genitals will be electrocuted. This would clearly be classified as sadistic behaviour.

- Incident #10: Six Photographs of DETAINEE-15, depict him standing on a box with simulated electrical wires attached to his fingers and a hood over his head... DETAINEE-15 described a female making him stand on the box, telling him if he fell off he would be electrocuted, and a 'tall black man' as putting the wires on his fingers and penis [Fay, (2004), p.77].

- Incident #11: Twenty-nine photos... depict seven detainees who were physically abused, placed in a pile and forced to masturbate. Present in some of these photographs are CPL Graner and SPC Harman. The CID investigation into these abuses identified SSG Frederick, CPL Graner, SGT J. Davis, SPC Ambuhl, SPC Harman, SPC Sivits, and PFC England; all MPs, as involved in the abuses which occurred... MI Brigade detainees were stripped, pushed into a pile, and jumped on by SGT J. Davis, CPL Graner, and SSG Frederick. They were photographed at different times by SPC Harman, SPC Sivits, and SSG Frederick. The detainees were subsequently posed sexually, forced to masturbate, and 'ridden like animals'. CPL Graner knocked at least one detainee unconscious and SSG Frederick punched one so hard in the chest that he couldn't breathe and a medic was summoned. SSG Frederick initiated the masturbation and forced the detainees to hit each other. PFC England stated she observed SSG Frederick strike a detainee in the chest during these abuses. The detainee had difficulty breathing and a medic, SOLDIER-01, was summoned. SOLDIER-01 treated the detainee and while in the hard site observed the 'human pyramid; of naked detainees with bags over their heads. SOLDIER-01 failed to report this abuse... SOLDIER-29 reported seeing a screen saver for a computer in the hard site that depicted several naked detainees stacked in a 'pyramid'. She also once observed, unrelated to this incident, CPL Graner slap a detainee. She stated that she didn't report the picture of naked detainees to MI because she did not see it again and also did not report the slap because she didn't consider it abuse [Fay, (2004), p.77-78].

Mestrovic (2006, p.9) mirrors our use of the circumplex model by stating, 'social chaos in any group or relationship, ranging from families to military and business organisations, leads inevitably to abuse'. According to Mestrovic, the soldiers were put into a double-bind being punished for reporting or failing to report prisoner abuse. Definitions of what constituted and did not constitute torture led to ambiguity and confusion (Hamm, 2007). A hostile environment permeated the Abu Ghraib prison that left little chance of lower level soldiers stopping the abusive behaviours.

4 Discussion

The aim of this study was to use the Abu Ghraib case study to assess the utility of using the circumplex model and violentisation theory. In addition, we addressed both the structural and agency components of this case. The use of both of these theories demonstrated that the perpetrators moved through the violentisation process as their social environment moved toward the chaotic and disengaged extremes of the circumplex model.

Sanborn (2003) looked at the similarities and differences between soldiers and criminals in becoming violentised and found similar patterns. For example, both groups observe violence, are taught how to engage in violent behaviour, view violence as appropriate in certain situations, and are reinforced from their peers for participating in the violent behaviour. Sanborn also points out that there is a deviolentisation process with most soldiers resuming a non-violent behavioural pattern once out of war zones. Further research should focus on the deviolentisation process (Ulmer, 2003).

There are several limitations to this study. First, the application of the models to one case study may not generalise to other violent case studies. Second, the use of secondary sources limits the questions that the researchers can ask. Third, this study only superficially addressed the pre and post conditions of the case study. Finally, we focused our analysis up to the organisational level of the Abu Ghraib prison while leaving out an assessment of the organisational leadership at higher levels of government (see Hamm, 2007).

Future research might address some of these limitations by using historical-comparative methods focusing on the preconditions, violent events, and post violence (Huttenbach, 2004; Winton, 2008). For example, researchers might analyse how organisations become unbalanced and violentised over longer time periods and how organisations are able to reverse dysfunctional patterns.

Hopefully, this type of research will encourage others to carry out research that incorporates multiple theories over several research sites with the main goal of preventing violence in a variety of settings by evidence based interventions and policies. By building healthy organisational cultures with balanced leadership, institutionalised violent behaviour may be prevented.

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