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## Sexualized Torture and Abuse at Abu Ghraib Prison: Feminist Psychological Analyses

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*A feminist analysis of the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib illuminates aspects of the abuses that have not been previously considered. Social psychological studies that emphasize the importance of a (degendered) 'power of the situation' in determining behaviour have not adequately considered the effects of masculine socialization. The sexualized nature of the abuses at Abu Ghraib was centred on feminization of the prisoners and was an enactment of misogyny and homophobia. Rather than minimizing the harmfulness of the Abu Ghraib abuses, comparisons of them with fraternity hazings and pornography suggest that hazing and pornography are harmful. Finally, prevention of future abuses will be difficult because of the fundamental contradiction in socializing soldiers to kill, yet expecting them to feel empathy for the enemy.*

*Key Words: empathy, fraternity hazing, homophobia, masculine socialization, misogyny, pornography, prison abuses, sexualization*

In an attempt to gather information and with the support and encouragement of military intelligence, US military personnel and civilian employees systematically brutalized, humiliated, and tortured Iraqi prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad (Hersh, 2004a). The photographs of this torture and abuse, released to the public in April 2004, shocked the USA and the world. In this article, I take a feminist psychological perspective in order to illuminate aspects of the Abu Ghraib atrocities that have been under-analysed in mainstream (scholarly and popular press) accounts. A feminist perspective provides alternative answers to questions that have been previously posed by others. In addition, it suggests the importance of asking a different set of questions that generally have not been the focus of attention.

## CAUSES OF TORTURE AND ABUSE: HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?

Most of the analyses of Abu Ghraib have focused on causation and responsibility: how such atrocities could be committed, what led up to the specific acts of torture and abuse, and who (or what) is responsible. The overriding concern is with understanding how torture can occur and what aspects of individuals, and the social culture in which they are embedded, might be most important in understanding the root causes of torture.

Politicians, media pundits, and psychologists have all posed questions of this sort, although the answers provided have been quite different. Many politicians (particularly those in the Bush administration) as well as pundits focused heavily on dispositional explanations – that is, they argued (or simply asserted) that only certain people could or would commit such atrocities. For example, in his first public comments concerning Abu Ghraib, President Bush said, ‘Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people. That’s not the way we do things in America’, thus distancing himself from the perpetrators at Abu Ghraib and implying that they are evil, deviant, and fundamentally different from most Americans (Milbank, 2004).

In contrast, most psychologists who have spoken or written about Abu Ghraib have focused on social context and aspects of the situation that might have prescribed or elicited these abhorrent behaviours. Fiske et al. (2004) offered a succinct summary of many of the social psychological processes that are relevant to understanding Abu Ghraib, including: (a) stress as a risk factor for aggressive behaviour; (b) the devaluation of those who are not part of our social group; (c) conformity with peers; (d) obedience to authority; and (e) the step-by-step nature of social influence.

The social psychological analysis that has received the most popular press attention is one that compares the situation faced by the guards in Abu Ghraib with that confronted by the participants of a psychological study conducted in the 1970s – the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) (Haney et al., 1973). In this study, undergraduate men were randomly assigned to play the role of either a prisoner or a prison guard in a study that was to have lasted two weeks. The study was terminated before the allotted time, however, because the simulation became too real. The men who were playing the role of prison guards took to these roles all too easily, and began abusing the men who were playing the role of prisoner. Moreover, the prisoners began exhibiting signs of serious psychological distress. For the protection of the research participants, the study was terminated early.

The SPE is one of the most famous social psychological studies ever conducted, in part because of the strength of the participants’ reactions. The experimenters did not expect that normal, psychologically healthy young men, most from relatively privileged backgrounds, would be changed so quickly and so dramatically by an experience that was, in the end, only play-acting. One can only assume that the experience of being an inmate or a guard in an actual prison would have even stronger effects (Haney and Zimbardo, 1998).

One of the main conclusions drawn from this study is that contextual and environmental factors are much more important in shaping and constraining behaviour than had heretofore been believed. Dispositional factors such as personality differences had relatively little effect on participants' reactions and behaviours. This study demonstrated in a highly dramatic way what has since been termed by psychologists 'the power of the situation'. The SPE and other studies (Asch, 1955; Milgram, 1974; Reicher and Haslam, 2006)<sup>1</sup> have demonstrated, at the least, that contextual and situational factors can have strong effects on behaviour. More strongly, some have argued that these studies imply that, given the right circumstances, all of us are capable of committing atrocities (Zimbardo, 2004b).

The findings of Zimbardo and his colleagues are highly relevant to an understanding of Abu Ghraib. Most of the specific conditions that have been found to set the stage for abuse were present there. Some of these are (a) boredom, fear, stress, harsh conditions; (b) encouragement by authorities (e.g. the CIA and military intelligence (Hersh 2004a, 2004b); (c) dehumanization of prisoners; (d) extreme power differential between prisoners and guards; (e) diffusion of responsibility; (f) presumption of anonymity; (g) no sanctions; and (h) modelling of behaviour by peers and superiors (Zimbardo, 2004a, 2004b). In some sense, then, it is not surprising that atrocities occurred, given that so many preconditions were present.

The SPE analysis is relevant and cogent, and can be used to help prevent future atrocities. It is especially powerful when contrasted with the simplistic 'bad apple' theory advanced by the Bush administration (i.e. that normal people would not commit these acts: only monsters would or could). As pertinent as the 'power of the situation' analysis is, however, it misses something that a feminist analysis, one that highlights gender, power, and accompanying socialization practices, can add.

#### SELF-SELECTION AND SHARED SOCIALIZATION BACKGROUNDS

Zimbardo's analysis focuses on the normality of his participants. In the original scholarly article, he and his colleagues highlighted this repeatedly. For example, they noted that 'the 24 subjects who were judged to be most stable (physically and mentally), most mature, and least involved in anti-social behaviour were selected to participate', '[t]he subjects were normal, healthy males', 'the subjects chosen to participate manifested no apparent abnormalities', 'each subject scored within the normal-average range', and '[the subjects] were highly representative of middle-class Caucasian American society', (Haney et al., 1973: 73, 90). In his analyses of Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo made these same points. For example, he stated that 'normal, healthy, intelligent college student volunteers . . . engaged in gratuitous abuse of their peers' and '[s]weet, charming, wise young men we had interviewed and tested only a short time earlier had been psychologically trans-

formed by something in that prison setting into unfeeling, cruel, even at times sadistic prison guards' (Zimbardo, 2004b).

In one sense, the description of the SPE participants as 'normal' is unproblematic. Indeed, these young men were quite representative of young, white, educated, middle- and upper-class American men. In addition, because they had been screened for psychological pathology, none of them exhibited any tendencies deemed deviant or abnormal. In another sense, however, the focus on 'normality' is problematic because it naturalizes what these individuals brought to the situation and prevents us from looking more closely at those dispositional aspects that might have been shared by all of them.

First, there may have been a self-selection bias, such that men who were willing to volunteer for a study of 'prison life' would perhaps have been more aggressive and less empathic than average. Carnahan and McFarland (2007) tested this theory by conducting an experiment in which college men were recruited for a study using either the exact text reported by Haney et al. (1973) ('Male college students needed for a psychological study of prison life') or a version in which the words 'of prison life' were deleted. Men who responded to the advertisement that mentioned prison life scored higher on aggression, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance, and scored lower on dispositional empathy and altruism than did men who responded to the advertisement that did not mention prison life. Carnahan and McFarland, while not discounting the strong situational forces created by the SPE setting, suggested that participants in that study may have had a predisposition to aggression and dominance that was not detectable to the experimenters because it was shared by all participants – those randomly assigned to the role of prisoner as well as those assigned to the role of guard. When playing the role of guard, these predispositions may have been reinforced by other group members and contributed to the abusive actions that were eventually perpetrated.

Participants who volunteered for the SPE may have had other characteristics in common as well. Because they were all young, educated, middle- to upper-class white men, it is reasonable to think that, although each had an individual history, they also had many shared socialization experiences. Two of these, in particular, seem important. First, most or all of the participants had received more than 12 years of socialization in the US educational system. This system emphasizes obedience to authority as an important value and practice, with teachers and professors instructing students in great detail what and how to study, what and how to write, and how to behave in the classroom. It is reasonable to assume that all of the SPE participants had demonstrated admirable proficiency in meeting the demands of educational authority figures, because they had been successful enough in this environment to graduate from high school and be admitted to college (all participants were college students).

To be sure, the experimenters set up the conditions of the study in such a way as to maximize compliance by the participants. Experimenters always want 'good subjects' – they want participants to do the tasks, as directed, to the best of their

ability. So the situation dictated obedience and discouraged questioning. But, in addition, all of the participants had years of socialization experiences in which they were encouraged to obey and discouraged from questioning authority. Because this was true for all participants, there was no way, in this study, to assess the effect that it had on participants' actions. It may be that people who have learned to question authority would be less susceptible to some of the social and psychological processes that lead to the acceptance of abuses. Of course, such people might have been relatively rare at Abu Ghraib, as they probably are in most armies, because of the military socialization that all soldiers undergo. A central part of such socialization is learning the vital importance of obeying the orders of superior officers (Gal, 1986; Katz, 1990). The result is that there are few environments in which the opportunities to question authority are as restricted as they are in the military (Katz, 1990; Shatan, 1974; also see Shay, 1994, concerning the total dependence of the modern combat soldier on the military hierarchy for everything essential to survival).

The second type of socialization history that all participants had in common was their socialization as men. In the 1960s and 1970s, as now, masculine socialization in the USA emphasizes several things that put men at risk of perpetration of aggressive acts. These include: (a) emphasizing hierarchy and 'pecking orders' (Cheng, 1999; Kilmartin, 2000: 142); (b) encouraging identification of weakness with 'the other' (women) (Cheng, 1999; O'Neil, 1981; Thompson and Pleck, 1986); (c) damaging the capacity for empathy and for expression of emotions other than anger (Brody and Hall, 2000; Cheng, 1999); (d) strengthening agency at the expense of communion (Bakan, 1966; Bem, 1974); and (e) encouraging action at the expense of introspection (Good et al. 2005; Kilmartin, 2000: 80). All participants may have been 'normal' – but, given the reality of masculine socialization, all 'normal' men may be at high risk of perpetration. Again, the SPE does not allow us to assess the effects of gender socialization on perpetration risk because all participants were male.

One might argue that gender socialization cannot be an important force in predicting aggression or torture because some of the most high-profile offenders at Abu Ghraib were women, and because the key whistle-blowers (David Sutton and Joe Darby) were men. However, because gender socialization is only one of many factors (both situational and dispositional) that contribute to aggressive behaviour, it is clear that both women and men are capable of committing or speaking out against atrocities. Moreover, gender differences might be especially small in the military environment because basic training provides masculine socialization to all recruits, both male and female (Huq, 2007). All soldiers, regardless of gender, also receive an indoctrination that emphasizes unquestioning obedience to authority (Gal, 1986; Katz, 1990). As Huq (2007) argued, the admission of women to the military and to military training institutions has not shifted the prevailing hypermasculine culture. If anything, military cultural norms have been consolidated and strengthened, and women have assimilated to this culture.

In addition to the probable effects of military socialization, in a volunteer army there are also likely to be various self-selection effects. For example, in a prospective longitudinal study, Johnson and Kaplan (1991) found that young men who enlisted in the military were more willing to be punished (i.e. they respected the right of an authority figure to punish them) and reported that they felt more 'dehumanization' (lack of empathy for, and kindness to, other people) than did young men who did not enlist. Similar characteristics might be found in young women who enlist in the military. In addition, such women might be more comfortable than women who choose not to enlist with aspects of traditional masculinity such as respect for hierarchy and belief in the importance of defending one's place in it, over-reliance on emotions such as anger at the expense of emotions such as empathy, and a preference for agency (perhaps enacted as dominance) rather than communion. Such predispositions, if they exist, would likely put these female soldiers at greater risk of aggression perpetration.

#### TYPE OF TORTURE: EXPLAINING THE SEXUALIZED NATURE OF THE ABUSES

In contrast to the wealth of analyses focusing on the causes of torture more generally, there have been relatively few analyses focusing specifically on the sexualized nature of the torture at Abu Ghraib (some exceptions are collected in McKelvey, 2007). Analyses based on mainstream psychological theory have been almost completely silent on this topic, but some political analysts have taken it up. Many such accounts have focused on the religious implications of sexualized torture. Homosexuality is not permitted under most interpretations of Islamic law (Halstead and Lewicka, 1998), and privacy and modesty are important for both men and women. Neither men nor women disrobe in front of others. Bernard Haykel, a scholar of Middle Eastern studies, highlighted the particularly strong humiliation that would be experienced by Muslims in the situations depicted in the Abu Ghraib photographs: 'Being put on top of each other and forced to masturbate, being naked in front of each other – it's all a form of torture' (quoted in Hersh 2004a: 43).

In fact, many of the torture practices and interrogation techniques that were used at Abu Ghraib may have been designed specifically with the religious beliefs and prohibitions of the Muslim prisoners in mind. Hersh (2004c) reported that neoconservative politicians, relying on analyses from Patai's (1973) book, *The Arab Mind*, believed that sexual humiliation would be especially effective in 'breaking' Muslim prisoners and that photographs of such humiliation could be used to blackmail them, even after they had been released. Sexual humiliation related to homosexuality would be particularly shameful and, therefore (from the point of view of US military intelligence), particularly effective.

These religious-based analyses are clearly relevant and help us to develop a more complex understanding of the abuses that were enacted. What is missing

from these analyses, however, is any sustained discussion of gender. Examining the sexualized abuse from a gendered perspective is also enlightening.

#### GENDERED PERSPECTIVE ON SEXUALIZED TORTURE

The sexualized nature of many of the abuses at Abu Ghraib was of a particular kind – it involved feminization of male prisoners, and derived power from what Kaufman-Osborn called ‘the logic of emasculation’ (2007: 154). In some cases, the feminization was overt: for example, when prisoners were made to wear women’s underwear or when women’s underwear was placed on their heads or used to hood or blindfold them. In other cases, the feminization was implied from forced participation in simulated ‘homosexual’ acts (sodomy and oral sex). Many gay men do not experience any dissonance between a masculine gender identity and engaging in same-sex behaviour (Gil, 2007; Nardi, 2000). However, the captors and detainees at Abu Ghraib apparently did experience that dissonance. Kaufman-Osborn, quoting from an Associated Press story, shares the words of Dhia al-Shweiri, who was imprisoned in Abu Ghraib:

They were trying to humiliate us, break our pride. We are men. It’s okay if they beat me. Beatings don’t hurt us, it’s just a blow. But no one would want their manhood to be shattered. They wanted us to feel as though we were women, the way women feel, and this is the worst insult, to feel like a woman. (Kaufman-Osborn, 2007: 157–8).

Kaufman-Osborn also argued that the American perpetrators, in creating these particular forms of humiliation and degradation, drew from their own experiences of homophobic and feminizing hazing experienced in military training.<sup>2</sup> Both prisoner and guard, then, shared an understanding of male homosexuality that stripped masculinity, and imposed femininity, on the participants. To a large extent, the humiliation of the simulated acts derives from this feminization.

Other sexualized abuses included forcing detainees to assume demeaning and sexualized positions such as posing on hands and knees while wearing a dog leash. Similar abuses against prisoners in Guantánamo (Huskey, 2007) and Bagram, Afghanistan, (Golden, 2005) have come to light, with one prisoner ordered to roll on the ground and kiss the boots of the guards. These humiliating practices can also be read as feminization. They enact a stylized power imbalance, with a sexual overtone. As such, these practices align with the sexualized power imbalance that comprises the prototypical or traditional heterosexual relationship, with man in a dominant or active role and woman in a submissive or passive role (Byers, 1996).

Several points are worth making. First, it is clear that these particular abuses enact both misogyny and homophobia. As such, they are most likely to occur within cultural groups that include both of these elements: groups such as the US military and US culture more broadly. A world in which women were truly seen

as the equals of men might not be free of aggression and torture. But these specific kinds of torture and humiliation, the purpose of which is to turn a man 'into a woman' because that automatically demeans and denigrates him, would not occur.

A second point is that these humiliations wouldn't 'work' (or at least they wouldn't work as well) unless both torturer and victim shared a cultural framework that denigrated women and gay men. To be sure, being stripped naked would likely lead to feelings of vulnerability no matter what the cultural context, and being held at the whim of a brutal captor is a terrifying experience in and of itself. But unless the prisoners shared the belief that it is shameful and humiliating to be associated with anything female, being forced to wear women's underwear or dresses would lose at least some of its power to degrade. Similarly, unless the prisoners shared the belief that having sex with another man is emasculating, participation in simulated homosexual sex acts would not be *especially* humiliating.

Third, it is useful to consider the point of view of a female soldier, embedded within a sexist military system. She will likely have developed strategies, perhaps sophisticated, to mitigate any effects of sexism and misogyny to which she may be subjected (Herbert, 1998). Such strategies might have implications for her interactions with prisoners and for the probability that she will commit abusive acts. Sasson-Levy's (2003) interviews with Israeli women soldiers suggest strategies that might have been used by US women soldiers at Abu Ghraib. Sasson-Levy found that her respondents distanced themselves from traditional femininity (e.g. by ridiculing feminine civilian women), mimicked the behaviour and dress of male combat soldiers, and downplayed the sexual harassment to which they were subjected on a regular basis. In other words, they took on, at least to some extent, a masculine identity. The abusive behaviour of female perpetrators at Abu Ghraib may have sprung, in part, from similar motives. Becoming 'one of the guys' has many benefits to a woman in the military, not the least of which is that it minimizes the chance that she will be seen as a sexual object. Given that sexual assault by a fellow soldier is a real risk for women serving in the US military,<sup>3</sup> being perceived as masculine or asexual might have many benefits.<sup>4</sup>

A final point of interest is that feminization of prisoners was part of the SPE as well. The experimenters dictated that the prisoners wear 'loosely fitting muslin smocks . . . No underclothes were worn beneath these "dresses"' (Haney et al., 1973: 75). This uniform was deliberately chosen in order to feminize the prisoners – the garments 'forced them to assume unfamiliar postures, more like those of a woman than a man – another part of the emasculating process of becoming a prisoner' (Haney et al., 1973: 76).

#### CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER SOCIAL ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE TO WOMEN

One useful aspect of feminist and other critical theorizing is that it encourages us to turn questions on their head. Most analyses of Abu Ghraib have used other



domains, theories, and activities to shed light on the events that occurred there – in effect, using what we know from other domains to help us understand the abuses at Abu Ghraib. It is equally useful, however, to ask whether the events at Abu Ghraib might help us understand other activities, problems, or issues, especially those that have relevance for women. Two such issues are fraternity culture and pornography.

### *Fraternity Culture*

Shortly after the photographs were released, popular conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh and a caller pointed out similarities between Abu Ghraib and fraternity hazings (Limbaugh, 2004a):<sup>5</sup>

- Caller: It was like a college fraternity prank that stacked up naked men –  
Limbaugh: Exactly. Exactly my point! This is no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation and we're going to ruin people's lives over it and we're going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them because they had a good time. You know, these people are being fired at every day. I'm talking about people having a good time, these people, you ever heard of emotional release? You ever heard of a need to blow some steam off?

Several months later, Limbaugh again equated Abu Ghraib and hazing, saying that what Lynndie England and other soldiers did at Abu Ghraib was 'sort of like hazing, a fraternity prank. Sort of like that kind of fun' (Limbaugh, 2004c). Former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who referred to the perpetrators of the abuses as 'Animal House on the night shift' (Danner, 2004: 28), also made an implicit comparison between fraternity culture (as represented in the film *National Lampoon's Animal House* [Landis, 1978]) and Abu Ghraib.

There are, of course, obvious and fundamental differences between torture and fraternity (and other types of 'initiation' – e.g. into the military or an athletic team) hazing. Hazing happens during a brief and well-defined period of time (Nuwer, 2004). Torture of military or political prisoners can continue for months or years. In fact, part of the psychological torment is the open-ended nature of the prisoner's incarceration and victimization – the abuse is seemingly unending. Hazing also involves no deliberate danger of death or serious physical injury. Although death or injury occasionally occur, they are unintended consequences, and ones that are considered regrettable by all participants (Nuwer, 2004). This contrasts markedly with torture. Here, although the infliction of permanent injury or death might not be the predominant goal (causing fear or pain, or obtaining information might be primary), there may be little regret if injury or death do occur. Most importantly, the pledge (the man attempting to join the fraternity) consents to participate in hazing. Even if he is driven by a need for acceptance that is so strong that it leads to poor decision making, there is no comparison with the experience of a torture victim, who is held captive and has never given consent. Even the most minimal exposure to the stories of real torture victims (Ortiz

and Davis, 2002; Partnoy, 1998) or their loved ones (Harbury, 1999) makes clear that Limbaugh and his caller trivialized one of the most horrific and traumatizing experiences to which human beings can be subjected.

With that said, however, it is difficult to deny that if the Abu Ghraib photographs were to be stripped from their context and approached more superficially and visually there is, in fact, an eerie similarity between them and what often occurs in fraternity hazing. Such hazing may involve forced nudity, simulated homosexuality, or being placed in humiliating or degrading positions. It can include physical pain or punishment, being hooded, blindfolded, bound or placed in settings where movement is restricted, or being subjected to sleep deprivation (Nuwer, 2004).

Hazing and torture also have deeper connections. Although some of the underlying goals are different, some are identical. Both hazing and torture seek to humiliate the pledges or detainees, to break them down physically or psychologically. Both also clearly involve a power hierarchy, and one that can be difficult to challenge. Finally, many of the specific activities (e.g. actual or simulated homosexual acts, wearing women's clothing) depend on feminization of the pledges or detainees to accomplish the goal of humiliation.

In making an analogy between torture and hazing, Limbaugh and his caller are advancing a particular argument. The argument is that, because the two are similar and because we know that fraternity hazing is neither morally wrong nor harmful, we can conclude that the events at Abu Ghraib also fall within the bounds of what is acceptable. But a feminist analysis turns this argument around. This new argument acknowledges the similarities between the Abu Ghraib torture and fraternity hazing. However, the argument-by-analogy is reversed. Because the two situations are similar and because the extent of psychological and physical harm that results from torture has been well documented (Gerrity et al. 2001; Mollica, 2004), we must ask whether hazing rituals involving humiliation and physical pain and punishment will also negatively impact participants both physically (Finkel, 2002) and psychologically. Such effects may be long-lasting. Furthermore, the relative clarity of the misogyny and homophobia inherent in many of the Abu Ghraib abuses can help us to more fully recognize the misogyny and homophobia inherent in the analogous fraternity hazing rituals. Rather than discounting the harm of Abu Ghraib, a comparison with hazing leads to a fuller appreciation of the harm that may result from it.

More broadly, this comparison can help us to see more clearly the damage that is done by rituals (whether consensual or not) that systematically reinforce the inferiority and denigration of women. Being a member of a fraternity is a risk factor for perpetrating rape and sexual assault (Sanday, 1990). Hazing rituals that humiliate initiates by feminizing them reinforce masculine culture – one that disrespects women and in its most extreme expression results in aggression against women.

### *Pornography*

The photographs from Abu Ghraib are also eerily similar to pornographic fare in which women are posed in humiliating positions for the amusement and sexual pleasure of others (Dworkin, 1981). As a group, women who appear in pornography have more in common with the Abu Ghraib prisoners than do fraternity pledges – some of them are subjected to repeated physical violence and sexual assault, some of them are being held against their will, some of them will end up dead (MacKinnon, 1993; Steinem, 1995[1983]). A parallel analysis with fraternity hazing is nevertheless appropriate. Pornography is seen by many as harmless (Assiter and Carol, 1993). Even some feminist scholars (e.g. Brison, 2004) are sceptical of the evidence that pornography, especially violent pornography, is a risk factor for sexual aggression perpetration (for a review of this evidence, see Oddone-Paolucci et al., 2000). Rush Limbaugh tells us that the Abu Ghraib photographs ‘look like standard good old American pornography, the Britney Spears or Madonna concerts or whatever’ (Limbaugh, 2004b), thus naturalizing and trivializing the abuses as he simultaneously naturalizes and trivializes the experiences of pornography models by comparing them to the experiences of extraordinarily well-paid pop stars. As with his comments about fraternity hazings, the implicit argument is that because the Abu Ghraib photographs are reminiscent of pornography and because pornography is harmless, the abuses at Abu Ghraib are also harmless. Again, however, it is instructive to turn this argument around. Because we know that great harm was inflicted in Abu Ghraib, the similarities between those actions and the ones portrayed in pornography should lead to scepticism concerning the claim that pornography is harmless (a claim that has been attacked by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, among others; Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1998).

Soon after the Abu Ghraib story broke, I became convinced that the photographs of sexualized abuse inspired more horror, heartsickness, and outrage in most Americans than did the other photographs, including the now iconic image of a hooded man standing on a box in the ‘crucifixion’ position. For example, when a reporter asked Senator John McCain to compare Abu Ghraib with the torture that he experienced while a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, his answer (‘I was never subjected to sexual humiliation and degradation’; Stolberg, 2004: A19) focused on the sexualized nature of the Abu Ghraib torture and seemed to imply that it was, at least in some respects, worse than the brutal physical torture that he had experienced. A comment posted to the San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center web page is also illustrative:

Strange as it may sound, I would have less hatred for these sick soldiers if they actually had only electrocuted and beat the prisoners. The revolting amusement and glee they seem to have derived from making hardcore homosexual rape and humiliation porn seems so much more disturbing than just plain old pain inducement. (Knox, 2004)

Indeed, this sentiment does seem strange because pain (e.g. being beaten or forced to hold extremely uncomfortable stress positions), death (e.g. the picture of a dead man wrapped in plastic), the fear of pain or death (e.g. being threatened with attack dogs, the threat of electrocution that is inherent in the hooded man/crucifixion photograph) are arguably worse than nudity, even if the nudity is accompanied by humiliation and even if it violates a sacred tenet of one's religion. I believe that the nausea and outrage that comprised our collective response to the pictures of sexual humiliation occurred because sexual humiliation such as this is deeply and fundamentally dehumanizing. It is a severe insult to dignity, humanity, and autonomy, and our emotional reaction to photographs of it occurred because, in a very primal way, we recognized this truth.

It is telling that many people do not experience these same strong reactions when looking at pornography, which is, in terms of its visual imagery, sometimes almost identical. Shock and repulsion is, for many people, absent; instead, excitement and sexual arousal are experienced. Partly, this may stem from the belief that the women depicted in pornography enjoy the experience and are, themselves, sexually aroused. Another explanation for this absence of negative affective reactions concerns desensitization. Because such images are so common in pornography (and less explicit versions are common in other media such as television programmes, films, music videos, billboards, and magazine advertisements (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007), it is likely that we have become habituated and desensitized to them (Krafka et al., 1997; Linz et al., 1988; Mullin and Linz, 1995). I would argue that the primary emotional reaction has been short-circuited because we have been flooded, literally for years, with similar images.

Brisson's (2004) analysis on the connections between Abu Ghraib and pornography is instructive. She argues that even if black men consented to pose for 'humorous' or 'amusing' lynching photos, most Americans alive today would still be sickened by them. But, I would argue, this would not be the case if such pictures were sold on every street corner, featured frequently in television programmes and films, and were a common theme in advertisements. Under those circumstances, we would likely habituate to the images and they would lose much of their power to shock.

Because of the ubiquity of images portraying the sexual humiliation and degradation of women, many of us are jaded. Abu Ghraib helped us see sexual humiliation with fresh eyes, and we were horrified by it. If we now turn our attention to similar images prevalent in pornography, and view them with fresh and newly resensitized vision, I believe we will be equally horrified by what we see there.

The second point concerning fraternity culture (mentioned earlier) is also relevant in a consideration of pornography. Just as misogynistic fraternity hazing rituals likely contribute to the increased risk that women will be raped by men in that fraternity (Sanday, 1990), so too the misogynistic Abu Ghraib torture practices may make the rape of female soldiers by their male comrades (Aguilera et al., 2003; Corbett, 2007) more likely. These practices perpetuate a sense that

women are fundamentally 'other', and that anything related to them is tainted. Also, at the same time that it denigrates male Iraqi prisoners by feminizing them, it denigrates women and all things feminine by associating them with the dehumanized enemy. Of course, this is not to suggest that the hypothetical future rape of a female American soldier that is (perhaps) made more likely by the actual torture of an Iraqi man is more serious than the torture of that man. Rather, my point is that there is a complex network of potential consequences of the act of torture (consequences for perpetrators as well as victims), some of which would not be apparent without viewing this act through a feminist lens.

#### PREVENTION: HOW CAN WE KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING AGAIN?

Both popular press and scholarly psychological analyses have provided suggestions for prevention. If, indeed, it is only a few 'bad apples' who could commit such heinous acts, then prevention should be focused on identifying these deviants, preventing them from holding positions of authority that might provide them with the latitude to commit such actions, and punishing them if they somehow slip through the cracks and end up committing torture and abuse. This approach is utilized in some domestic prisons. For example, MacDonald (2004) reported that applicants for prison guard positions in Maryland are screened for sadistic tendencies. Furthermore, the main response by the Bush administration to the revelations of torture was to promise that the (deviant) American soldiers guilty of perpetrating the abuses pictured in the photographs would be punished (Milbank, 2004).

Because some risk factors for the commission of violence have been identified, the strategy of screening people for suitability as prison guards might be effective. For example, people who were physically abused as children are more likely to be abusive themselves as adults (Widom, 2000) and extensive viewing of violent media (e.g. television programmes) by children is a well-established risk factor for adult aggressive behaviour (Anderson et al., 2003). One might argue that either of these histories should be cause for exclusion from assignment to any duty that would involve control over military or civilian prisoners. However, the experience of socialization into the military might also put one at risk for the commission of non-sanctioned violence (Bouffard, 2005; Marshall et al., 2005; Merrill et al., 2005), and it is not possible to exclude all military personnel from guard duty. Screening strategies thus have obvious limitations.

The social psychological perspective focuses on situational aspects of the prison domain and has a better chance of success. In their discussion of the implications of the SPE for US prison policy and procedures, Haney and Zimbardo (1998) recommended that because the powerful dynamics inherent in any prison situation may be difficult to resist, we should minimize our use of prisons and attempt to develop alternatives to incarceration. For those prisons that do exist, it is crucial to have external oversight, because guards and supervisors within the

prison system are unlikely to be able to clearly see or acknowledge abuses as they begin to happen (Reicher and Haslam [2004] make a similar point). Applying these recommendations to Iraq would lead to several suggestions. First, it would mean limiting incarceration to a small number of people who are verified to be dangerous, rather than conducting large sweeps of sections of the city and incarcerating everyone, as was apparently done regularly in what was referred to as 'cordon and capture' (Danner, 2004). It would also mean ensuring that independent outside agencies such as the International Red Cross and Amnesty International have full access to facilities in order to inspect them and monitor all activities.

Fiske et al. (2004) proposed a different approach, asking us to consider how we might create conditions that would allow for those *inside* the system to report problems. Recalling the findings of both Asch (1955) and Milgram (1974), they noted that the presence of even one dissenter makes it more likely that others will follow their own internal moral codes rather than participate in an immoral action. Their recommendation is that institutions should 'encourage dissenting opinions' (Fiske et al., 2004: 1483). Moreover, given that dehumanization is important in the processes leading to the perpetration of atrocities, anything that increases connection with the prisoner/enemy and fosters viewing him or her as a person will make such atrocities less likely. Fiske et al. state 'it would be harder to dehumanize and abuse imprisoned Iraqis if one had friends among ordinary Iraqis' (2004: 1483). This recommendation is supported by other psychological research that has demonstrated that a lack of empathy is implicated in aggression perpetration more generally (Miller and Eisenberg, 1988). Thus, training programmes to increase empathy and perspective taking might make future Abu Ghraibs less likely.

#### KILL BUT DON'T TORTURE: THE FUNDAMENTAL CONTRADICTION OF MILITARY SOCIALIZATION

These recommendations are based on solid social science research and probably can be used to minimize the likelihood of future such abuses. However, they fail to articulate an important point – that the goal of preventing the perpetration of torture and other atrocities may be fundamentally at odds with the goal of waging and winning wars. Because of this underlying conflict, virtually every socialization process that could lead to a decreased likelihood of committing torture, genocide, or other atrocities has a downside for the military. For example, we know that deindividuation (making people feel that they're not individuals any more, they are just part of a larger group or system) leads to greater and more frequent aggression (Prentice-Dunn and Spivey, 1986). However, some amount of deindividuation is necessary to enable the military machine to move quickly and efficiently. Similarly, the articulation of dissenting opinions must be minimized because, in the midst of a battle, even minor dissent could prove fatal

to the entire unit. Change to the military socialization process that makes it easier for individuals to stand up to a commanding officer and refuse to obey an immoral order would also make it much more difficult for a strict hierarchical organization like the military to function.

A similar paradox applies when considering empathy and resisting the dehumanization of the enemy. Empathy is explicitly 'de-socialized' in military training (Cortright, 2006; Pershing, 2006) because it could be life-threatening in a combat situation. Hazing and humiliation are part of basic training (Pershing, 2006; Snyder, 2003) and empathy toward the enemy during actual deployment is often ridiculed (Mejía, 2007). Thus, good soldiers do not feel empathy (or, at least, they can turn off their empathy at crucial moments). Socialization that makes soldiers sickened by torture and unable to participate in it will also make it more difficult for them to kill enemy combatants. Dehumanization of the enemy may be necessary in order to overcome the strong inhibition against killing another person. If soldiers are trained to honour and respect the humanity of the enemy, it will likely make them less efficient killers and, therefore, less effective soldiers.

This, then, is a fundamental contradiction faced by any military power that is committed to waging a 'just war' (Roblyer, 2005). Sets of conventions for military personnel to follow (e.g. the Geneva Conventions, the code of honour of traditional Japanese samurai warriors) are attempts to resolve that fundamental contradiction by setting rules to try to keep in check the hostile and aggressive impulses that have been previously encouraged. To say that resolving this fundamental contradiction is a difficult task is an understatement. Whether it is, in the end, an impossible as opposed to merely difficult endeavour remains to be determined.

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#### NOTES

1. In collaboration with the BBC in the UK, Reicher and Haslam (2006) conducted an experiment similar to the SPE. The behaviours exhibited by prisoners and guards in their study were, in many respects, different from those exhibited by the SPE participants. In particular, the guards did not resort to abusive and humiliating practices to

- discipline and control the prisoners. However, Reicher and Haslam's theoretical framework as well as their interpretations of their findings focus heavily on situational and contextual forces. Thus, even though their findings did not exactly replicate the findings of the SPE, and they have a more nuanced and theory-based discussion of why specific contextual forces have the effects they do, Reicher and Haslam's (2006) study can be read as another compelling demonstration of the power of situational forces.
2. Hazing is typically defined as physical, mental, or emotional harassment directed at an individual while he or she is in the process of joining or qualifying to join a group (such as an athletic team, a fraternity, a marching band, or an elite military unit).
  3. Tyson (2005) reported that many units in Iraq require female soldiers to be in the company of a 'battle buddy' in high-risk locations such as the women's showers. Female soldiers stationed in Iraq have indicated that they feared sexual assault from other US soldiers and took precautions such as avoiding running alone or being in the company of a lone man (Harris, 2007). Such fears are not unfounded. In 2006, 1167 US service members reported being sexually assaulted by one or more other US service members (Harris, 2007) and sexual assaults are almost certain to be under-reported (Lee, 2006).
  4. This analysis is not without its complexities, however. Perhaps Lynndie England was trying to protect herself from being the victim of sexual assault by participating in the sexual assault of others, whose status was lower than hers. However, this apparently was not part of a larger project of making herself asexual because she was simultaneously involved in a sexual relationship with fellow reservist Charles Graner.
  5. Rush Limbaugh is a conservative commentator who hosts a daily (Monday to Friday) three-hour call-in radio programme that is carried by over 600 US radio stations (Limbaugh, 2007) and reaches approximately 3.4 million listeners each quarter hour (Stelter, 2007). Limbaugh wields considerable political power because of this large and devoted listener base.

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