

**How could psychology explain atrocious acts towards humans, such as during war times?**

According to the Oxford Dictionary, war is 'a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country'<sup>1</sup>. However, this definition only portrays war as a physical and political struggle. Indeed, those are what make up a political war, but this definition ignores psychology. War should be defined as more of a psychological conflict than a physical one; they all begin through a thinking process that occurs in the minds of the people who declare and participate in it. So what does it take for humanity to commit the inhumane? How do ordinary and law-abiding people suddenly transform into the evillest perpetrators? Perhaps the 'war' that is occurring is the one between the individual and their moral compass. Due to the ubiquity of war, psychology has attempted to explore this idea, postulating that social influence, deindividuation, social identity theory and reduced empathy are all factors eager for the individual to lose their own moral conflict.

The Holocaust is known as the deadliest genocide in history, taking place in World War II. During its aftermath, many of the Nazi soldiers were put on trial for the genocide they contributed to. For example, Adolf Eichmann defended himself by claiming he was only following orders and that he, along with the other Nazis, was 'forced to serve as mere instruments in the hands of leaders'<sup>2</sup>. These events provoked an infamous experiment by Stanley Milgram (1961) that investigated how far people would go to deceive their morals to obey an authority figure. Participants were required to administer electric shocks to a learner if they answered incorrectly, increasing by 15 volts each time, as ordered by an authoritative figure (the experimenter). The participants did not know that the learner was a confederate and the electric shocks were not real, and so were led to believe they were inflicting harm onto a stranger. Shockingly, it was found that 100% of the participants went up to 330V, and 67% went up to the maximum, possibly fatal, 450V. Milgram concluded that although the participants were visibly

disturbed by the learner's shrieks, authority still defeated their conscience, signifying that obedience plays a significant role in regular people committing atrocities against others in war<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, it is possible that perpetrators in war do not feel responsible for their heinous acts. Milgram's experiment suggested the agentic state, which is when the individual hands responsibility entirely to the authority figure, no longer feeling personal responsibility for their actions. It is the opposite of the autonomous state, where the individual believes that the consequences are their responsibility. For example, obedience decreased when the participants in Milgram's experiment were told they were responsible for the outcome. Participants who refused to go on changed their minds when told the experimenter would take responsibility. Thus, people would be more likely to surrender to authority and neglect their morals if they didn't feel responsible, facilitating them to continue inflicting violence upon others.

However, Milgram's experiment only lasted an hour, whereas wars can last years. This means the participants in the experiment had little time to reassess whether their actions aligned with their morals, while perpetrators have ample time for contemplation. Therefore, although the experiment does provide insight into how obedience to authority causes someone to lose their moral conflict, it lacks ecological validity, so it is not entirely accurate to apply it to war in real life.

In war, there are roles such as soldiers and guards that individuals would take on. Possibly it's a combination of the hostile environment of war and the violent role of the soldier that encourages people to act brutally. This notion was explored by Zimbardo, notorious for his Stanford Prison Experiment. 24 male college students, tested mentally stable, were randomly split into two groups: prisoners and guards. The prisoners were arrested, handcuffed, and jailed in a

pseudoprison in the university's basement. To ensure deindividuation, the prisoners were only referred to as numbers, and the guards all wore similar uniforms. Zimbardo found that both groups conformed to their roles: the guards became aggressive and dehumanised the prisoners, while the prisoners were humiliated and helpless from the guards' abuse<sup>4</sup>. The prison environment and the social roles were believed to have caused these behaviours, as none of the guards had exhibited these sadistic behaviours before. This study has implications for the Holocaust and the My Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War— the Nazis and the US Army, who were ordinary law-abiding people, were conforming to their role as soldiers, which overpowered their morality, leading them to contribute to the monstrosities of genocide and mass murder in the violent environment of war.

Nevertheless, the Stanford Prison Experiment's methodology has been criticised heavily. Firstly, the experiment was unethical, as it elicited the prisoners to have alarming emotional breakdowns, subjecting them to psychological harm. Also, Zimbardo had been participating in his own experiment as the prison superintendent, which may have exacerbated the guards' behaviour. In an interview, one guard said he saw the experiment as an 'improv exercise' and based his performance on a stereotypical guard in a film, exemplifying how some guards only acted out their own schemas of a guard— not genuinely adopting the role<sup>5</sup>. This reduces the internal and ecological validity of the findings, making it inaccurate to extrapolate them to soldiers committing mass murders in war, since war is not an acting class.

As previously mentioned, another psychological explanation for the evil of humans in war is deindividuation. Deindividuation refers to anonymity when a person is identified as a group member rather than an individual. Zimbardo explored this concept through an experiment similar to Milgram's with two groups of college women: one group individuated in a bright room

wearing large name tags, and the other group deindividuated by being placed in a dark room wearing hoods. When given a chance to aggress against a victim, the deindividuated women were found to have given longer shocks than the individuated women, as well as not discriminating whether the victims even deserved it<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, Harvard anthropologist R. Watson (1973) concluded in a study that when a group deindividuated themselves by changing their appearance before war, they would be more aggressive towards their victims. 92% of the thirteen cultures that killed, tortured and mutilated victims had changed their appearance prior<sup>7</sup>. An explanation for these results is that due to deindividuation, people are stripped from their identity, so they lose awareness of themselves and their sense of morality. Hence, they would not evaluate the consequences of their actions. As well as explaining the behaviours of the guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment, deindividuation could also be applied to explain the brutality of the US Army during the Vietnam War, as they all wore similar uniforms for their social roles. Therefore, due to the anonymity that deindividuation provides, it defeats the individual's moral compass, playing a role in facilitating violent behaviour towards others in war.

However, deindividuation does not provide a full explanation for the switch from an average 'good' person to evil during war as in many cases, including Yugoslavia, the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, many of the horrific acts inflicted on the victims were by their own neighbours and even close relatives. An explanation for this could lie in Social Identity Theory<sup>8</sup>. Social Identity Theory posits that group membership significantly contributes to our concept of who we are, i.e. the groups we identify with and the groups we don't identify with. The theory's social comparison stage is crucial to understanding prejudice as comparison between groups can lead to competition, which can then lead to antagonism, intensifying the prejudice one group can have for the other. In more severe circumstances, prejudice is the prerequisite for genocide: Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda, Nazis and the Jews in the Holocaust, and the Bosniaks and the

Serbs in Yugoslavia. In all of these examples, the perpetrators had a deep animosity towards the other group, which was rooted in prejudice. On the contrary, there have been cases of people from the perpetrating group who risked their lives protecting the victims, winning their moral conflict. Thus, social identity theory does not fully explain why people commit the terrors they do to others in war.

Perhaps the perpetrators' shift from moral to cruel during war is due to reduced empathy. For example, there is neuroimaging research displaying that people in their own labelled groups, on average, feel a diminished empathy response for a member of an out-group's pain<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, neurosurgeon Itzhak Fried proposed 'Syndrome E'<sup>10</sup> when the subcortex (involved in emotions and empathy) is no longer involved in decision-making which manifests as diminished emotional reactivity to the suffering of the out-group. A lack of empathy means perpetrators would be indifferent to the victims' pain, resulting in moral disengagement and consequently continuing violence towards them. However, studies have contradicted the prospect that empathy is linked with morality, as it was observed that participants who were induced to feel empathy were more likely to violate a principle of justice than participants who were not<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, empathy and morality are two different motives with different goals, suggesting that reduced empathy may not have a significant role in losing the moral conflict to commit atrocities against others during war.

In conclusion, psychology can explain how obedience to authority, conformity to social roles, social identity theory, and Syndrome E can corrupt a person's conscience, rendering their moral compass defeated as they commit atrocious acts towards others during war. However, this is only to a certain extent. This is because it is inevitable for a psychological study to have some form of limitations since some of the aforementioned experiments broke severe ethical guidelines, and as

a result, would not be replicated today. Despite this, it would not be possible to conduct a psychological experiment to thoroughly and accurately investigate the darkness of human acts without it lacking ecological validity or becoming highly unethical.

## **References**

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