

Abu ghraib prison



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The atrocities that were practiced at the Abu Ghraib prison show complex group behavior among the guards. The norms for treating the prisoners inhumanly were accepted and enforced. Every guard was expected to conform to the aggressive stance. The leadership of the group was in the hands of Gen. Janis Karpinski and he was no leader. Groupthink dominated the guards who believed that they were right in their nastiness and were untouchable. Most importantly, external conditions were so created that the guards took to rough treatment as a routine.

According to Professor Zimbardo military prisons in Iraq offer an environment where the balance of power is so unequal that even ordinary people without any past psychological troubles can become atrocious and abusive unless there are measures taken by the military top brass to control their aggression. In case of Iraqi prisoners and their guards there were two groups, the guards and the prisoners. The group of guards in absence of specific rules developed a set of norms in which being abusive and brutal towards the soldiers was the accepted norm.

The norms that developed in the background of ambiguity were that prisoners could be abused, physically beaten up and tortured so that they accede to the discipline imposed by the soldiers. The norms were not built by sanctions from the top but emerged from ambiguous suggestions made by the intelligence that the prisoners should be softened up for interrogation. To make it worse, even though the soldiers as a group had control over the other group that is the prisoners there were unprecedented disparity in the levels of power.

The soldiers confirmed to the group mentality that it was correct that they should abuse the prisoners. There were several cues given to them that such behavior was socially acceptable and expected of them, the most notable being that a military or civil contract interrogator an authority figure asking the military police to “ set conditions” for interrogation. . In a way group goals were set for the military police to be vicious with the prisoners. The soldiers were confirming with the culture that had been created and were aligning with similar people.

The survival conditions were tough for the soldiers; they were working in difficult conditions and could be gunned down by insurgents any time. So they complied and confirmed with the requests of the interrogators (Danner. M, Ehrenreich. B & Strauss. D, 2005),. Who were the reference groups of the soldiers at Abu Ghraib? The reference groups were the interrogators and Gen. Janis Karpinski. The reference groups actually gave them permission to do whatever they want. Karpinski only occasionally visited the prison.

On the other hand the interrogators gave vague instructions that the soldiers should prepare the prisoners for interrogation. The aspiration giving Karpinski was missing and the membership reference group that is the interrogators was asking for ‘ setting the right conditions’. The guards at Abu Ghraib accepted the message and acted. At Abu Ghraib there were symptoms of groupthink among the guards. The guards felt invulnerable, those that were involved in viciousness felt so unassailable that they took pictures of the atrocities that they were committing.

Moreover, the guards felt that they were morally right in carrying out the brutality. They never thought about the ethical implications of their actions. Further, the guards treated the prisoners as an out-group because they spoke different languages and were not Americans. These aliens were perceived to be less than human beings. The different culture of the prisoners made them even more deserving of the vindictiveness. Those guards that did not get tough were warned and even ridiculed. This exerted pressure on other guards also to produce results.

Even those who had doubts about the torture did not express their opinions. Most importantly, the outrages were perpetrated by entire group of guards. There was unanimity in their violence and cruelty. The members of the guard group do not appear to have reconsidered their assumptions about torturing the prisoners or interrogating them. The external conditions imposed on these guards were that they were neither provided proper training for supervising internment nor were they provided with any standard procedures.

In addition, they were out in a foreign country for much longer time than what they had imagined (Lewis. A, Greenberg. K & Dratel, J 2005). These conditions created a situation ripe for the atrocities that were carried out. Further, there were other insecurities in the form of guerilla attacks that could kill or maim them. Working conditions were so bad that the army had shortage even of barbershop. What directly impacted these guards was that lapses of army rules and procedures were not hauled up and punished.

They felt safe and confident that they will not be punished for their evil actions. The final external factor was the equivocal request from the interrogators that proper conditions were set for interrogation. The one external factor that precipitated these conditions by its absence was utter lack of leadership and care by Karpinski. To sum, the conditions described by Dr. Zimbardo were all present at Abu Ghraib and the inevitable happened. The sadism that took place at Abu Ghraib was a reaction to the atrocious conditions that prevailed in Iraq at that time.