The Historical Influence of Obedience vs. Rebellion on Crime

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# Rationale

The history of man is riddled with many dark episodes of people committing crimes against their fellow humans. These crimes have ranged from simple acts such as stealing and rape to much more horrific crimes including mutilation, murder an even genocide. The purpose of this research article is to analyze the causes of the far more hideous crimes that man has committed in history with a bid to determine whether obedience or rebellion has been the main motivating factor behind them. This analysis will be done with respect to concepts such as obedience to authority, stereotyping, prejudice, de-humanization, and the effects of different emotions on the human psyche.

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# Introduction

The term “crime” is often used to describe an action or activity that results in bringing harm to an individual, a society or a state and is considered an offence by the state or community within which it occurs. Crime has existed in human society since time immemorial, and even religious texts from different faiths such as the Bible and the Quran have documented the occurrence of crime in history. Some crimes such as rape, theft and murder are condemned universally in almost all societies around the world, but this fact never stops some wayward individuals from committing them. The occurrence of crime is in fact so common that it is viewed as part of the existence of man. However, some instances of crime occur in such large scales or are so horrific that they are considered to have scarred the essence of humanity itself. Mass killings, torture, genocide and other serious crimes have also made their mark in human history and have been responsible for the deaths and anguish of millions of human beings throughout time.

There has been a lot of debate concerned with whether these serious crimes have been more influenced by obedience or rebellion. Snow states that “When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion (Zimbardo, 2007).” The purpose of this article is to research in detail the factors that contributed to the perpetration of the far more hideous crimes that man has committed in history with a bid to determine whether obedience or rebellion has been the main motivating factor behind them.

# Main Arguments

## Obedience to Authority

Many of the worst crimes in history have been committed by individuals or groups of people responding to the orders given to them by their leaders or others who hold a higher office to them. Soldiers, extremist fundamentals and even people of faith have committed hideous crimes while in obedience of kings, popes and political leaders as well. Owens, Su, & Snow (2013) point out that mass killings and genocide can be said to emanate from five core processes. The first one is micro-level process of the state and its institutions. The second process entails the involvement of policy decisions and political elites. The third factor is non-elite perpetrator motivation. The fourth process is victim group identity that arises out of social construction. The last causative factor is regional and local variation that occurs in the context of larger episodes.

During the twenty first century, episodes of mass killings and genocide have not shown signs of subsiding despite efforts to create global organizations with the core mandate of promoting international peace and stability (Jones, 2010). In historical research, many efforts have been made to compare the mass atrocities and killings of the twentieth century and those that have occurred throughout the history of humankind. In these efforts, it is evident that episodes of genocide are holistic events whose origin or causative factors can be analyzed and understood in greater depth. Moreover, such studies create a better conceptualization of hideous crimes as a social phenomenon.

In many instances, the crimes have been committed in circumstances where the perpetrators claimed to be obeying the authority. In such cases, the killings took the form of a continuum in terms of organization. State-directed violence has in many cases led to the death of many innocent civilians. States that perpetuate this violence give various reasons to justify their actions. They victimize certain communities as a way of creating avenues through which they can be discriminated against on the basis of their race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or social class. In many situations, those who oversee the mass killings tend to be members of top echelons of government, who insist that they are simply acting on the instructions of the head of state.

Zimbardo (2007) argues that any good person has the potential to turn evil if exposed to the need to demonstrate obedience to an authority. According to Zimbardo, the most hideous crimes were committed by good people who used political, religious, and ideological justification to turn against fellow human beings. To demonstrate how this happens, Zimbardo uses the notions of Power of Disposition, Power of Situation, and Power of System through a comparative discussion to demonstrate how humankind ended up committing some of the worst crimes in history.

## De-humanization

It is only possible for individuals and groups who commit such kinds of crimes to do so because they have undergone a de-humanization process that has led them to lose their respect for human life and suffering. Once they lose this respect for life, they gain the ability to perpetrate these crimes without remorse or empathy for their fellow humans. Many of these individuals go through such processes as a direct result of having to follow orders from their superiors, for examples soldiers.

The explanation provided for dehumanization by Harris & Fiske (2011) is very important for this paper. Harris and Fiske adopt a psychological perspective to explain how dehumanized perception provides the ideal state of mind for a person to facilitate inhumane acts such as murder, torture, mass killings, and genocide. Ordinarily, any human being uses social cognition to recognize the other human being as someone who should be subjected to moral treatment. For the minds of a certain group to be dehumanized, they must be trained on how not to think about the wellbeing of another group (Perez, 2012). This is done simply by disengaging this social cognition of the group. This way, the perpetrators of hatred seek to extend the borders of the groups that are traditionally dehumanized such as drug addicts and homeless persons. Those who perpetrate atrocities rarely pause to think about a day in the lives of their victims just in the same way that an ordinary person rarely pauses to think about a day in the life of a homeless person or a drug addict.

Savage (2013) argues that throughout history, dehumanization has played a critical role in the perpetration of genocide. Savage (2013) attempts to answer the question of why genocide manifests, an issue he contends has persistently been avoided in scholarly discussions. Moreover, a lot needs to be done to determine whether dehumanization occurs in all cases and the specific role it plays (Savage, 2013). Unless these questions are answered, the usefulness of the concept of dehumanization may be undermined. In Savage’s view, a novel model of dehumanization best explains why genocide occurs. In this model, Savage attempts to provide a definition dehumanization that easily cuts across all disciplines.

As the debate on dehumanization rages, many concerns are being raised on the ways in which it continues to manifest in the modern society. With the rise of the state, perceptions of legitimate violence have changed. Efforts are also being made to change the initial paradigm of placing perpetrators into various categories. According to Hagan (2008), those who perpetuate dehumanization use it to achieve two core functions: legitimization and motivation. At the beginning, the motivation function may lead to non-genocidal practices. However, as time goes, the wave of dehumanization may gain a life of its own, leading to extreme levels of obedience to authority by entire populations, leading to genocide.

To mobilize many people, perpetrators have mainly been targeting state machinery. For example, the armed forces can easily be dehumanized before being directed to commit atrocity crimes. Similarly, many perpetrators of hideous crimes have traditionally used religion as a platform for directing hatred towards certain communities. The strategy involves efforts to describe the religion of a certain group as being inferior. With time, the people being targeted for dehumanized are “trained” to view the target group to be less human by virtue of their religious convictions. This strategy creates a platform for animosity, religious wars, and mass killings.

In recent times, the Darfur genocide provides an excellent example of how a state can promote a dehumanization process with a view to commit atrocities against a population (Hagan, 2008). The Sudanese forces have been joining hands with the Janjaweed militia to launch deadly attacks against black African settlements. This genocide has attracted the attention of the International Criminal Court (ICC) which has gone ahead to issue a warrant of arrest for Sudanese president Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir. The ICC considers Al Bashir as a prime suspect in the perpetration of crimes against humanity in the Darfur region. Hagan (2008) rejects the popular notion of counterinsurgency as an explanation for the ongoing Darfur genocide. In Hagan’s view, the genocide has taken the form of organized terror that is founded on an elaborate, state-sponsored process of dehumanization.

The recent war on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan has also triggered concerns that the US, the UK, and their allies may have constructed the image of the “enemy” through the media (Steuter, 2009). These concerns were reinforced by the heartless and careless manner in which the US-led forces invaded Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, in Canada, dominant media discourse dwelt too much on efforts to create the impression that Iraq and Afghanistan were “enemy states” (Steuter, 2009). Steuter (2009) observes that the Canadian media used a dehumanizing language and applied it Muslim and Arab citizens in general and “enemy leaders” of Iraq and Afghanistan in particular. In this language, animal imagery was used, whereby the actions of these leaders were equated to sub-human behaviours.

By repeatedly using animal metaphors, the motivated representations portrayed are of great ideological significance. The ideological overtones created by these representations become increasingly significant when they are being perpetuated by monopoly media institutions like in the case of Canada. Steuter (2009) warns that such representations could easily have gone beyond empty political rhetoric to set the stage for genocide.

In the distant past, similar dehumanization efforts saw the black people being described as ape-like in the US (Goff & Eberhardt, 2008). Although the black people are no longer being associated with apes, the mental association has persisted. Today, this association is being used to influence the outcomes of the country’s justice system. It continues to influence the occurrences of incidents of violence against African Americans. According to Goff & Eberhardt (2008), news articles written about Whites convicted of capital offences are less likely to contain ape-related language than articles written about Black convicts. On the basis of these findings, one may conclude that historical representations that led to genocides in the past continue to exist today. The worse thing is that these representations go unnoticed. It is therefore not surprising that they tend to be ignored in research on dehumanization. This does not mean that they have lost their ability to cause genocide. Using those representations, governments can trigger a dehumanization process that causes citizens to lose respect for people of a certain origin to trigger genocide. This was demonstrated during the war on terror when Muslims and Arabs were persistently described using animal-like connotations. The objective was to ensure that Iraq and Afghanistan fitted into the prototype of “the enemy” thereby justifying the US led invasion of these two sovereign states.

## The Power of Disposition vs. Situation vs. System

Another reason why some people are able to commit such crimes is due to the positioning of power within the society. When some individuals are given power over others, they tend to use this power to abuse their charges as opposed to helping them. This is made even worse when the group without power happens to be a minority within the society as they lack the ability to defend themselves. The mass crimes committed in such situations are usually undertaken by the people with the support of those in positions of power as opposed to rebellious reasons.

Most mass atrocities and genocides occur because of sanctioning by the state. The state acts as the primary participant in these crimes. For example, in the Bosnian genocide, a campaign of ethnic cleansing was being spearheaded by top government officials and military commanders. The top officials knew that their victims constituted a minority and that no one in a position of authority could give them any assistance. Many Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims were killed by Bosnian Serb forces (Owens, Su, & Snow, 2013). In the ethnic cleansing campaign, the atrocities committed included murder, sexual assault, inhuman treatment, unlawful confinement, beating, and torture (Owens, Su, & Snow, 2013). Civilians were deported unlawfully and political leaders of the minority groups were targeted. Many intellectuals and professionals lost their property while numerous places of worship were destroyed. Fortunately, the international community came to the rescue of the victims through a NATO-led humanitarian intervention.

## Hostile imagination

In other cases, a population is intentionally manipulated into developing a hostile demeanour towards another group of people, and eventually this leads to this unknowing population committing unspeakable crimes against the prejudiced minority. The leadership, through propaganda and educating its population, leads the people to believe that false information about the minority to be true, and with time they lose respect for this group of people, essentially allowing them the ability to tolerate hideous crimes being committed against the unfortunate minority (Korstanje, 2013).

According to Slovic, Västfjäll, & Gregory (2012), emotion has persistently been used to influence the masses to get them to either commit mass murders or to tolerate them in society. In situations where a group is being manipulated to commit murders, members of that group are made to believe that the target group poses a threat of economic domination, takeover of employment opportunities, or imposition of a new religion. Conversely, members of the group that is being targeted may be made to believe that they are destined to go through suffering, humiliation, and merciless killings.

# Potential Challenges

Some of these terrible crimes are committed as a result of massive build-up of negative emotions such as anger, fear or hatred. One may argue that the build-up of such emotions is something that cannot be forced on people, and as such the occurrence of crimes such as genocide cannot be said to be a result of obedience but instead rebellion against the status quo. On the other hand, there are simply too many examples in which states have participated in dehumanizing their militaries and populations in order to “empower” them to carry out the most hideous crimes without any deterrence. The challenge in this case is on how to determine which one between rebellion and obedience is responsible for more hideous crimes in the history of humankind.

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