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Local Acts, Global Consequences: A Dynamic Systems Perspective on Torture

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The consequences of extreme forms of interrogation are considered from the perspective of dynamical systems. Because of the self-organizing tendency of systems, a change in a single element of mind or society (e.g., a new belief, course of action, or government policy) holds potential for transforming the larger mental or social system in which the element is embedded. The emergence of new mental and social states is especially likely when factors such as external threat and the necessity for unequivocal action strengthen the positive feedback loops among elements, making them highly responsive to each other. Because torture occurs under such "high-temperature" conditions, it can trigger a series of changes in other elements (thoughts, actions), thereby promoting fundamental changes in individual minds, societal values, and government policies. To halt or reverse this scenario, negative feedback loops among the elements must be introduced so that a change in 1 element is compensated rather than reinforced by changes in other elements. This redirection of the self-organizing tendency of mind and society is difficult but might be accomplished by an effective leader whose policies emphasize humanity, justice, and morality.

Actions, even those behind closed doors, do not exist in isolation. They may be launched as self-contained episodes without consideration of their connections to other actions later in time, but they, in fact, are linked in various ways with the fabric of action possibilities defining the actor and the society in which these possibilities are embedded. A careless lane change on a freeway can produce a chain reaction of automobile crashes, each of which has effects that ripple through the network of friends, relatives, and lawyers of the people involved. An

uncensored comment caught on an open microphone can dash a front-runner's political career and subsequently change the political landscape of a society. An act of abuse perpetrated on an infant can permanently alter the victim's behavior throughout life and the behavior of others with whom he or she comes into contact.

Because of the interconnectedness of human action, there is reason to be concerned about the consequences of drastic forms of interrogation—even when such acts occur behind closed doors and in a remote part of the world. The consequences of torture are felt immediately by those being interrogated, of course, although not in a manner that benefits the interrogators or the public they represent. As documented by others in this special issue, torture is largely ineffective in eliciting accurate information. More often than not, a torture recipient's primary concern is to end the torture—a goal that can be served in a variety of ways that do not require divulging accurate information relevant to the interrogators' concerns. However, the consequences of torture are not limited to the pain and private motives of the recipient, or to the questionable validity and relevance of any information extracted by this approach to interrogation. Indeed, acts of torture can have pernicious effects that ripple through layers of social reality, with profound and unintended implications for social interaction, public policy, cultural values, and international relations.

The link between local acts and global consequences is readily understandable from the perspective of dynamical systems (cf. Nowak & Vallacher, 1998; Vallacher & Nowak, 2007). The dynamical perspective conceptualizes psychological phenomena as systems consisting of elements that interact, often in unpredictable and seemingly chaotic fashion, to produce higher order properties and processes. The elements comprising a system take on specific meanings for different levels of human experience. At the level of the brain, the elements are neurons that interact to produce sensation and cognition (e.g., Tononi & Edelman, 1998). At the level of the mind, the elements are thoughts and feelings that interact over time to produce beliefs and social judgments (e.g., Vallacher, Nowak, & Kaufman, 1994). At the level of groups and social systems, the elements are individuals whose interactions with one another forge a shared reality in the form of public opinion, fads, and political ideology (e.g., Nowak, Szamrej, & Latané, 1990). At each level of experience, local influences among the interacting elements—neurons, thoughts, individuals—promote the emergence of new phenomena that do not reside in the elements themselves (e.g., Holland, 1995; Johnson, 2001).

Research within the dynamical perspective has revealed that change in a single element can promote wholesale change in the larger system as the elements interact to re-establish a coherent collective state. A new piece of relevant information can launch a trajectory of thoughts that ultimately prompts a dramatic change in a person's political attitude, a new person in a group can transform the dynamics of social interaction and promote the emergence of new group norms, and a new gov-

ernment policy can have cascading effects that alter the fundamental attitudes and values defining the society. Because systems at different levels of experience are linked to one another, moreover, a change in an element at any level can promote unintended consequences at all the other levels. Changes in the mental states of interacting individuals, for example, can transform beliefs and practices at the societal level (Nowak & Vallacher, 2001); such transformations, in turn, can impinge on the society's relations with other societies (Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2007).

The potential for such cross-level effects is especially likely when the *temperature* of the embedded systems is high. In human systems, temperature refers to the overall energy, threat, or stress experienced by individuals, groups, and societies. During times of war or political turmoil, for example, the feedback loops among individuals and groups are strengthened so that each person or group is highly responsive to the actions of other people and groups. With strong connections (mutual feedback) among elements, the overall system is likely to display sudden and dramatic (nonlinear) changes in response to seemingly self-contained events (Nowak & Vallacher, 2001). A new social policy or practice that might have limited impact in times of normalcy can trigger a series of changes that ripple through the entire society when the society's temperature is high.

It is against this backdrop that one should consider the short- and long-term implications of a practice that is linked to fundamental beliefs and values. The use of torture to extract confessions from enemy combatants is a case in point. This practice is perceived by many to be an effective means of gaining useful information that could not be obtained through non-coercive means (see Janoff-Bulman, this issue). Aside from abundant evidence that this lay assumption is wrong—indeed, torture is demonstrably *less* effective than other means (see Arrigo & Bennett, this issue; Arrigo & Wagner, this issue; McCauley, this issue)—the acceptance of torture as a necessary evil can have effects that ripple through other facets of society and undermine relations with other nations.

In particular, because this practice is linked to issues of morality, human dignity, legitimate responses to undesirable behavior, and modes of social influence, it can effectively “reset” a society's orientation in these areas, particularly during high-temperature times (such as war) that amplify the feedback loops among individuals, groups, and issues. When torture is practiced by interrogators and condoned by the larger society, it signals that immoral and inhumane behavior can be justified, that aggression from a person or group in a position of power is a legitimate response to undesirable behavior, and that there are no limits to the social influence strategies that can be employed to achieve a goal. In effect, the use and acceptance of torture signifies that “the end justifies the means,” thereby relinquishing the moral high ground in conflict with those who employ means (e.g., terrorism, suicide bombing, random killing of citizens) deemed repugnant and immoral.

These shifts in values have been demonstrated with respect to the perpetrators of harsh treatment of detainees. In a mock prison setting at Stanford University, for example, Zimbardo (1970) found that well-adjusted college students assigned to the role of prison guard quickly resorted to highly questionable means of controlling students assigned to the role of inmate; more important, they adjusted their attitudes concerning such behavior to make it consistent with their actions. In real-world contexts that endure for extended periods of time, the adjustment of values to match one's behavior could have a pervasive impact not only on the perpetrator, but also on those with whom the perpetrator comes into contact because of the feedback that occurs in social interaction (Nowak et al., 1990).

However, the corrosive impact of extreme forms of interrogation is not confined to the perpetrators and the people with whom they interact. When such behavior is condoned—or passively accepted—by members of the larger society, their system of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs might also be altered to make these mental states compatible with the behavior. Although not directly involved in the administration of torture, a citizen's acceptance of this practice can, because of mutual feedback with other thoughts and feelings, promote dramatic changes in his or her way of thinking about legitimate means of social influence and common humanity. This effect is likely to be strengthened, moreover, by the feedback among individuals in their social interactions. As the altered values percolate through the social system, they create a cultural climate in which yet other measures that heretofore had been considered immoral and illegitimate become accepted and normative. In short, the mutual feedback across levels, from the actions of a few individuals to large-scale social institutions, can transform a society in ways that undermine the very values that separate the society from its enemies.

Systems also have the potential for self-correction. This occurs when positive feedback loops are reversed, functioning instead to promote *negative* feedback among system elements. Rather than amplifying the effects of a particular element, negative feedback serves to dampen an element's impact. A hostile act toward someone, for example, may promote compensatory behavior toward the person (e.g., an apology) on a subsequent occasion rather than another round of hostility. The reversal of feedback loops to contain the ripple effects of a new practice, however, is unlikely to occur under conditions of high temperature because such conditions enhance personal and collective concerns with subjective coherence and certainty. Rather than pushing back against new practices of questionable morality or effectiveness (negative feedback), people and groups in societies under high temperature demonstrate a collapse of complexity and nuance in favor of a single-minded approach to deal with their enemies ("by whatever means necessary"). This approach promotes and, in turn, is reinforced by a global and undifferentiated view of the enemy ("evil").

The use of torture as a means of interrogation exacerbates this process because of its positive feedback loop with societal temperature. Torture may arise as an op-

tion because of high temperature in a society, but once employed, it can promote further increases in the temperature of a system. Indeed, there is reason to believe that torture plays into the hands of terrorists for precisely this reason. Terrorists cannot win a war on the battlefield, but they can achieve a semblance of victory by undermining and transforming the social fabric of the societies they fear and despise. Progress toward this goal is achieved when democratic societies “take the bait” and engage in practices that not only reflect frustration and anger, but also serve to enhance this collective mindset. Ironically, then, the very feature that promotes torture in the first place—high stress and turmoil in a society—is likely to be enhanced rather than reduced by this interrogation strategy.

For negative feedback to contain or reverse the spread of beliefs and values that justify immoral behavior (“might makes right”), the society’s temperature needs to be reduced. This can prove difficult during times of terror and war, but it is not impossible. Systems change from the top-down as well as from the bottom-up. An effective leader, in particular, can introduce new elements—statements and policies that emphasize humanity, justice, and morality—and thereby influence people to rethink their positions concerning these matters. One can hope that this happens sooner rather than later.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Robin R. Vallacher is a professor of psychology at Florida Atlantic University and a research affiliate at the Center for Complex Systems, Warsaw University. His research spans a wide variety of topics in social psychology, from basic principles of social judgment and self-concept to issues in social justice and conflict. In recent years, his work has centered on identifying the invariant dynamic properties underlying these otherwise diverse phenomena.

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