

The Paradox of Repression

and Nonviolent Movements

**Edited by Lester R. Kurtz
and Lee A. Smithey**

With a Foreword by Brian Martin



Syracuse University Press

Copyright © 2018 by Syracuse University Press
Syracuse, New York 13244-5290

All Rights Reserved

First Edition 2018

18 19 20 21 22 23 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

For a listing of books published and distributed by Syracuse University Press, visit www.SyracuseUniversityPress.syr.edu.

ISBN: 978-0-8156-3564-2 (hardcover) 978-0-8156-3582-6 (paperback)
978-0-8156-5429-2 (e-book)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Available from the publisher upon request.

Manufactured in the United States of America

4

The Psychology of Agents of Repression

The Paradox of Defection

RACHEL MACNAIR

Introduction

A major insight of nonviolent resistance is that power is not a physical property that people hold in their hands but is instead a *psychological* experience. If people perceive leaders as legitimate and cooperate with their rule, then the rulers have power, and the system will be strong and stable. If people perceive leaders as illegitimate but nevertheless cooperate for reasons such as fear or apathy, then the rulers still have power, but it will be unstable and weak—vulnerable to resistance whenever that fear or apathy is overcome (Johnstad 2012).

Repression happens when rulers who have not gained the confidence of their populations need to induce more fear. Though being competent at governing and avoiding corruption would be a much more stable way of ensuring the needed cooperation, people who think in terms of repression do not grasp this basic point. They have had positive experiences with getting the behavior they want through fear.

Repression requires police, soldiers, death squads, or similar people to carry it out. If a dictator orders repression and its agents do not follow the orders, then the ruler's power is lost right there, before even considering the reaction of the repressed population. Since police and soldiers are often recruited out of the population and have friends and

family members there, this refusal to follow orders does actually occur at times—especially when there is a trigger, such as a clearly stolen election, signaling that the time has come for those who are prepared to act to do so, knowing that others will act in concert. At other times, police and soldiers will continue to understand themselves to be on the side of order and against the forces of chaos, and this perception will allow them to engage in horrific acts of repression.

The potential for atrocity is especially high when portions of the population disagree with rebels concerning the legitimacy of the rulers or when the agents of repression have property interests they wish to protect. That is to say, some agents sincerely believe in the justice of what they are doing and feel a patriotic duty, while others are corrupt themselves, with no pretense to actual justice. In either case, it is a matter of basic psychology that they will usually rationalize to themselves that they are serving the public good and are entitled to their booty.

There is a practical question for the nonviolent revolution: How can we best encourage these agents of repression to defect and join noncooperation with the ruler? Psychological studies on successful attempts to psychologically disarm agents of repression are hard to come by, but a couple of historical studies illustrate the potential for repression management.

Cascio and Luthans (2013) focused on the experience of Nelson Mandela and several other South African political prisoners, who were held in abusive conditions at Robben Island from the mid-1960s until the end of apartheid in 1991. The authors drew from the prisoners' and guards' accounts, showing that Robben Island changed from a traditionally repressive institution into "one where the positively oriented prisoners disrupted the institution with a resulting climate of learning and transformation that eventually led to freedom and the end of apartheid" (51). The assertively friendly interactions the prisoners offered the guards had their effect.

A study of the 2000 Serbian movement to oust Milosevic and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine looks at how organizers developed strategies to undermine the willingness of the agents of regression to

commit violence against them (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006). There was no major crackdown in these two cases, and the strategies used contributed to that outcome—or perhaps were entirely responsible for it. Military personnel in both cases had lost pay and prestige under the regime, so activists could advocate for better treatment of military personnel and assert that helping the revolution was better serving the country.

To better understand the psychological underpinnings of repression and its management, we will first look at the ways that people can be induced to become agents of repression. Then we will examine the traumatizing impact this actually has on them. These investigations can help us understand the psychology of otherwise puzzling behavior and should offer major insights into how to deal with repression.

Experiments on How to Make Agents of Repression

How do rulers get soldiers, police, and others to engage in repression, and how can those crucial actors be persuaded to defect? Although this aspect of nonviolent resistance is not well researched to date, quite a few experiments deal with punitive or aggressive behavior and offer various insights; moreover, two classic psychological experiments deal more directly with inducing people to become agents of repression. We might think that would be a difficult thing to do in an artificial laboratory experiment, but in both cases, researchers were remarkably effective. Indeed, these kinds of experiments are no longer done as their method poses severe ethical problems.

Milgram Experiments—Destructive Obedience to Authority

In 1963, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram and his colleagues performed a set of experiments that purported to be about learning but actually tested participants' willingness to administer supposed electric shocks to a supposed learner in another room (Milgram 1974; Blass 2000). Participants were told that learners who failed simple tests had to be shocked at levels that started out low but increased in intensity with each wrong answer the learner submitted. Eventually, by design,

there would be no correct answer, and a man in a lab coat would insist to participants that the experiment must continue, and that he would take responsibility for the completion of the tests, including the shocks that were to be administered. The researchers found that solid majorities of American participants, generally over two-thirds, progressed all the way to administering the highest level of shock, despite hearing noises of distress from the “learner” (who was in fact an actor). This set of studies launched one of the major findings of social psychology: even among people who bear no animosity to an immediate other—people who express that they are suffering great tension and who clearly state that they do not want to inflict pain on others—compliance with demands of authority is quite high. No threat or promise of rewards is necessary.

Why did this happen in the Milgram experiments? One reason is that the authority defined reality and what it meant. Another is that the participants had shifted all responsibility to the authority—the man in the lab coat explicitly stated that he was taking responsibility. So in spite of the fact that the participants were the ones administering what they were led to believe were increasingly severe shocks—much to their own dismay, as documented by video—they understood this as something the authority was doing, not something they were doing themselves. Therefore, it was the authority’s responsibility rather than theirs. Finally, they had given their word that they would participate, so they understood nonparticipation as undermining the experiment and going against their word.

Similar experiments went on for years, by many different experimenters in different countries and using several different variations. They revealed little difference between compliance rates for nation, race, culture, class, gender, or how impressive the location of the experiment was. There was no change in the rate of compliance if the “learner” had a heart condition and thus would seem more vulnerable. However, there were some variables that triggered more participants to defect; that is, to refuse to seemingly administer higher levels of shocks:

1. The participants are shown that the “learner” has a contract to be released from the experiment on demand, and the experimenter is breaking the contract when insisting on continuing—*some drop, to 40 percent compliance.*
2. The experimenter calls orders in to participants by phone, not face-to-face—*dramatic drop, 20 percent compliance.*
3. Participants are free to choose the shock level—*very dramatic drop, only 1 in 40 went to maximum.*
4. A second experimenter argues with the first—*all participants stop by time of or soon after argument.*
5. A staged experiment is running at the same time in the same vicinity and in view, in which the participant rebels, thus offering a peer rebellion—*dramatic drop—1 in 10 compliance.*

All of these variations deal with perceptions of the legitimacy of the authority, and all can be applied to nonviolent movements. In real-life terms, the stolen election, or any other situation in which the ruler promised something and then does not deliver, fits the first situation of a contract being broken. The next two permutations, in which the authority is distant or allows participants some choice, can have an impact on the ordinary officer in a civil resistance situation where he or she is receiving commands from a distance. Of course, if they are in a death squad that operates with considerable autonomy, where both conditions apply, they may have been selected because they are among the 5–20 percent who comply in any event.

What about when two authorities argue with each other? If, say, the church or a large group of Buddhist monks or an out-of-country mullah argues with the government, then the government can lose its monopoly on legitimacy and the authority to compel compliance of the public without direct violence. In such cases, authorities may feel forced to order repression and violence, but then they may also lose the authority to compel their agents to repress challengers. In those cases, the population, police, and soldiers may take sides over which authority they prefer and find they prefer the nongovernmental one. In any event, when framing conflicts with significant movements of

people, the nonviolent opposition is well-advised to find authoritative people whom police or soldiers respect. The real-world application would seem rather obvious: if one entity that is seen as an authority is a problem, then invite another entity with authority to counter the problem.

In the “peer rebellion” variation, noncompliance with the experimenter was increased by a role model of noncompliance. Police and soldiers in similar circumstances might be inclined to continue to do as they are told, but if they find themselves in a minority, the noncompliance from others in their group can have a significant impact on them as well.

The Stanford Prison Experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted in 1971 by Phil Zimbardo, Craig Haney, and other colleagues, generated further well-accepted psychological principles that promise to shed light on the study of repression and its management. In this laboratory experiment, a simulated prison, designed to last two weeks, offered an arguably more realistic simulation of what agents of repression would be expected to do. In some ways, it was the opposite of the Milgram experiment. Instead of the experimenters encouraging more aggression, they tried to hold it in check. There was no deception. An institution—the jail and all of its personnel—rather than an individual, served as the critical source of authority.

However, the study had to be called off after only six days when the researchers came to understand that they had themselves become caught up in an abusive and destructive group dynamic. All participants were college students, screened to fall within normal psychological parameters and assigned randomly to prisoner or guard roles. Yet vast personality changes developed. Those playing the role of guards became cruel. Those playing prisoners became inordinately depressed. Even the experimenters got sucked into their roles as prison administrators. A consultant who had been a former prisoner found himself saying the same things while playing a parole officer

that he had hated when he had been a prisoner on the receiving end of abuse in prison.¹

The “terminator” of the experiment was a late entrant, an outsider. Christina Maslach was a trained psychologist herself, busy with other projects. She had not experienced the slow escalation from normal to abnormal behavior. Invited to observe after six days, she was appalled to see how inhumane the situation had become. The participants and experimenters themselves could not see this. After much argument, they came to understand she was right, and shut down the simulation (Blass 2000).

Maslach served on a small scale the function a nonviolent movement serves on a much larger scale: not only intervening in an unjust situation, but bringing insight to which the participants were blind. She had considerable influence as a fiancée of Zimbardo and a colleague to the other psychologists, advantages normally lacking in mass social movements. Of course, social movements take more time to develop extensive and similarly influential networks—a normal and expected difference between the laboratory and the real world. Though experiments are fairly artificial and oversimplified (not the same as the much more complicated reality), they can offer valuable insight.

What It Takes to Keep People Repressing

Though it may seem like a strange assertion given the prominence of repression throughout history, the human mind resists killing and committing violence. One early study that suggested this was conducted during World War II, when S. L. A. Marshall (1947) reported from postcombat interviews that only 15 to 20 percent of riflemen fired their weapons at an exposed enemy soldier. Firing increased greatly if a nearby leader demanded it (as would be expected from Milgram’s findings on obedience). But when left to their own devices, the great majority appeared to avoid killing. Some have questioned Marshall’s

1. A full account of the experiment is available at the Stanford Prison Experiment website (www.prisonexp.org).

results, but other studies with similar findings include French officers in the 1860s, Argentine firing rates in the Falkland War, the Napoleonic wars, American Civil War regiments, and numerous others (Grossman 1995; Grossman and Siddle 2008).

The same disinclination to kill extends to non-war situations as well: “Police hesitancy to fire even when life is in jeopardy was first formally reported outside of law enforcement circles in the early 1980s, when a study of police shootings in four major cities disclosed that officers in these departments shot in just a fraction of the cases that law and policy would allow” (Binder, Scharf, and Galvin 1982, 58).

Randall Collins (2008) shows from extensive photos and video recordings how this pattern applies to riots, bullying, and various forms of police repression: actual violence is committed by a small portion of officers. Tension, fear, and a low “competence” in actually doing harm to the target are common. To focus repression where authorities want it focused, those instructed to carry it out require training and the right conditions to overcome the natural human aversion to doing violence.

Conditioning and Desensitization

After World War II, the psychological means to overcome this resistance to kill was deliberately put into practice. Bull’s-eye targets were replaced with realistic man-shaped targets that popped up on the shooting range and then fell when hit. Each hit was accompanied by an intricate awards system, in what behaviorist B. F. Skinner remarked was a perfect example of the operant conditioning he had used so well to train pigeons (Grossman 1995, 253).

This conditioning can influence behavior when people are frightened. For instance, fire drills condition terrified school children to respond properly during a fire. Such exercises do not merely provide information ahead of a catastrophe but condition children to behave a certain way when their thought processes are not at their best. With conditioning in flight simulators, frightened pilots can respond reflexively to emergency situations. The application of operant conditioning techniques did increase the rate of Americans firing their weapons

in Korea and even more in Vietnam. Nevertheless, only a small portion fired frequently and only a small portion actually hit their targets (Grossman, 1995, 35).

Violent media as a whole—including movies and television shows with graphic violence—can also serve as a form of conditioning in a real-world setting called desensitization. Historically, the Roman gladiator games, the circus atmosphere at public executions, and similar popular violent entertainment could have served the same function. However, unlike realistic target practice or video games that develop shooting skills, in this case only the sight is being conditioned, not the action.

Fortunately, humans are not programmable robots. Conditioning is not some form of brainwashing that keeps people from thinking. It is only a form of training. Desensitization is easily countered by resensitization. Both conditioning and resensitization rely on a person finding the situation to be predictable. Therefore, novel and creative approaches can dissolve their influence rather quickly, if done with care. Soldiers and police are quite capable of deciding whether or not to use their training in a given situation—especially when the real-world situation does not present the kind of threat on which their training was based, and when there is no sense of imminent danger to themselves. Thus, nonviolent activists can strategically present agents of repression with circumstances that interrupt processes of conditioning and desensitization and thereby interrupt repression.

Group Solidarity

An external threat often increases group cohesion. Sometimes people remember wartime fondly as the time when petty quarrels ceased and people felt unified against the “enemy.” This is a psychological experience that is often consciously utilized by commanders and rulers to bolster their power with the population as a whole and with their police and army in particular. (The 1997 film *Wag the Dog* presents a biting satire on this phenomenon.)

Police work together and army members often live together, so their sense of being a group that requires loyalty to one another

develops as a matter of course. Add any sense of danger, and the loyalty to one another becomes intense. This group solidarity can interfere with nonviolent activists' attempts to reach the consciences of individual police or soldiers, since the value of loyalty to colleagues is also a matter of conscience for them. Yet there are occasions when this solidarity works in favor of the nonviolent rebellion: once even a small portion of individuals see a need to either defect to the side of the nonviolent rebellion or at least lay down arms so as not to repress the rebellion, then others in their group may feel the need to join them. Group solidarity can work in both directions.

What Are They Thinking?

The mental processes that allow or encourage police, soldiers, and death squads to engage in repressive violence need to be understood to make any effective outreach to them possible. In individual situations, of course, that involves listening to and persuading individuals, but there are some overarching group processes that deserve further examination.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Albert Bandura and his colleagues (1996) argue the most inhumane behavior comes about when principles of moral conduct are disengaged—people find ways to disconnect their actions from fundamental norms of conduct. Mechanisms to remove inhibitions have been extensively documented in historical atrocities and confirmed in laboratory studies of punitive behavior. The main psychological mechanisms identified by Bandura and others include:

- Change how you think about the act. For example, try to figure out how it is morally justified, use euphemisms, or compare it to worse conduct.
- Put the responsibility elsewhere, either by giving it to an authority or by giving it to the victims (commonly called scapegoating).
- Discount the effects of atrocious behavior by minimizing, ignoring, or distorting victims.
- Dehumanize the victims (Brennan 1995; Smith 2011).

One study tested the extent to which these mechanisms were used by capital punishment teams in the United States, compared with the support teams that provide solace to families involved, and compared to guards in the same prison who were not involved in carrying out executions at all. As would be expected, the execution staff had the highest level of justifying, disavowing personal responsibility, and dehumanizing (Osofsky, Bandura, and Zimbardo 2005).

The best and lengthiest study of agents of repression used extensive interviews with Brazilian police torturers and death squad participants, as discussed in the book *Violence Workers* (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo 2002). Chapter 11 is devoted to illustrating how these mechanisms came up in the interviews carried out by the researchers. Interviewees explained that their acts were justified because of the Communist threat; they compared their own actions to those of other police by way of saying the others were bad and so they were not so bad by comparison; and they worded what they were doing in ways that made their actions sound less cruel. They blamed authorities for their orders, and they blamed their victims for being smug or not confessing. They understood their victims as less than human and indicated that they had no sense of how horrible a description of their actions would sound to others.

The authors compared yes-and-no answers from these Brazilian police about accepting responsibility for their actions or admitting their actions were wrong. There was only one case of someone both accepting responsibility and acknowledging the ethical problems with their work, simply admitting personal guilt. When individuals accepted personal responsibility but thought the act was not wrong, they engaged in justification, asserting that their cause was just. When they admitted the act was wrong but refused to accept personal responsibility, they blamed others, mainly their victims. Denial and shifting responsibility occurs when the act is not admitted as wrong nor is their personal responsibility for it.

How do nonviolent activists counter these processes of justification and denial? It depends on the situation, but if they look for signs

of these kinds of reasoning, they can label them and try to counter them directly.

One method is to make an analogy to something that activists and agents of repression have in common. Rather than make direct accusations, which would more likely lead to defensiveness on the part of those accused, activists can offer an indirect story or situation. The moral of the story can be appreciated because it applies to somebody else, but this eases later applying it to one's own situation. This technique of offering a perspective outside the immediate situation has been used effectively in education in intense conflicts. For Israelis and Palestinians, for example, one technique that seemed to work better than others was to teach them not about their own conflict but about the conflict in Northern Ireland. Since they were outsiders to that conflict, they were able to learn about the dynamics of a similar conflict in a way that was not threatening and made sense to them. They could then apply what they learned to their own experience. They learned as outsiders first before learning directly (Salomon 2004).

Activists attempting to introduce new perspectives to agents of repression may cite authorities, institutions, or admired individuals to legitimize the new frames they introduce. In cases where the legitimacy of the regime is in serious question, there will generally be political or religious leaders, or even actors or sports figures, who are respected by the agents and can serve as persuaders, providing common connection between protesters and agents.

Fear

Bravado is common among people caught in an “us/them” mentality with “us” being understood as their own government and its supporters. But these people also often have fears that are important to consider. Agents of repression who are trained to not fear death or injury nevertheless fear the unknown, which may take various forms.

- The protesters are not only “them” to agents of repression but are also unknown. Only the course of time makes it possible for agents to predict how the protesters will behave.

- The authorities to whom agents of repression answer are another huge unknown. Even when agents are accustomed to dealing with those in a hierarchically superior position, they may be uncertain how those authorities will respond to the novel situation of the protests. Might they be angrier, and therefore more dangerous, than usual?
- The future is unknown. If the rebels win and a regime is replaced, will there be reconciliation, or a revenge spree? Will agents of repression be caught up in extreme punishment, or milder sanctions, such as being social outcasts or having difficulty finding employment? Once they have cast in their lot with one group (the current authorities) or the other (dissidents), they have a stake in the outcome of protest, and they could be very fearful for the consequences to their families.
- For those who take comfort in a well-established routine, including a job, salary, and basic services, the prospect of sweeping change can be a problem.

How protestors behave can undermine fear among agents of repression as patient yet firm interaction takes place. Protestors signaling the prospect of reconciliation with agents of repression may help alleviate some fears of the future. The interests of agents of repression (jobs, salary, and access to services) can be maintained to the extent that they do not perpetuate injustice, and sensitivity on this point by new leaders can help alleviate problems.

Finally, the agents of repression expect opponents to be monsters to be feared; they have been trained this way. Anything that instead establishes human interaction and undermines stereotypes can work against the normal fear reactions and thus diminish the likelihood or severity of any repression that is deployed.

Psychological Impact of Being an Agent of Repression

What is the psychological reaction these agents have to engaging in repression? Are acts of violence traumatizing to those who commit them? What insights will this give us as to how to persuade them to defect?

Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress

There is indeed quite a bit of evidence that people are traumatized not merely by being subjected to violence from others (which is known to be more traumatizing than suffering from hurricanes or car accidents) but also by inflicting violence on others. Not only is inflicting violence traumatic, but the evidence so far demonstrates that the trauma of violence is actually more severe for perpetrators than victims (MacNair 2002). Having more control in the situation does not protect against being traumatized by one's own acts of perpetration—in fact, that very feature may make it worse as the mind cannot shield itself from the horror by legitimately placing blame elsewhere.

The current term in psychology for post-trauma reactions is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a well-defined term in the diagnostic literature. I have coined the term perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS) for PTSD symptoms caused by being the person who caused the violence (MacNair 2002). This concept applies to a wide range of groups, starting with the combat veterans in whom it was first observed but also including people who carry out executions, police who shoot in the line of duty, and soldiers and police who carry out governmental orders for repression.

Symptoms of PTSD are divided into clusters.

1. Various ways of re-experiencing the trauma:
 - constant intrusive thoughts
 - repeating dreams about the event
 - flashbacks, which are rather like dreams when still awake
 - intense reactions to reminders of the trauma
2. Avoidance of reminders of the event
3. Negative thinking and moods:
 - feeling emotionally numb
 - feeling estranged and detached from other people
 - inability to remember key aspects of the event(s)
 - trouble concentrating
 - feeling a sense of foreshortened future

4. Arousal:

- sleep disturbances
- startle reactions
- hypervigilance
- irritability and outbursts of anger—aggressive, reckless, destructive and self-destructive behavior

Official definitions of PTSD can be found in the 2013 edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and World Health Organization’s 1992 International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10).² These two definitions of PTSD allow for the *idea* that committing violence is a kind of trauma that causes psychological problems with diagnosable symptoms; this allows for PITS to be unofficially defined as a form of post-trauma symptoms (MacNair 2002). The DSM-5, in contrast to previous versions, does address this point in a less-than-thorough way under the discussion accompanying the definition by adding to the list of causal factors: “for military personnel, being a perpetrator, witnessing atrocities, or killing the enemy.” This remains a point that is not actually controversial but is also not often considered.

Both definitions also make clear that the phenomenon is cross-cultural. Though symptoms are naturally perceived and interpreted differently by different cultures, they are widespread enough that PTSD symptoms are understood to be a common human response to trauma and not some culture-bound construct.

Overconsumption of alcohol or other intoxicants—which can even include workaholism—is also a common post-trauma reaction among those who suffer from PITS. Feelings of guilt can be especially troubling

2. The DSM-5 criteria for PTSD are available on the US Department of Veterans Affairs website (www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/dsm5_criteria_ptsd.asp). The ICD-10 criteria are published on the World Health Organization’s website (www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/GRNBOOK.pdf).

(especially when entirely justified, as opposed to the irrational survivor's guilt) and have commonly been reported by defectors.

While there are official clinical diagnoses, we are not only concerned with people who suffer from the full-blown disorder. Having symptoms is enough to warrant concern, and far more people have just one or two symptoms, which is nonetheless quite distressing.

Experiments and Case Studies

Craig Haney, one of the staff psychologists involved in the Stanford Prison Experiment, reports the kinds of nightmares that are a symptom of PTSD:

As the prison atmosphere evolved and became thick and real, I sensed the growing hostility and distrust on all sides. On one of the nights that it was my turn to sleep overnight at the prison, I had a terribly realistic dream in which I was suddenly imprisoned by guards in an actual prison that Zimbardo, Banks, and I supposedly had created. Some of the prisoners in our study, the ones who in retrospect had impressed me as most in distress, were now decked out in elaborately militaristic guard uniforms. They were my most angry and abusive captors, and I had the unmistakable sense that there was to be no escape or release from this awful place. I awoke drenched in sweat and shaken from the experience. The dream required no psychoanalytic acumen to interpret and should have given me some pause about what we were doing. But it didn't. I pressed on without reflection. After all, we had a prison to run and too many day-to-day crises and decisions to allow myself the luxury of pondering the ultimate wisdom of this noble endeavor that had already started to go wrong. (Haney 2000, 226–27)

Haney's experience offers some insight into why people continue to engage in violent behavior even as they begin to suffer acute symptoms. This also suggests that the absence of such symptoms cannot be assumed merely because a person continues in the activity.

In a 1960s psychiatric case study, Frantz Fanon (1961) describes the real-life experience of a European police inspector who tortured

Algerian rebels for information. He had lost his appetite, with sleep frequently disturbed by nightmares. He had sought psychiatric help for what he called “fits of madness,” which seems to align with the symptom of explosive outbursts:

“Can you give me an explanation for this, doctor: as soon as someone goes against me I want to hit him. Even outside my job. I feel I want to settle the fellows who get in my way, even for nothing at all. Look here, for example, suppose I go to the kiosk to buy the papers. There’s a lot of people. Of course you have to wait. I hold out my hand (the chap who keeps the kiosk is a pal of mine) to take my papers. Someone in the line gives me a challenging look and says ‘Wait your turn.’ Well, I feel I want to beat him up and I say to myself, ‘If I had you for a few hours my fine fellow you wouldn’t look so clever afterwards’” (267).

The psychiatrist’s case report indicates that these outbursts were not limited to thoughts but led to domestic abuse:

The patient dislikes noise. At home he wants to hit everybody all the time. In fact, he does hit his children, even the baby of twenty months, with unaccustomed savagery. But what really frightened him was one evening when his wife had criticized him particularly for hitting his children too much. (She had even said to him. “My word, anyone’d think you were going mad.”) He threw himself upon her, beat her, and tied her to a chair, saying to himself “I’ll teach her once and for all that I’m master in this house.” Fortunately his children began roaring and crying. He then realized the full gravity of his behavior, untied his wife and the next day decided to consult a doctor, “a nerve specialist.” (267–68)

The police inspector told the doctors that he had not been like this before, rarely punishing his children or fighting with his wife. This had only started “since the troubles.” The man could not get sick leave, and he did not want to be declared as having psychological problems, so he wanted treatment while he continued to work. The psychiatrist comments on this:

The weaknesses of such a procedure may easily be imagined. This man knew perfectly well that his disorders were directly caused by the kind of activity that went on inside the rooms where interrogations were carried out, even though he tried to throw the responsibility totally upon “present troubles.” As he could not see his way to stopping torturing people (that made nonsense [*sic*] to him for in that case he would have to resign) he asked me without beating about the bush to help him to go on torturing Algerian patriots without any prickings of conscience, without any behavior problems, and with complete equanimity. (269)

It is normal for people to try to avoid becoming or remaining victims of trauma. Would it not follow that people with acute symptoms resulting from their own actions would stop the actions to avoid the trauma? Yet we find otherwise; the psychological dynamics leading to the actions remain strong.

There is another problem: besides those who manage to overcome ethical barriers, a few people actually get a rush out of acts of violence. They experience a state of euphoria. These come from brain opioids released by the stress of committing violence. If bottled and artificial, these would be addictive and similar to cocaine (Southwick, Yehuda, and Morgan 1995). This is where the idea of being “bloodthirsty” comes from. As with cocaine, the feeling of exhilaration is followed by withdrawal symptoms, and PTSD symptoms can worsen. These are only a small portion of cases, but they may be associated with particularly brutal instances of violence.

PITS and Repression Management

Can we apply psychological knowledge about agents of repression being traumatized by their own actions to any practical applications that encourage them to defect, or at least withdraw from repression against civilians? There have been no studies published on this specific topic at the time of writing and very little by way of experience. We only have studies of techniques that have historically been successfully used directly on agents of repression to positively influence

their behavior (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006; Cascio and Luthans 2013). However, we can put forward several questions that may serve to guide further research on the topic:

1. *How often do security personnel who actually commit violence against protesters defect, as opposed to those who witness violence but do not actively do it themselves?* It is common that a large portion of people are only witnesses of the violence done by other individuals. But are there a substantial number of people who commit violence among the defectors? This should be established first before moving on to further research into whether circumstances can be established by nonviolent activists that would encourage those suffering from PITS to defect.

2. *Would suffering from PITS symptoms make individuals more likely to defect, or less likely?* We know that PITS symptoms may cause further violence, thus fueling cycles of violence. The symptoms of angry outbursts and of a feeling of detachment and estrangement from other people lend themselves to further acts of violence, so that engaging in violence continues to happen, even though it traumatizes the person doing it (Silva et al. 2001). We have little information on the opposite tack: bolting from the violence. Does escape lessen symptoms, or provide any kind of therapeutic benefit?

It could be that those who suffer from PITS symptoms are less likely to defect because they are suffering symptoms that lead them into further violence instead. Conversely, post-trauma symptoms could create a drive for relief that leads people to the options of defecting or otherwise refusing orders. Or perhaps both paths are more likely, and which one is taken will depend upon the individual and the circumstances they encounter, including those in confrontations with protestors.

Might the potential for defection also be influenced by an intervention that could help enable agents of repression to escape cycles of perpetration? This could, for example, involve providing knowledge that such symptoms are normal, that committing further violence exacerbates them, and that refusing to commit further violence might provide some relief. If so, activists could craft such an intervention appropriate to their own culture and circumstances.

3. *Would anticipating suffering from PITS (consciously or not) make individuals more or less likely to defect, and can this be used to encourage defections?* This is more problematic to ascertain as we do not know what forms such anticipation might take. Might agents of repression fear the onset of PITS symptoms, or is the anticipation more likely to manifest as feelings of guilt? Understanding the universality of post-trauma symptoms as situational and not individual has itself been shown to have therapeutic aspects as people are relieved to understand that it is the situation that is causing their problems and not that they are themselves “crazy” (Lipke 2000; Yalom 1995). So what would anticipation do? What would happen with efforts in advance to educate? Might there be education campaigns to help agents of repression understand PITS and recognize symptoms in colleagues?

4. *What would be the effect if protesters who had personal interaction with agents of repression mentioned the symptoms of intrusive thoughts and dreams or other appropriate symptoms? How often would this lead to insight that might help the agent make progress toward understanding his or her condition and defecting in order to avoid PITS? Would knowledge of possible symptoms at least help protesters better understand what is going on and inform their strategic and tactical attempts at repression management?* Those involved in nonviolent civil resistance need to understand PTSD symptoms before they can design and develop appropriate actions. Tailoring actions may be difficult if agents have not become symptomatic. If one-third of them become symptomatic, that is a huge portion, and the problem is widely prevalent—but that still leaves two-thirds who do not have the problems. Any initial attempts to address individuals’ symptoms would probably be ill-suited and ineffective. Asking questions rather than making assertions is likely to be more productive. Cross-cultural variations in symptoms and the circumstances that allow for their discussion would also need to be taken into account.

Since people normally react to PITS symptoms as unusual or offensive, might it be more helpful if activists understand that these are actually symptoms of normal people thrust into extraordinary situations? To better empathize with agents of repression and develop creative strategies, nonviolent activists should become familiar with

PITS symptoms, such as unexpected outbursts of irritability, jumpiness (hypervigilance), trouble concentrating, or emotional numbness.

5. *If agents were to be aware that the symptoms are actually common and normal, can this lead to interaction among agents to confirm this among themselves? If so, what impact would this have on the reliability of agents to carry out repression?* This question has to be approached carefully, because agents could suffer ridicule by other agents, either because the others do not have the symptoms or have them only mildly, or because the others have them and do not want to admit it. Symptomatic individuals can be branded as crazy or cowardly. In most cultures, mental problems carry stigma. Hiding symptoms from others is therefore quite common, and people may studiously ignore symptoms rather than admit them even to themselves. Are there times and places where group solidarity and a hope for healing can overcome stigma? Those with authority over agents of repression or people with potential authority, such as local or foreign psychologists, may be best placed to educate potential PITS sufferers. Activists would do well to identify the most effective spokespersons for any campaigns to interrupt repression by educating agents of repression about the dangers of PITS.

6. *Do those suffering from PITS find defection to be a good therapy?* Refusing to take part in violent repression would likely help diminish intrusive imagery such as unwanted thoughts, nightmares, and flashbacks. It may be that defection would only replace such intrusions with a different reality. This would be a healthy form of self-medication. People have used alcohol or intoxicating drugs to self-medicate, a practice that obviously causes worse problems and is unlikely to work well as a permanent solution. Being a workaholic has also been used this way, a method far more amenable to healthy outcomes, but frenzied work is often an effort to push away feelings of trauma that return with intensity later in retirement, when work is no longer available to push them away.

One of the techniques for dealing with intrusive dreams is to consciously write scripts for alternative, healthier endings. This is called “imagery rehearsal therapy,” and indications are that it not only helps with the dreams but spreads out to alleviate other symptoms as well

(Moore and Krakow 2010). It would stand to reason that the alternative scripts would work even better if they were not merely imagined but actual reality.

So what would be most promising from the viewpoint of the non-violent movement may also be most promising from a therapeutic perspective. The nonviolent movement wants agents to at least refrain from following violent orders from the repressive regime, and ideally to become more active in helping the nonviolent opposition. If a case can be made that the individuals being given the orders are also not only better off but in actual therapeutic need of this, then perhaps there are institutions (e.g., local psychologists, religious bodies) who can use this knowledge to create an intervention that benefits everybody involved.

7. *If agents of repression find defection to be good therapy, is there a way of using this knowledge to encourage defections?* This is a new idea that will take time to develop. Studies on actual defectors have not been conducted, but information can be gathered from people who have left any form of violent institution to understand their experiences of defection.

For example, insights can be gleaned from former executioners who turn into death penalty abolitionists. Fred Allen, who was part of the tie-down team in about 120 executions, described in an interview why he had stopped three years earlier:

I was just working in the shop, then all of a sudden something just triggered in me and I started shaking and I walked back into the house, and my wife asked, “What’s the matter?” and I said, “I don’t feel good,” and tears, uncontrollable tears, was coming out of my eyes. . . . “I just thought about that execution that I did two days ago, and everybody else’s that I was involved with.” And what it was, was something triggered within and it just—everybody, all of these executions, all of a sudden all sprung forward. (National Public Radio 2000)

Allen spoke later in this interview about his experience of continuing intrusive imagery:

Just like taking slides in a film projector and having a button and just pushing a button and just watching over and over, him, him, him. I don't know if it's a mental breakdown, I don't know if—it will probably be classified more as a traumatic stress, similar to what the individuals in war had, you know, and they'd come back from the war and it might be three months, it might be two years, it might be five years, all of a sudden they relive it again, and all that has to come out. You see, I can barely even talk because I'm thinking more and more of it, you know. There was just so many of them.

Several former execution staff people have written about and actively campaigned against the death penalty. This suggests that, at least for some people, the initial acts were indeed traumatic and active opposition to the actions that traumatized them is plausibly therapeutic. Wardens who have written full autobiographical books opposing the death penalty include Donald Cabana (1996) and Jerry Givens (2012). Warden Alan Ault (2011) oversaw five executions, and in one of many interviews reports: “The men and women who assist in executions are not psychopaths or sadists. They do their best to perform the impossible and inhumane job with which the state has charged them. Those of us who have participated in executions often suffer something very much like posttraumatic stress. Many turn to alcohol and drugs. For me, those nights that weren't sleepless were plagued by nightmares.” As early as the 1800s, James Berry served as a hangman for over a hundred people, but spent his later years actively campaigning against the death penalty; he kept a diary showing that his post-trauma symptoms were extensive (Atholl 1956).

Was writing and talking about opposition to the death penalty therapeutic? Probably; expressing is commonly understood as helpful therapy for trauma. In this case, that expression provides a service by perhaps helping others avoid the traumatizing activity. This provides the further therapeutic benefit of helping to undo the sense of helplessness, a common exacerbating feature of feeling traumatized. Former agents of state violence, such as Ault and Berry, may also serve as important interlocutors with former colleagues, offering critiques

of state violence, modeling defection, raising awareness about the psychological dangers of violence and repression, and introducing sufferers to therapeutic options.

Except for James Berry, these are all US cases where the behavior that executions were intended to repress is premeditated murder. Most people regard such behavior as worthy of repression, including those who oppose executions as the proper response. Those being executed are not liable to receive the same kind of sympathy that nonviolent activists can generate. Thus, the knowledge that defections from death penalty practice do come about with people who report trauma symptoms portends well for the hope of strategically encouraging such defections.

The cases relayed above showed that people who obeyed orders and were traumatized by their own actions can turn out to campaign against the orders. There was no intervention that caused this to occur, other than critiques by death penalty opponents and their willingness to welcome and cooperate with whistleblowers. It may be that more defections among execution staff could have come about with a more developed intervention, just as it is possible that interventions with this knowledge may encourage defections among agents of repression.

Conclusion

There are several ways that repression can backfire. A country's elite or international groups can offer condemnation and thus embarrass those who carried out the repression. An ally can be aghast and withdraw. Most particularly, repression can get people excited and focused and angry, and make the movement it was supposed to repress actually grow.

However, repression can also affect those individuals expected to carry it out. If it leads to massive defections or to collective inaction—a decision to stop engaging in the repressive tactics—then the backfire goes to the very heart of any institution's ability to carry out further repression as its power disappears.

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan (2011) found defections associated with the size of nonviolent campaigns. More protesters, more defectors. More protesters contribute to a sense or calculation

that the campaign will succeed and that it is time for agents of repression to jump ship. More protesters also generate more chances for interaction between agents of repression and the protesters themselves, allowing more opportunities to undermine fear of one another and socially redefine the situation.

The Milgram electroshock experiments demonstrated that authorities often define the situation so as to bring about destructive obedience to authority. However, the experiments also revealed the potential for rebellion to authority. One major condition that could prompt rebellion is that a contract that the authority made is broken (say, a stolen election, or not paying agents of repression). Another major condition is that there are authorities who argue with each other, so if one is a problem, activists can try bringing in another to counter the first (say, the government and the main religious institution).

Another strategy that psychology experiments affirm is the importance of outside insight and influence. In some cases, outsiders are able to see what is not obvious to insiders, as happened with Christina Maslach, who initiated the termination of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Teaching the agents and those in their circles about the dynamics of repression through reference to an outside conflict with which they have nothing to do can allow them to learn in a way that does not arouse defenses. Then they are in a better position to apply what they have learned to their own situation.

Agents of repression have been conditioned and desensitized, but novel and creative approaches crafted by people who are aware of this can break through this conditioning. There tends to be high group solidarity among the agents, and while this often works as a front against protesters, it can also serve as an aid when dealt with carefully. Agents often have fears, especially of their superiors and of what happens to them in the aftermath of conflict, all of which can be addressed during nonviolent civil resistance campaigns. However, agents will often be more impressed by words from authorities they respect than by the most articulate protester.

Finally, there is the pioneering area of dealing with PITS, post-trauma symptoms from committing acts of violence. It would be a

more satisfying conclusion to report on what interventions have been done so far and give advice on techniques that might be adapted to different cultures. However, we do not yet have studies, because first we need to understand the concepts that these studies might test. As the field of nonviolent action progresses, we should be able to study what does and does not work, and then offer more practical advice.

Nonviolent activists have attempted to cause defections by being friendly, being understanding, and making it clear to potential defectors that being among the protesters is a safe place. How much more can we encourage defections if we are educated and mindful of the psychological dynamics that can lead to them? As Mohandas Gandhi ([1940] 2005, 80) said, “We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence.” In general, the study of psychology is a treasure trove of concepts and experiments that can be explored for such discoveries. In particular, knowing how violent acts are traumatizing to those who commit them, and crafting interventions accordingly, is one of those discoveries that more experience can give us.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- Atholl, J. 1956. *The Reluctant Hangman: The Story of James Berry, Executioner 1884–1892*. London: John Long Limited.
- Ault, Alan. 2011. “I Ordered Death in Georgia: The State’s Former D.O.C. Commissioner on ‘Rehearsed Murder.’” *The Daily Beast*, Sep. 25. <https://prisonwatchnetwork.org/category/alan-ault/>.
- Bandura, A., Barbarelli, C., Caprara, G. V., and Pastorelli, C. 1996. “Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71: 364–74.
- Binder, A., P. Scharf, and R. Galvin. 1982. *Use of Deadly Force by Police Officers: Final Report*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.
- Binnendijk, Anika Locke, and Ivan Marovic. 2006. “Power and Persuasion: Nonviolent Strategies to Influence State Security Forces in Serbia 2000

- and Ukraine 2004.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39: 411–29. https://tavaana.org/sites/default/files/power_and_persuasion_-_pdf_-_english.pdf.
- Blass, T. 2000. *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brennan, W. 1995. *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives*. Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press.
- Cabana, Donald A. 1996. *Death at Midnight: The Confession of an Executioner*. Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press.
- Cascio, Wayne F., and Fred Luthans. 2013. “Reflections on the Metamorphosis at Robben Island: The Role of Institutional Work and Positive Psychology Capital.” *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Feb. 5. Sage Journals Online.
- Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.
- Collins, Randall. 2008. *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
- Gandhi, Mohandas. [1940] 2005. *All Men Are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*. Edited by K. Kripalani. New York: Continuum.
- Givens, Jerry. 2012. *Another Day Is Not Promised*. Bloomington, IN: Westblow Press.
- Grossman, Dave. 1995. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Grossman, Dave, and Bruce Siddle. 2008. “Psychological Effects of Combat.” In *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*, 2d ed., edited by Lester R. Kurtz, 1796–1805. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Haney, C. 2000. “Reflections on the Stanford Prison Experiment: Genesis, Transformations, Consequences.” In *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, edited by Thomas Blass, 193–237. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Huggins, Martha K., Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Philip G. Zimbardo. 2002. *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- Johnstad, P. G. 2012. “When the Time Is Right: Regime Legitimacy as a Predictor of Nonviolent Protest Outcome.” *Peace and Change* 37: 516–43.

- Lipke, H. 2000. *EMDR and Psychotherapy Integration*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- MacNair, Rachel M. 2002. *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Marshall, S. L. A. 1947. *Men against Fire*. New York: Morrow.
- Milgram, Stanley. 1974. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Moore, Bret A., and Barry Krakow. 2010. "Imagery Rehearsal Therapy: An Emerging Treatment for Posttraumatic Nightmares in Veterans." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 23: 232–38.
- National Public Radio. 2000. "Witness to an Execution, An Extraordinary Glimpse into the Chambers of a Texas Death House." *All Things Considered*, Oct. 12.
- Osofsky, Michael J., Albert Bandura, and Philip G. Zimbardo. 2005. "The Role of Moral Disengagement in the Execution Process." *Law and Human Behavior* 294: 371–93.
- Salomon, G. 2004. "Does Peace Education Make a Difference in the Context of an Intractable Conflict?" *Peace and Conflict: A Journal of Peace Psychology* 103: 257–74.
- Silva, J. A., D. V. Derecho, G. B. Leong, R. Weinstock, and M. M. Ferrari. 2001. "A Classification of Psychological Factors Leading to Violent Behavior in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder." *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 46: 309–16.
- Smith, D. L. 2011. *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Southwick, S. M., R. Yehuda, and C. A. Morgan. 1995. "Clinical Studies of Neurotransmitter Alterations in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." In *Neurobiological and Clinical Consequences of Stress*, edited by M. J. Friedman, D. S. Charney, A. Y. Deutch, 335–50. Philadelphia: Lippincott-Raven.
- World Health Organization. 1992. *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 10th rev. Geneva, Switzerland.
- Yalom, I. 1995. *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.