

PRESENTATION: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF TORTURE

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Good morning, everyone. It is an honour to present a talk on the sensitive psychological aspects of torture. When I was asked to conduct this talk, I was specifically requested to speak of the permanent effects of torture. I would like to tell you all gathered here today that almost all aspects of torture are permanent. These permanent effects are, moreover, damaging.

To better consider the nature of torture and its effects upon us, let us now consider two scenarios.

1. You have a tornado or cyclone that hits you. Your bones are broken, your family suffers grievous injury, your house is torn to the ground
2. A group of policemen picks you up, beats you, inflicts physical damage by breaking your bones, tortures your family and burns down your home.

End consequence appears the same – wherein lies the difference? Why does the second scenario affect or trouble us so much more?

1. It's the force of impersonal, unpredictable nature
2. It's personal, deliberate (and unnatural) human cruelty. It's a violation of respect for the human by a human.

Torture is intensely personal. Torture violates us. How do we begin to understand torture? Interpersonal aggression and violence is an important starting point.

Torture has existed as long as human civilisation has. Yet psychiatry/psychology has only focussed on this terrible practice in the past 30-40 years. It is shocking to see how torture dramatically alters the human psyche, even for those who have not personally experienced it. Torture causes human thought and our sub-consciousness to develop abnormally: major parts of the brain cease functioning altogether as the body retreats into survival mode. Only the most primitive aspects of our brain involved with sheer survival remain functional and this remains the case for a very long time, if not for the rest of that person's life. The cognitive, creative parts of the brain dealing with abstract thought are no longer or are much less active. This has serious implications for the way that a person lives or interacts with others subsequently. The person may exhibit an inability to form deep emotional bonds with others, find it difficult to trust others or find it extremely stressful to be in a new situation or to talk to new people, for example. When someone endures trauma, permanent damage is done to the brain which results in an inability to pick up environmental cues (i.e. "danger signals") afterward. This means an exponential increase in the likelihood of being re-victimised.

Let me share a story of someone who was a victim of sexual assault. There was a stakeout on a rapist. The officers involved allowed the rapist to continue to stalk and grab a woman so they could catch him in the act. They then told the extremely scared and distressed woman that they had saved her. There's a very practical dilemma here: in allowing the rapist to continue to stalk, grab and frighten the woman, they knowingly permitted her to be traumatised. Yet practically speaking, they needed evidence to convict the rapist. In this

particular encounter, they sacrificed the woman's psychological well-being to their need for evidence. The trauma done to the woman, even if she was not eventually raped, is immeasurable and will have a long-lasting effect on her emotional intelligence and the health of her relationship with others.

How then can we address trauma that's already been inflicted? The first step we need to take is to convince and reassure the victims that it was not their fault they were victimised. Often, perpetrators successfully convince their victims that they had somehow brought it upon themselves. They may convince a rape victim, for instance, that her dressing somehow "seduced" them and caused them to lust after her. A schoolteacher who viciously beats his students may convince them that they somehow deserved the beating because they had been naughty, or maybe did something wrong. The children may come to believe they deserved the punishment, no matter if the punishment is monstrously disproportionate. This is an emotional burden that trauma survivors bear their entire lives.

Let's take the scenario of torture one step further. What happens to us?

For a long time, it was believed that trauma was something observable or overt. We expect individuals under tremendous stress or trauma to scream, or shout or writhe in pain – very outward, obvious expressions of an internal anguish that we, as outsiders and observers, cannot feel or imagine. Psychologists have learnt, however, that victims of extreme trauma actually go into shock and "freeze". An experiment was done in the United States with a chicken, which was pushed, dragged and poked. Initially, the chicken did flap around a bit to try to escape the manhandling, but after a while it went very still, even after the physical harassment stopped. Our traditional understanding of the "fight or flight syndrome" is no longer perfectly true. When faced with overwhelming danger, everything in your system shuts down. It is the complete inability of the animal to respond any further in that moment. The animal, given time, recovers from this psychological paralysis, gathers itself and devises an escape plan. The closest analogy I can find in the English language is that of the deer caught in the headlights. So is this survival or avoidance mechanism? It is the former. My colleagues were among these studying 9/11 survivors. Different responses were shown when people saw the planes crashing into the twin towers. One group immediately fled. Another group froze and perhaps called people on their mobiles. A third group, the members of which showed the highest degree of post-trauma survival, took charge of the situation and tried to devise a good plan for escape. Many who work in highly stressful jobs – firemen, civil defence officers, policemen, etc. – form this last group, and are society's first, and perhaps only, line of defence against unforeseen disasters. Unfortunately, the people making up this last group are rare. The rest of us find ourselves in the second group, frozen in the face of imminent and on-going danger and reliant on the help of others.

I have worked with many torture survivors. I have been in those situations. I still carry guilt from the first time I witnessed torture. I froze in those moments. I was completely unable to help the victims. In one case, the police were pounding a suspect. I took a full twenty seconds to realise the enormity of the situation. I asked the perpetrators to stop, but they gently pushed me aside, warned me against getting involved and continued to beat the man to a pulp. The suspect's only obvious crime was in not conveying immediately what they wanted to hear. This was in an infamous prison in Tihar, Delhi.

There are three parties involved in every incident: the perpetrator, the victim and the witness/bystander. The effect on all three agents is different, but only slightly, and only in degree. The bystander feels threatened because they fear the same could/would happen to them. They rated the fear (trauma) experienced as 6 or 7 out of a maximum scale of 10. This is of course less than the rating given by the victim himself, who consistently rated the trauma experienced 9 or 10 out of 10).

Somebody once asked if interpersonal violence actually had that much of an impact. My answer would be a resounding "Yes, it does". Let me explain how seriously interpersonal violence affects everyone. A serial killer can change the behaviour and mental well-being of an entire city. Most would have never seen or spoken to the serial killer. Nevertheless, fear is contagious, and the subsequent trauma wrought by such fear is not easily mitigated or quenched. Fear affects the plasticity of the brain in fundamental ways. It affects our children too. Let me share two instances in which I have observed this.

I have a 7-year-old daughter. She accompanied me to my office in the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Stuck to the wall right above my desk is an anti-torture poster and I naturally had to explain what torture was. I didn't know where to begin, so I started by saying things from my own experience. "You know, sometimes when police want information, but they don't get it the correct way ..." My daughter immediately said, "Oh, that's boring, I know all about that, we play torture in school." When I reacted in something approaching horror, she very nonchalantly replied, "Ya, when we want information we grab someone like this and put him like that..." I told her very sternly, "That is not how you get information. You talk to people if you want information. Where did you hear all that from!" to which she replied, calm as ever, "TV!"

In the case of documentaries or movies depicting Abu Ghraib, there have been recorded cases of children becoming excited and re-enacting conditions in prison after watching it on TV. The globalisation of violence is going to be also a potent force shaping the world in the future. There is nothing called good torture or a good beating, and yet children are unable to know the difference. It is the responsibility of parents and adults to inculcate the notion that violence and torture is, under all circumstances, unjustifiably bad. Children have to be told that when one does something to someone against that person's permission, it is wrong and the effects last a lifetime, both on the perpetrator as well as on the victim(s).

Torture affects memory. In the field of psychology, we contrast "normal memory" and "traumatic memory". When a person is traumatised (trauma is inevitably and invariably a result of being subjected to torture), "normal memory" fragments. When we ask torture victims "What happened to you? Can you describe it? Do you remember this particular detail, or that? Are you absolutely certain this was the man responsible? Can you demonstrate what happened?" One of the difficulties victims experience is describing their experience.

In one study, a group of 20 Literature majors from the best universities across the United States were shown a 10 minute video clip showing torture and asked to describe what happened. What emerged was amazing. None of the students could easily describe the phenomena of torture. They were only able to describe very mechanical events (he beat him...here, here, here) and provided only reductionist accounts stripped of detail. Researchers expected eloquent and detailed descriptions, but not one student was capable of it. An alternative description was then shown the students, which gave graphic

details such as the "cracking of bones, loud sounds, acrid stench..." The students had simply blanked out all these details. They experienced tunnel vision and a strong desire only to get away from the traumatic experience.

I was mugged years ago on the streets of San Francisco while taking a walk after the conference on Clinical Psychology and Forensic Sciences. I was walking home on a street notorious for crime. Three young men whipped out knives and became angry when they saw I only had \$70-80. I tried placating them, so they pushed me and ran off. I went to report the incident to the police and hotel. I informed them I was a psychologist and the police said, "Oh, it must be easy for you to describe events then" but all I could recall was the handle of a knife they had pressed against me. I could not recall their faces or the clothes they were wearing. I used to take pride in the details I was able to capture, but when I was traumatised I could not take in these important environmental cues and clues.

Through this and many other examples we must change our perspective of torture survivors. They are not lazy or dishonest. They have genuine difficulty describing the events. Today, psychologists have sensory amplification techniques by which we help survivors recall details of the environment and the encounter. In principle, this is quite simple. Somatic memory is this: even if your brain doesn't register, your body does. By recalling the entire incident one thing at a time, and then asking at appropriate junctures things such as, "What does your hand feel like now?", the brain is able to reconstitute events and put it together in a more coherent narrative.

The research on trauma and torture today is breaking new grounds. New techniques are being discovered and invented to motivate and encourage survivors, as well as to enable them to testify in courts. The coming century will lead us to understand more truths about torture and trauma, and give us more scientific avenues for the reporting of facts and stories.

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