The psychology behind Sialkot tragedy

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyse the Sialkot tragedy which had happened in Sialkot, Pakistan in 2010, in which two innocent brothers were lynched in broad daylight and in front of hundreds of people including policemen, thus committing sin of violence and cruelty. Archival research method was done to explore two important questions: what had led to the killing of those innocent boys and why didn't anyone do anything to stop it? Detailed analyses of the case revealed the following causal elements with significant role: conceptualisation of self and that of the other, semantic framing and stereotypic labelling, psychological distancing, rationalisation, obedience to authority, deindividuation and evil as inaction. It is important to note that these factors need not be antecedently conditional or necessary for the prevalence of malignant behaviours but helps to understand their impact under negative circumstances.

Keywords: Violence, cruelty, malignant behaviour

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1. Introduction

Spinochordodes tellinii, commonly known as hairworms, are a parasitic worm species that take up residence inside grass hoppers and beetles, feeding off the arthropods tissue. Yet, it is only after this creature had metamorphosed into an adult, does the true nature and potent malignancy of the parasite surface. After complete grown, the hairworm induces the host to leave their natural land habitat and effectively 'commit suicide' by jumping into a water body and drowning itself. Once this task is accomplished, the hairworm merrily swims away to mate with another of its devious kind (Biron et al., 2006).

Modern day man is no stranger to the presence of evil. Be it from the depths of nature like the hairworm or manifestations in the complex world of man, evil is lurking all around us. It is actively experienced and directly perceived by everyone. A young woman is raped, a child is murdered, an old man is beaten, a powerful nation wipes out a weaker country, an unarmed captive is tortured, a leader slowly corrupts away the chances of his people; those with sane minds automatically react to these circumstances with justifiable indignation and rage. A person does not sit around weighing the philosophical and logical merits of ethical principles when a child is seen being tormented. Hence, it can be argued that on the most fundamental level, evil is not in fact an abstract concept, but is undeniably real and substantial (Russell, 1992).

In order to properly understand evil in all of its glory, we have to first understand what exactly it is. Let's first examine the definition of evil given by Philip Zimbardo 'evil consists of intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others or using one's authority and systematic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf. In short, evil is knowing better but doing worse' (Zimbardo, 2007).

Examining the theological foundations of evil, the question arises as to why evil exists in the first place; it stands in complete paradox to the very nature of man as an image of the powerful, just and inherently 'good' god. Here, to use the words of Norman Geisler, evil does not actually exist as a separate entity, it is merely the manifestation of the absence of good (Tompkins, 2009). Man needs evil to exist so that he is aware of the necessity of good to triumph over it. So, what is evil? It's the diabolic inverse of the characterisation of God as wholly good and wholly other (Pagels, 1995). Buddha provides a similar philosophy, conveying the idea that there has to be bad in order for good to prove its 'purity' above it. Hamlet also puts this idea of indulging in immediate acts of evil in order to do away with worse consequences in the future, 'I must be cruel only to be kind; thus bad begins, and worse remains behind' (Shakespeare, 1603).

2. Literature review

Traditionally, the approach to understanding evil stemmed from a desire to explain unusual or undesirable behaviour in terms of inherent personal qualities such as personality traits, character, genetic makeup, free will and other similar dispositions. The initial view was to look within for answers to the question of why events folded as they did. This was especially the case for people coming from cultures that emphasised individualism. This perspective was not restricted to only certain fields of study, but was, and still is, the foundation for many institutions of law, religion, medicine including the focus of psychiatry, clinical and assessment psychology. 'Culpability, illness and sin, they assume, are to be found within the guilty party, the sick person and the sinner' (Zimbardo, 2007). The pursuit for understanding starts with the questions of 'who', Who is responsible? Who is to blame? Who should get the credit?

In recent times, personality theorists have been the most vocal in their belief that the propensity of individuals for violence and evil stems from dispositions or more accurately from the presence of certain personality traits and pathologies. Personality theorists, psychoanalysts as well as psychiatrists explain human evil as expanding from the disorder of psychopathy, a conception developed following

centuries of clinical research and speculation (Hare, Clark, Grann & Thornton, 2000). The assertion made is that evil people share common personality types and characteristics which cause them to make morally inappropriate choices repeatedly (Leedom, 2007).

Freud believed that much, if not all, of our actions and decisions stemmed from conflict in the unconscious triggered by unresolved childhood insecurities. Yet, it is the intrinsic instincts of a person that really push the boundaries between good and evil. In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud ascribes two basic 'Trieb' or drives within people; the first is the life or sex drive which consists of the Eros; the second is the death drive or Thanatos which pertains to destruction and aggression.

Another aspect is that of the *fundamental attribution error*, a term coined by Lee Ross which aimed to explain the dual bias existing in our individual, societal and institutional attribution styles. It dealt with the inclination to explain behaviour in terms of internal dispositional features whilst neglecting and reducing the impact of situational causes (Ross, 1997).

Proponents of behavioural school of thought treat evil in incrementalist terms (Zimbardo, 2007). At any one point in time, people possess a particular attribute (be it malignant or benign) to either a greater or lesser degree. These attributes are acquired through experience, deliberate practice or through external intervention and come into play depending on the circumstances. So in essence, man learns to become good or evil irrespective of personality and genetic inheritance due to the situation he or she is in (Dweck, 2006).

One of the first views that took into account the influence of social factors on behaviour was the doctrine of the Noble Savage presented by Rousseau (Patrick, 2007). According to this principle, man in a state of nature is 'peaceful, harmonious and, above all, fundamentally good'. On contrary, evil and depravity have little to do with nature itself, but come from a 'distortion and corruption of a good nature by a bad culture, imposed from the outside' (Buss, 2001).

Social psychologists such as Zimbardo look at behaviour as coming from our ability to accurately know ourselves. We believe that we are able to predict our future actions because we are keenly aware of our own capabilities, values and capacities (for both good and evil). Yet, this self-knowledge we claim to have is restricted to our past behaviour and interactions stemming from similar situations that are governed by policies, rules and pressures that we take for granted with increased exposure. However, susceptibility for evil arises when there is a conflict between what we know of ourselves from experience, and the uncertainty of finding oneself in a whole new unchartered territory or situation. There is no way to pre-ascertain whether or not our old habits will suffice in this new environment and so we may end up acting in a manner that we never thought ourselves capability (Zimbardo, 2007).

Research shows that one of the most powerful indicators of insidious behaviour is the concept of deindividuation which allows the perpetrator anonymity which in turn reduces personal accountability, sense of responsibility and focus on self-monitoring. In short, deindividuation gives the perpetrator freedom to act without conscience-restraining boundaries (Zimbardo, 2007). More often than not, this process takes place accompanying a change in physical appearance. In the words of Shakespeare, 'this robe of mine doth change my disposition' (1603). Zimbardo found that the construct of deindividuation was not limited to individuals but could stem from environmental anonymity as well. He contrasted the behaviours of people in close-knit communities to large cities where there was no strong sense of community within the inhabitants.

In the words of British Statesman, Edmund Burke, 'The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing'. Social psychologists became acutely interested in the phenomenon of bystander apathy especially in terms of evil as a form of inaction following the much publicised horrific murder of Catherine Genovese in New York, 1964. The story made headlines because despite there being 38 witnesses to the crime, not a single person intervened or even called the police during the assault (The New York Times, 1964). Through various experiments, Latane and Darley (1968) came up

with the phenomenon known as the diffusion of responsibility. The underlying assumption was that one need not help out because there were others present who would be taking on the adage that it was 'someone else's business' (Latane & Darley, 1968).

A growing body of research suggests that language and semantic framing when referring to the 'other' influence the way in which we behave. An experiment conducted by Tajfel revealed that the mere classification of people into groups and individuals as either members of the in-group or out-group, leads to discrimination (Tajfel, 1970). In extreme cases, such as genocides and widespread propaganda, twin concepts of dehumanisation and infrahumanisation biases come into the equation of categorising in-group and out-group members. Dehumanisation refers to the process of removing the humanity of potential victims (belonging to an out-group) and replacing it with animal-like qualities, or many times, with nothing at all. On contrary, infrahumanisation goes beyond derogating the other with animal-like qualities and denying them any 'human essence' with only the in-group members maintaining uniquely human emotions and traits (Leyens et al., 2000). Bandura and colleagues revealed the power in how labelling random groups as either 'monsters' or 'nice guys' influenced the way in which they were treated by third parties. Once the group was conceptualised as monsters, people were happy to treat them as such and reduce their value to non-human animals without ever coming in contact with them or getting to know them (Bandura, Underwood & Fromson, 1975).

Tragically, we live in what psychologist Zimbardo dubs as the 'mass murder century'. Despite philosophers' claims that human beings are inherently good, moral and just, we find ourselves time and again dappling in the unthinkable, the unimaginable and the senseless acts of evil. Violence, torture, aggression, passive inaction, irrationality and immorality have become like a second nature to us. We only have to look at our past to properly comprehend the extent of the damage we are capable of. Yet, by adopting a sense of humility, we can work towards understanding the factors that contribute to man's penchant to do wrong. If we strive to learn what influences us to behave insidiously, and then perhaps we stand a chance to make better choices in the future, avoid certain triggers, respect the humanity of others and above all, work towards reducing evil in the world.

3. Case study

It was a fateful day of August 15, 2010 when two brothers Mughees aged 18 years and Muneeb aged 15 years were lynched to death by a rowdy mob who had claimed that the brothers were robbers and should be punished. This all happened in front of a large crowd which also included policemen of the area Buttran Wali, Sialkot a rural area in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. The bodies were hanged against the water tank and people were about to set them on fire when the family members of the deceased reached and claimed the dead bodies. Later, no police record was discovered for the two brothers who were students (Usman, 2011).

Later, two versions were revealed first that on that tragic day the two brothers had left the house on a motor bike to play cricket with their friends, second that they earlier had a fight with some of their cricket playmates and on their way to the playground they encountered a gathering where people were talking angrily about the ongoing robberies in the vicinity where in one incident firing had occurred but the dacoits had fled and two other people were injured. When the brothers were in that crowd somebody (probably the ones who had a fight with them earlier) pointed out them saying that they were part of that robbery gang. People got emotional and started beating them, the police intervened and took the two boys to the office of Rescue 1122. Later, the news came about the death of one of the firing victims which instigate the mob and they broke in the Rescue 1122 office and took the boys out while no one from the police or crowd interceded. They were brutally beaten to death. Afterwards, the bodies of the brothers were put on a trolley which was paraded through the streets of that area and then they were tied against a water tank and their bodies were about to be set on fire when members of their family reached the spot and claimed the bodies. All this happened with the presence of police and somebody making footage with a mobile camera (Ikram, 2010).

4. Analysis of the case

Analysis of the case has revealed the following psychological reasons to answer the two framed questions which are: what led to the killing of the two innocent boys and why didn't anyone do anything to stop it?

4.1. Conceptualisation of self and that of the other

This idea stems from the work of Edward Said and his concept of orientalism. He goes on to say that the orientalism has to establish the *other* because it is used to strengthen one's own identity and superiority while the infamous *other* is delegated to the ranks of savage and inferior being.

In the given case, the two boys were taken as others who were termed as robbers without any authenticity, whereas the remaining crowd had taken itself as to be better and superior in terms of conduct on the basis of which they believed to have a right to punish the culprits.

4.2. Semantic framing and stereotypical labelling

By sullying the identity of the other, it becomes much easier to partake in moral disengagement. According to Zimbardo (2007), there are a few ways that can enable anyone of us to disengage morally from actions that are destructive and evil mainly through exercising various cognitive mechanisms The first is our ability to redefine our destructive actions as honourable so that our behaviour is justifiable (Zimbardo, 2007).

Over here the two boys were labelled as robbers who were involved in a robbery which had resulted in the death of a person. The crowd was already brainwashed against these two boys who looked at them only negatively with hatred and fear.

4.3. Psychological distancing

One needs to understand that the person in front of them is someone equally frightened, with a mother and father and life (Kassimeris, 2006). By displacing personal responsibility, the direct link between perpetrator and action is severed. In doing so, the evil action committed is free from self-condemnation and there is no longer a need to see oneself as an agent of crime, destruction and violence (Zimbardo, 2007).

The crowd had distanced itself from the two boys whose characteristics were taken as widely different and destructive thus generating negative activities in the society. Therefore, this justified the behaviour of the crowd in their own minds.

4.4. Rationalisation

Another mechanism used to disengage ourselves morally from our actions is that of rationalising. We distort, ignore, minimise and deny the unsavory consequences of the behaviour displayed in effect, altering the way we perceive the harm done by our conduct (Zimbardo, 2007).

In this case, people in the crowd rationalised that these boys were already culprits and harmful for the society so no harm would occur if they were removed completely from the face of this earth.

4.5. Obedience to authority

Obedience to authority plays a vital role in people carrying out the tasks blindly without questioning the outcome openly. Here, in this case where some policemen were also involved in the gruesome task of lynching those two brothers the general public didn't feel bothered to question the activity.

They also carried the task of either doing the torture or being silent observer of the whole event while believing that law enforcing agents have a right of punishing anyone openly without going for a fair trial first.

4.6. Deindividuation

New group identities often emerge at the cost of individual ones. Once a person loses sight of themselves as a separate entity outside that of the group, deindividuation often rears its head. Deindividuation acts as a cloak for the perpetrator, making them anonymous. Under the cloak of anonymity the person is able to reduce feelings of personal accountability, deny responsibility and forsake the need of self-monitoring. With deindividuation firmly in place, the perpetrator is able to act without the constraints of conscience and morality tying him down (Zimbardo, 2007).

What the crowd did together if had been given a chance to do the same individually than most of the people would have denied doing it. Since under the effect of mob one loses the touch with one's own individuality and takes the characteristics of the crowd/mob, they also have the feeling of security that since they are working together in a group no one can point them out individually.

4.7. Evil as inaction

Being a bystander to crime and violence makes one as guilty as the perpetrator, a theory similar to that of the concept of lying through omission. Situations where people become observers to violence, crime and injustice are equally responsible for such things to happen and flourish in the society by not reporting to the right authority. Over here a large crowd including police officers who were supposed to protect the innocent was also involved.

5. Conclusion

It seems that by and large our society is becoming corrupt with evil and malice where people are losing self-control, feelings of empathy, trust on others and while enjoying others sufferings. Some of the most heinous actions and insidious behaviour can be attributed to interplay of dynamics that makes one question their morals, ignore their values and commit to performing acts that they never would have thought themselves capable of. The analysis has shown that the common causes of human evil stems from deindividuation, inaction in the face of evil committed by others, propaganda to distinguish self from others, psychological distancing, rationalisation, semantic framing and stereotypic labelling resulting into dehumanisation.

Now that, we have the basic frameworks about what encourages evil to prosper, we can focus on limiting the effects it has on us and the world we live in, while highlighting the possible causes of violent and sinful behaviours rather than labelling a complete nation as inhuman. The information can be used in making people psychologically sound so that others do not just act without thinking and should develop a habit of analysing situations in neutral manner without the collective social influence to react irrationally.

6. Recommendations

Future avenues should include a focus on studies done on the nations where such gruesome acts of violence rarely happen to find out what social values do they follow and the procedure to inculcate them in their nation.

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