

Psychology 607, Spring 2003, Trauma as Etiology

May 19: Effects on Political Processes

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Adolf Hitler's Childhood: From Hidden to Manifest Horror

- Psychoanalysis can be used to answer the question of why wars occur, on the basis of early childhood conditioning
- We can possibly understand Hitler's political career by knowing his early traumatic experiences; being physically abused by his father daily
- Hitler's childhood included a family structure that can be characterized as the "prototype of a totalitarian regime." This hierarchy is also seen in the way the concentration camps were organized.
- Hitler's father is also reported to have had a traumatizing childhood, characterized by:
 - Being poor
 - Being illegitimate
 - Being separated from his biological mother at 5 yo
 - Having Jewish blood (possible but unproven)Thus, Alois Hitler expressed his rage at his own childhood suffering by repeatedly beating his son.
- Based on psychoanalytic theory, Hitler unconsciously took on his father's behavior and displayed it during WWII, which is indicative of how he saw his father—as a "snappy, uniformed dictator"
- Thus, Hitler transferred the trauma of his family life onto the entire German nation.
- The role of anti-Semitism
 - All people harbor a forbidden hatred (against their caregivers) and are eager to legitimate it
 - This is evident by the fact that Hitler had so many enthusiastic followers—they must have had similar upbringings
 - Hitler no longer needs to hate his father. He can transfer his revenge onto the Jews and will not be beaten for it, while honoring and idealizing his parents.
- Hitler's mother must not have loved her son. If he had been loved he would have been capable of love, which obviously is not true.
 - Lost her first 3 children within one month. Her anxieties and depression were communicated directly to Hitler as a baby
 - Therefore, had a disturbed early relationship
 - Unconsciously delegated Hitler to rescue her from her husband, thus Germany comes to symbolize his mother and must be saved from the Jews (his father).
- Hitler has been used as an example to show that:
 - Criminals are not born

- Those who persecute others are warding off knowledge of their own fate as victims
- Consciously experiencing one's own victimization provides a protection against sadism
- By honoring parents, we over look crucial factors in a person's early childhood
- Living out hatred is the opposite of experiencing it

The Politics of Denial Millburn & Conrad

Defense mechanisms: How we skew reality to make ourselves feel better.

Denial: Person's inability to tolerate a particular emotion.

Projection: Process of putting unacceptable emotion onto others.

Displacement: Finding a scapegoat to take out unacceptable emotions

“Personal is Political”

- Residual childhood emotions are played out in politics.
- How denial works: “hear no evil, see no evil.” Feels better to create fantasy world than to accept feelings of anger, rage, and anxiety in ourselves. It is easier to claim someone or something is “evil” than to look inside ourselves.
- Denial can protect us, but it can promote complacency.

Causes of Denial

- Reaction to Trauma: can emotionally protect us from horrifying events.
- Children use denial to deal with upsetting feelings and events because they don't have the power to change their external world.
- Poisonous Pedagogy: Child rearing philosophy that posits children's “wills” need to be broken in order to protect them and teach obedience. Doing this may require physical punishment.

Negative Effects of Physical Punishment

- Teaches children to be violent and accept violence around them.
- Does not allow child to develop internal set of moral standards.
- Creates fear and anger in child, reduces self-esteem.
- Can start a cycle of violence.
- Promotes denial, and “may fuel punitive political and social attitudes.”

“Early Personal Experiences Determine Political Behavior”

DeMause (2002), *The Emotional Life of Nations*

The Assassination of Leaders

- ◆ Demause tracks the emotional mood of the nation using political cartoons, editorials, magazine clippings, historical trends, political speeches, etc.

- e.g. Reagan's early speeches included rhetoric like: "terror" (of inflation), "doomed", "frightened", "weak and disintegrating" (as a nation), full of "pent-up furies" (toward gov't), "in greater danger today than we were after Pearl Harbor"

...*despite the period of peace and prosperity*

- ◆ Leaders are expected to sense the irrational wishes and fears of their nations, and do something to deflect or relieve their anxieties...nations go through emotional cycles
- Presidents are regularly depicted as strong during 1st year (with high approval ratings), but weakening and collapsing as their polls decline over the term...Wars have never begun during the 1st year of a term
- Disappointment and sense of betrayal when leaders *don't* go to war when the nation is emotionally ready (i.e. when the leader has become "impotent")
- ◆ Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis... example of a "leader who was 'too impotent' to go to war"
 - Only 4% opposed Kennedy's actions in amassing troops near Cuba, but 60% thought it would lead to a nuclear WWII
 - When Khrushchev backed down, Americans felt let down rather than relieved...accused Kennedy of being 'soft on Communism'
 - Political cartoonists began picturing Kennedy getting beheaded, one columnist said "let's shoot him, literally, before Christmas"
 - Psychopaths may see these media death wishes as permission to kill, as signals or commands
 - Increase in the number of death threats, begged and warned not to go to Dallas, the "hate capital of Dixie" by his aids and Dallas citizens due to the danger of assassination...100's of reporters flew in because they had been alerted that something might happen
 - *Kennedy even thought he was in danger*...looking at the platform, he remarked that someone could get him if they wanted to, warned his wife that something might happen, said they were nothing but "sitting ducks in a shooting gallery"
 - ...but accepted the martyr's role anyway: he actually instructed the Secret Service *not* to go to Dallas ahead of time, *not* to scout out open windows along the parade route, and *not* to put a bullet-proof top on the convertible

- Similar scenario with Reagan, who inherited ill-will from Carter for not going to war with Iran after the hostage crisis
- ◆ Peace as betrayal?
 - 6 out of 7 assassination attempts took place either after unusually long peaceful periods (e.g. Garfield's assassination) or after a peace treaty at the end of a war (e.g. Lincoln)

The Gulf War as an Emotional Disorder

- ◆ Main determinant of whether a president will be able to resist the nation's call to war is the kind of childhood they had
 - Only childhood photos of Carter and Eisenhower showed their mothers smiling at them...also happen to be 2 presidents who resisted going to war
 - In contrast, Reagan experienced neglect & abuse from an 'obsessively religious' mother and a 'violent, alcoholic father'
- ◆ George Bush (Senior)'s childhood: 'full of fear and punishment', father was 'aloof and distant', 'formidable and stern' ...not 'a warm person' "Dad was really scary"
 - Mood of America when Bush ran for president: depressed
 - Unprecedented period of peace and prosperity ... 1980's were 'a decade of indulgence'
 - Manic spending binges on the military, financial speculation, financed by borrowing...periods like this usually end with war
 - But...our traditional enemies (e.g. Soviet Union, East Germany) had collapsed...period of *unprecedented world peace* without any enemies
 - Predictions of 'doom, decline, and the death of the American dream' ... "something catastrophic coming"
 - No foreign enemy to project our fears and hatred on, so... "America had only one choice to end its feelings of depression: have a sacrificial economic recession...to punish ourselves and our families for our peace and prosperity"
 - In order to keep us from punishing ourselves too much with a lengthy recession, need to create an enemy abroad to punish
 - "Preparing for a new sacrificial war first requires avoiding the guilt for starting it....Bush's task was to find some country that was willing to start a war against a

weaker country so that America could come to the rescue in a war that would make us feel better again”

- Political cartoons and magazine covers began expressing death wishes toward children, depicting “terrifying” mother figures, and questioning Bush’s masculinity
- Saddam Hussein....paid by U.S., supported in war with Iran, and in 1990: was encouraged by US envoy to raise oil prices, and implicitly understood that America supported his invasion of Kuwait and wouldn’t intervene
- Bush’s rhetoric: we’ll “kick the ass” (of Saddam Hussein), “fighting for a new world order”, “a new era of peace”
- When Iraq agreed to withdraw peacefully, Bush said: “Instead of feeling exhilarated, my heart sank”... “We have to have a war”
 - Desert Storm... lasted 43 days plus embargo: 80,000 tons of “smart bombs” dropped (70% missed targets and hit civilians) illegal napalm used to destroy farm lands...all shown nightly on TV, but we didn’t see them actually hitting anything
 - Elected to pull back without actually removing Saddam... sensing “that the US might need a reliable enemy in the future”
 - Bush’s approval rating soared, depictions no longer questioned his masculinity

The Childhood Origins of Terrorism

- ◆ Origins of terrorist attacks lie, “not in this or that American foreign policy error, but in the extremely abusive families of the terrorists”
 - “Islamic...terrorists are products of a misogynist fundamentalist system that often segregated the family into two separate areas: the men’s and the women’s”
 - What about *American* terrorists??
 - Horrible treatment of girls and women...genital mutilation, high rates of sexual abuse and rates, wife beating, no access to education or employment
 - Common physical abuse at home, corporal punishment at school, sexual abuse for boys as well
 - For males, originally attracted to Western culture, Westerners came to represent their “own ‘bad boy’ self in projection, and had to be killed off, as they felt they themselves deserved for such unforgivable sins as listening to music, flying kites, and enjoying sex”

- Iranian Ministry of Culture: all American TV programs are part of an “extensive plot to wipe out our religious and sacred values”
- Osama bin Laden: “a drinker and a womanizer”, but felt extreme guilt for his sins and began preaching killing Westerners for their freedoms and their sinful enticements of Muslims
- ◆ Islamic terrorists have been taught to kill the part of themselves ---and by projection, others— that is selfish and wants personal freedoms and pleasures
- ◆ If we want to prevent terrorism, we should back a UN sponsored Marshall plan (such as that for Germany after WWII) that includes community parenting centers to teach more humane child rearing practices

Interesting thoughts....

- “Time and Newsweek ran scare stories about a ‘wildly out of control’ crime wave that was supposed to be occurring—although they had paid little attention to crime in previous months and in fact the actual crime rate had been *decreasing* during those months”
- “...seemed to the military an embarrassment, calling it ridiculous because *‘the whole goddam operation depends on finding one guy in a bunker.’*”
- “Who would be our enemy in the next sacrificial war?”
- “...where could he find an enemy crazy enough to be willing to fight the most powerful military force on earth, yet small enough for us to defeat easily?”
- “The arming of Iraq was a 15 year love affair [for America]. Saddam Hussein was our creation, our monster. We built him up and then tried to take him down”
- Gore, on Bush (senior): “Bush wants the American people to see him as the hero who put out a raging fire. But new evidence now shows that he is the one who set the fire. He not only struck the match, he poured gasoline on the flames”

Discussion Questions & Group notes (thanks for your great discussions!)

I. Hitler's Childhood: from hidden to manifest horror

- 1. What are criticisms of using psycho-analytic theory to explain Hitler's behavior? Does it adequately explain it?**
 - ignores political climate / contexts
 - retrospective, after the fact
 - conjectured hypotheses—based on theory and used to put puzzle pieces together
 - theory that reader believes can be extrapolated from this explanation

- 2. What is the influence of Hitler possibly having a Jewish grandfather in his attempt to eradicate the Jews?**
 - “probably knowing”...did Hitler know that he had a Jewish grandfather?
 - Hints that he had knowledge of this
 - hates g'pa and father...but easier to hate Jews than own family

- 3. What political and contextual factors should also be considered in explaining Hitler's behavior and rise to power?**
 - political context, economics (pointing fingers at Jews)
 - child-rearing context...hierarchical structure perhaps made it easier for Hitler to take power
 - had been peace for awhile...maybe needed a war?
 - alliances of Hitler (e.g. PR guy who helped him move up, interact with people, provided funding)...where would Hitler have gone w/o this guy helping him?
 - betrayal from the fact that lost WWI, humiliation

- 4. How is living out hatred the “opposite of experiencing it”?**
 - affects more people to live it out
 - experiencing hatred = intrapsychic process
 - don't think it's “opposite”
 - if you experience it, and feel you can't get it out→ eventually it will come out in some form (self-destructive or harmful to others)
 - * feels more like a continuum relationship than opposite

- 5. What are similarities btwn the organization of families and totalitarian regimes? How did Hitler's family experience affect how he organized his regime, concentration camps?**
 - uncompromising in regime...compromise = weakness
 - control to take away when you want to
 - leader can ask you to do anything, and you have to do it
 - admiration, love and respect is unquestionable for leaders of family

II. Politics of Denial

- 1. How does the media coverage of war, international relations, and world news perpetuate denial?**
 - Iraqis are not depicted as people—denies their humanness. Makes it easy to distance ourselves from their experiences.
 - Use of passive language—“War is inevitable.”
 - “Few casualties” refers to US troops, does not acknowledge the “enemy” casualties.
 - Seeing self (own nation) as victors—winning is associated with successful and with what is right.
 - Capitalizes on fear
 - Politicians use the media to create an image and change the focus of the war. Weapons of mass destruction do not matter because the US won.

- 2. What function does denial serve in creating “acceptable” targets for aggression? (i.e. war, capital punishment)**
 - Politicians who can be more free to ban capital punishment are already perceived as “masculine,” such as Jesse Ventura.
 - Can not take out own aggression—a scapegoat is needed. The media helps with this by dehumanizing the enemy.
 - Categorizing into “good and evil” is very oversimplified. Portrays Bush as “superhero.”
 - Denial of history
 - Lack of attention to the roots of violence.
 - Hard to admit that part of it.

- 3. Will being faced with “unpleasant truths” (p.8) promote healing or increase anxiety (or both)?**
 - Support system needs to be in place. Need to be OK with being vulnerable—stop being so stoic.
 - “Unpleasant truths” need to be paired with something that can be done about it.

- 4. What purpose does spanking serve adults according to Millburn and Conrad? How might cultural differences in attitudes about corporal punishment affect children differently?**
 - Different meanings for Caucasians and African Americans with possibly less detriment to African Americans.
 - o Right of passage—“I went through this and I am OK.”
 - o Easier to trust own painful experiences as normal and not because it was “bad.”
 - o What makes adults want sense of power—own childhood experiences.
 - o Dissociation—need to function in an unjust society.

5. How does denial of our emotions and dilemmas experienced in childhood affect our political behavior? (e.g. as leaders, voters, or political party alignment)

- Empathy versus re-enacting (denying own experiences)
- High levels of dissociation—more likely to abuse children.

III. The Emotional Life of Nations

5. (diagnoses question)

Some diagnoses:

- sociopathic
- male histrionics, dysthymia
- PTSD (esp. post 9-11)
 - “pre” TSD...unprecedented demonstrations *before* the war (that were mostly ignored)...feeling of inevitability
- DID, split personality: overly patriotic side vs. opposition of war (‘unamerican’ for opposing war)
- a little bit of borderline?

Some symptoms:

- militant
- hypervigilant
- paranoid delusions, delusions of grandeur
- feel the need to justify actions... (‘embedded reporters’ on front lines)
- erratic aggressive behavior
- extreme patriotism
- feelings of inadequacy
- projecting feelings of lack of control into action vs. external “evil” source after 9/11
- anxiety
- lack of control (leads to homeland security bill, that in effect destroys human rights...therefore turning against self)

2. (Rhetoric question)

- “axis of evil”...myth of good vs. evil
- Wild West metaphors... Osama bin Laden as “wanted, dead or alive”
 - Middle east as last frontier? Manifest destiny...divine right
- “terror”, “terrorists”
- “victim” language (of terrorists)...our duty to stand up, fight back, not be victimized anymore
- * all serves to keep anxiety level up, leads people to believe its true without questioning

3. (ways to reduce anxiety):

- scapegoat minorities and other groups
- find a problem in the community to tackle--create crisis and try to fix it...e.g. kidnappings, ‘war on drugs’, gangs, etc.
- (more positive solution): talk and use diplomacy!