

Trauma's Legacy
Psychology 607, Winter 2004,
University of Oregon

February 2, 2004:

Part I: Questions about the last part of the book: *The Politics of Denial*

In Julius Lester's book, To Be a Slave, two ways for enslaving human beings are listed: one through force and one to teach him or her to think that her/his own best interests will be served by doing what his master wishes him to do. The latter was more subtle way with a main goal to brainwash the slave. In the cruelest way slave was asked to deny his own identity in addition to his feelings. Many parallels could be made with Milburn and Conrad's book. One that comes to mind is *emotional numbing* that's associated with denial. Could you think of some others?

Milburn and Conrad cite a classic article (p.168) by political scientist Murray Edelman (1971) that argues that governments attempt to generate a series of public perceptions in support of their actions. These perceptions are often not representative of reality and are simplified version of events if not falsification. Some of these perceptions are: "particular groups in the world are evil;" "certain kinds of actions are evil." Maybe it's just me, but doesn't this sound familiar? (hint: "evil-doers")

While we're discussing "evil" isn't it interesting that the other Bush administration referred to Manuel Noriega (once on CIA's payroll) as "an evil man engaged in evil deeds." (p.172) (maybe this adjective runs in some families?)

The authors illustrate how the power of personal motives can initiate policies that impact many people by using the example of JFK and Khrushchev (pp.169-170). Is this stretching it or do you think that there is some validity to this claim?

The authors do a great job of illustrating how war is described like a game using words like "cleaning up" and "owning the air." (p.174) How does this contribute to mass denial?

I was absolutely surprised by the results of Milgram (1963) study (p.179). 65% of subjects obeyed orders to administer 450 volts of electricity to a fellow human being. Authority is the key variable that predicts obedience – What are some reasons for people's willingness to do horrible things to other human beings in addition to obeying an order?

The authors argue that the international community did not intervene in Rwanda because there is a possibility that other nations ignore or deny the occurrence of genocide as a result of their own ethnocentrism or racism. I can relate to this statement – the European

Community did not do anything for 3 years while neighboring Bosnians were being exterminated (200,000 people killed) constituting the worst genocide Europe has seen since the WWII. If one can assign different magnitudes of tragedy Rwanda was even more tragic story as it received little or no attention and close to million people were killed. Would this happen if the same thing was happening in Belgium? Saudi Arabia? Does economy alone dictate the worth of a nation? Or are there alliances based on values, race, religion, etc.? By ignoring genocide aren't we denying the existence of those people? Aren't we denying their humanity? – (“cheese sandwich”) (p.190).

How can public figures such as Pat Buchanan make outrageous comments and deny Holocaust and get away with practically no media scrutiny? Who has a power to define what's important and what's not? Who controls the media?

The authors mention (p.196) Weine and his colleagues (1995) study that found Bosnian refugees in the United States suffer high rates of PTSD and depression. What about those detainment camp survivors who still live in Bosnia and Herzegovina surrounded by Serbia and Croatia who constantly minimize if not deny their responsibilities for war crimes committed against humanity? They are denying it in the face of the victims or equalizing responsibility of all 3 ethnicities by calling it “civil war”.

The authors relate the importance of power and toughness and “survival of the fittest” of a laissez-faire capitalism to authoritarianism that contributes to denial. Do you agree?

Texas Rep. DeLay assembled more than a hundred business lobbyists into Project Relief whose goal is to eliminate regulation of business by federal government. (p.218) Wasn't the regulation implemented by FDR during the Great Depression because lack of business regulations was one of the reasons that led to stock market crash in the late 20's? Are conservatives denying historical facts now? (Actually, they do – remember Pat B. case)

What did you think about Ingo Hasselbach's case? (p.224)

Part II: Questions about the two articles on slavery (NYT magazine article and Scientific American article)

As difficult and challenging as it was to read the two articles (I cannot believe the human brutality that is still going on) somehow I managed to write down a few discussion questions:

Denial is a powerful thing. Scientific American article writes: “Often slaveholders have interposed many layers of management between themselves and the slaves. They purposely deny themselves the knowledge of what they are doing and thus the responsibility for it.” This reminds me of Milburn and Conrad's comments on proximity's role in denial. Do you think that the more distance (or insulation) one makes

between themselves and injustice that it is easier to deny the injustice? After all wasn't Vietnam far away? Iraq?

In 1865, when slaves were emancipated in the U.S. they were denied any rehabilitation that is needed after centuries of enslavement. This freedom without rehabilitation is also a form of denial of the seriousness of the institution – denying them rehabilitation is like saying that what they went through is not that significant...

Scientific American article ends with “Our ignorance of their hidden world is vast.” Is their world hidden or are we not looking for it? Or is media not reporting things that are too disturbing?

The New York Times article states: “...estimates that there are 30,000 to 50,000 sex slaves in captivity in the United States at any given time. Laura Lederer, a senior State Dept. adviser on trafficking, told me, ‘We’re not finding victims in the United States because we’re not looking for them.’” This happens despite the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and the Protect Act, but these acts address most of the injustice that’s going on outside our borders? By focusing on sex trafficking elsewhere are we forgetting/neglecting or denying the abuse of sex-slaves in the U.S.?

Part III” Discussion Notes from call discussion: 1/2/2/04

Two ways to enslave man – by force or by brainwashing... often both used – examples: slavery; with Native Americans. Also, battered women often experience the interplay between violence and brain washing as violence scares people into obeying.

The power of language – words like “evil” used often by politicians – power of language is denied!

Conservatives are not as constrained by morality- better use and manipulation with words.

Some politicians use words like “crusade”... Part of denial is decomplexifying often complex reality.

Political correctness turned around... complexity presented by more liberal politicians often interpreted as less genuine...

Science O.K. only if it agrees with certain political agenda.

Emergence of “faith based” programs and abstinence. Cannot be beat by logic.

Vietnam – desensitizing war...

Corruption in science community – for example, pharmacological firms “pushing” their products to physicians – physicians may think that they are not being influenced – general attitude of “I’ll accept this, but won’t be corrupted...”

Power of wealth in political discourse – book: Buying of the President – applies for both Democrats and Republicans.

Historical causes of constitution taken out of context.

Power of media: new film whose director is using the film to push his own agenda of getting the case overturned... this applies to some politicians... Who decides what gets more attention – church child abuse or domestic abuse?

Media- who runs the world? What are the implications for the future of the internet...

“Mass hypnosis” – T.V. and the passive nature of watching it – reduces our critical thinking...

Hopefully, the Protect Act will take effect after a while and be fully reinforced...

Dorothy Lewis book – case studies on murders – they themselves had injuries and were abused.

The way we raise our children is very influential and very meaningful and has implications for larger societal processes.

James Prescott – societies that are more “touchy”/hugging and sexuality is O.K. is less violent.