Evolutionary Psychology

www.epjournal.net – 2009. 7(1): 6-10

Book Review

Human Nature Abhors a Vacuum

A review of James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing. (Second Edition).* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 351 pp., US$24.99, ISBN 978-0-19-531456-4 (paperback).

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The book's dedication—to the 60 million people who were victims of genocide and mass murder in the past century—is a sobering reminder of the ghastly terrain this book covers. Lest we lose sight of that brutal reality amid the academic studies and polemic, Waller ends each chapter with harrowing first-hand accounts of atrocities from across history and around the world. The reader's visceral response of "I could never do that" goes a long way to underlining and personalizing the central thesis against which Waller argues. Frighteningly, and I am guessing this was not the author's intention, the emotional impact of these scenes lessened as, like the perpetrators, I became increasingly desensitized to the horror.

The first part of the book wraps up and discards the notion that Holocaust killers were different from the rest of humanity. But I found myself wondering if such a belief really continues to survive. Since Hannah Arendt's famous phrase "the banality of evil" entered the lexicon, most of us accept that the potential for mass killing was not confined to a few madmen during the Second World War. Indeed the author himself suggests that some readers might wish to skip this section and proceed directly to the next part of the book. This first section dismisses German national culture, psychopathology and the Nazi or authoritarian personality as adequate explanations of the holocaust. But the chief weapon in this argument is a defective one: the Rorschach test. After the war, Allied mental health professionals headed by Douglas Kelley and Gustave Gilbert arrived in Nuremburg to ascertain the mental health of 19 Nazi defendants. The two reached very different conclusions: Kelley, a psychiatrist, announced that "none of them [were] sufficiently deviate to be locked up by society under normal conditions" (p. 65) while Gilbert, a psychologist, authored an article entitled "The Mentality of SS Murdering Robots." To resolve the issue, Gilbert's Rorschach notes were made available to ten experts but none agreed to examine the records. Each feared that the test would reveal no pathology and this

would be disastrous on two counts. Firstly, because world opinion held that these high level Nazis must be insane and secondly, that failure to find *scientific* evidence of this must cast doubt on the Rorschach itself.

From our contemporary understanding of psychometrics, we know of course that such doubt would be well-placed. (A later reanalysis of the Nuremburg Rorschach responses found that the group manifested "overconfidence." Why? Because they expressed mistrust of the Rorschach testing instrument!) Waller briefly acknowledges the doubtful reliability and validity of the projective method but continues to argue that "the Rorschach gives us a window into an individual's most striking or dominant personality characteristics, those that are relatively consistent over time and across different situations, those that differentiate him from others" (p. 77). And this "window" confirms his thesis that pathology played no part in these atrocities. But if the instrument is neither reliable nor valid it cannot prove anything either way. Indeed the author's tendency to see support for his central thesis everywhere and to dismiss viewpoints that undermine it pervades the book and understandably so. The ghastly events which need explanation cannot be ethically subject to experimental research, so attempts at understanding must come from the post hoc application of hypotheses and it is all too easy for confirmatory bias to creep in. Perhaps the most striking impact of this first section is as a historical indictment of the psychology of the time: Impenetrable psychoanalytic terms (doubling, anti-intraception, projectivity, infantile emotional dependence) bandied about as if they had some scientific legitimacy.

In Part 2 we move on to Waller's model of how ordinary people can commit genocide and mass killing. The list of variables in this model is long but I suspect that you can guess many of them if you have read the classic studies included in social psychology textbooks: Conformity (Asch's line judgments), intergroup hostility (Tajfel's minimal group paradigm), obedience (Milgram's shock machine) and role acceptance (Zimbardo's prison study). Waller depends heavily on the original reports of most of these studies with much less consideration of their replicability or later caveats and revisions. The factors he cites are doubtless relevant but my argument is with his use of the term "model" to describe them. Waller explicitly eschews the idea that his model might be "a sequential, additive or flowchart design in which one stage must be fully experienced before advancing (or regressing) to the next one" (p. 139). Although he refers to it as "an overarching explanatory model" (p. 139), it appears to be simply a list of nine variables broadly dealing with group processes and moral justifications. How then do these combine to explain the behavior of any given individual? Is there a critical threshold for each of them that, when exceeded, trips the individual into genocide? Do all the factors have to be active or just some of them? In the final chapter, the author asks for more research to determine the relative importance of the factors suggesting that he envisions some set of regression weightings that can predict genocidal behavior. Because Waller tells us so frequently that not everyone is drawn into participation in these atrocities, the issue of individual differences remains centre stage and, having sloughed off personality as an explanation in the first section, we are left with only differences in the joint and interactive impact of these variables to explain why some are able to resist being drawn into such demonic acts.

His model identifies three broad areas of proximate influence (each subsuming three processes). The first, Cultural Construction of Worldview, deals with cultural support for aspects of group process including collectivist values (effectively a treatment of social identity theory's emphasis on in-group and out-group effects), authority orientation (the

role of dominance hierarchies within groups) and social dominance orientation (a preference for group-based social hierarchies and ideologies that foster group inequalities). Because the "cultural construction of worldview is differentially internalised across individuals" (p. 173), individual differences are to be expected, although presumably cannot be predicted.

The second area is the Psychological Construction of the Other and includes: Us-them thinking (which would appear to have much in common with social identity theory but this time is scaffolded by Sherif's boys' camp study), moral disengagement (justifications, dehumanization and euphemistic labeling of evil actions) and blaming the victim. This section raises a key problem that Waller has used earlier to dismiss Lifton's work on doubling—the causal and temporal relationship. Earlier in the book dissociative "doubling" by Nazi leaders is interpreted by Waller as a reaction to the horrific acts willingly undertaken rather than as a cause of them as Lifton had originally contended. But here Waller sees justifications as enabling rather than reactive: Generated by political and ideological forces, their availability made it possible for ordinary citizens to commit horrific acts. While the issue of time ordering may not be crucial (justifications may well play both roles), it is important in the context of what is proposed as a causal model. The final member of the psychological triad is the Social Construction of Cruelty involving professional socialization (escalating commitments using the foot-in-the-door technique and the power of role assignation from Zimbardo's prison study), group identification (including diffusion of responsibility and deindividuation) and binding factors (the power of conformity and group acceptance).

So far, so much social psychology. Can evolutionary psychology add anything to this exhaustive selection of explanatory variables? Waller believes it can and the central chapter of the book provides the reader with a compact primer on the topic. This chapter sits proud and theoretical, amid the smorgasbord of social psychological concepts arrayed around it. And that is the problem. It is largely disconnected from the remainder of the argument. What is it doing there? According to Waller it is there to establish "the nature of human nature" which is our ability to kill others of our own species. Now this seems like a chapter too far. The fact that we patently *do* kill our own species seems quite sufficient to attest to our capability of doing so. Performance implies competence. More worrying is the elision between evolutionary psychology and religion, concerning which Waller enthusiastically quotes historians Konkola and Sunshine: "The hottest field in modern science is just in the process of discovering the part of human nature which Christianity used to call 'original sin'" (p. 159) and Donald Campbell's "thesis about basic biological human nature that is in agreement with traditional religious moral teachings" (p. 159). It is hard to know who is more likely to be appalled by this comparison—fundamentalist ministers or Richard Dawkins.

So Waller's argument is that evolutionary psychology "tells us only that we are capable of committing evil" but it is "too diffuse to tell us everything we need to know about the direction, form, and targets of our violent behaviour" (p. 171). Our evolutionary dark side is "activated" by the triad of proximal factors he describes. The reason that I was surprised by the apparently limited role of evolutionary psychology is because several pages earlier, Waller's diagram of his proposed model clearly shows unidirectional arrows flowing from a box labeled The Evolution of Human Nature to the three social psychological domains (Cultural Worldviews, Psychological Construction of the Other and

Social Construction of Cruelty). This led me to suppose that these causal arrows were to be explained, so I was anticipating an exposition firstly of how human evolution had permitted the formation of transmissible cumulative culture and thence perhaps to a more speculative consideration of the way that representational thought and language makes it possible for us to categorize, distance, blame, justify, excuse and otherwise manage the dirty business of harming others. But this was not to be. Evolutionary theory is entrained chiefly to establish that human competition abounds. But human evolutionary psychology is hardly needed for that observation—competition drives evolution in all species.

To make the link between evolutionary psychology and the psychology of genocide, he highlights the *groupie* nature of humans which sets the stage for both our ethnocentrism and our xenophobia. But to do this he uses the controversial (and to me unnecessary) stepping stone of group selection. Waller acknowledges that there is considerable debate about whether the group could be a unit of selection noting that "Some would even go so far as to say that group selection rarely manages to overcome individual selection" (p. 157) but decides that "It would be irresponsible to simply assume that living in these groups has not somehow produced group-level adaptations" (p. 156). But there is really no need for him to lead the reader into this unit-of-selection debate. The fact that humans are a social species means that we have evolved emotions and abilities that regulate these relationships. We cooperate, empathize, imitate, converse, mind read and feel affection, but none of this requires anything more than selection for individuals who are successful at group living. Similarly, distrust for the out-group (which we share with chimpanzees) requires only that we are unwilling to share scarce resources with those beyond our kin and acquaintance. Because individual humans benefit from group living does not require that those groups themselves become the units of selection. Even when an individual risks his life for the group, I am not convinced that we have to invoke group selection. Warfare may pose the possibility of death but the social ostracism and banishment that would follow from refusing to fight would have been a certain death sentence in the ancestral past.

As a woman and an evolutionary psychologist reading this book, I was surprised to find a scant five pages given to the topic of gender. I eventually found it, nestled in a section on Binding Factors in the Group, where Waller suggests that "masculinity norms structure expectations in groups that facilitate violence and atrocity" (p. 264). The theoretical centrality of sex differences in evolutionary psychology would suggest its obvious relevance to understanding men's greater involvement in competition, dominance and subjugation yet these are barely touched upon. Instead and somewhat unexpectedly, Waller argues that women are no more averse to committing atrocities than are men. Since Waller acknowledges that the historical record shows that genocide is "overwhelmingly the work of men" (p. 264), the search for supporting data is selective to say the least. I do not doubt that women have the ability to carry out extraordinary evil but the more obvious fact that begs explanation is how rarely they do it.

By the end of the book I became convinced that the processes that Waller entrains to explain "extraordinary evil" are probably those that most social scientists would also identify as important, but what makes the book remarkable is the wealth of first-hand data and detail that have been brought to bear to illustrate, rather than prove, his thesis. More worryingly for evolutionary psychologists is to find our discipline used simply to fill the theoretical hole of human nature. Social scientists who wish to separate themselves from the blank slate view of mankind need a platform on which to build their argument, one that

will explain the relative ease with which we learn some things and relative difficulty of others. I believe that evolutionary psychology has more to offer than this.