Book Review


I have seldom read a book that has fascinated me as much as this one. At the same time, it is not a book that I would recommend to take with you on a sunny, relaxing vacation on a Greek island or a similar place.

The main thesis of this book, that is well documented, is, that people are not born as torturers, but that circumstances and situations turn people that otherwise would have become average, decent citizens into ferocious, brutal offenders. The author presents a thorough piece of research. It has the character of a case study, exemplary (too exemplary) of processes that take place in many parts of the world. She analyses a life-phenomenon, torture under the Greek dictatorship (1967–1974). And what makes this study of special interest, is, that she, rather than interviewing the victims of torture, found her main respondents among the torturers themselves. These people have been brought to justice after the fall of the Greek junta. The researcher spent many hours, even days, with them after their release, and her findings from the interviews form the empirical basis of this study. But she does much more than this. She analyses how far the existing theories of human behavior can explain her data, and is not afraid to criticize them and propose an alternative theory, using her own findings as well as data from psychological and anthropological research. I do not know any other book that made such an elaborate study of a phenomenon that generally is considered abject and repulsive. The common wishful thinking is, that torture is alien to civilized and democratic nations, where human values are believed to be upheld. The author shows that this is an illusion, and her intention is to help prevent future occurrence of this kind of maltreatment of human beings.

The author disagrees with the theoretical assumptions that dispositional factors are behind the activity of torture and questioned the explanatory value of Adorno’s (1969) theories and his famous F-scale. Her findings seem to emphasize the situational hypothesis: torturers are made, not born. Methodologically the researcher started her work from a behavior modification background with an emphasis on Bandura’s social learning theory. In the process of her work however she moved to a more phenomenological approach, in which qualitative analysis proved to be more and more illuminating. She analyses the well-known Milgrarn
and Zimbardo experiments. She describes the parallels with her own data, but also shows convincingly the differences between the experimental and the real-life situations. The study also tells us something about the personality of the researcher who spent many years on this project, and did it by herself. She must be a strong person. Reading the transcripts of her interviews is an experience hard to digest; hearing the subjects talk, question them, and spending days, in one case a full week, with them, is not something an everyday researcher can easily bear. And yet, she not only succeeded in completing the procedures, but also in keeping her professional attitude as a researcher.

Let me turn now to the contents of the book. I will not try to summarize the transcripts of the interviews or the extracts of what the torturers said in court, but recommend the reader of this review to read the book. It is an illuminating, but discomforting reading. Torturers are trained by being tortured, indoctrinating them with the governmental ideology, creating group cohesion and giving them a special status in the military system. After analyzing the personal histories of her subjects the researcher concludes that the military authorities “were not looking for recruits with authoritarian personality traits or indeed any authoritarian tendencies . . . rather, what was important to them was conformity and conventionalism” (pp. 134, 135). The training follows what the author calls a “model for obedience to the authority of violence” (p. 164). In-group euphemistic language was used as a tool to reduce the torturer’s anxiety and strain.

Reviewing her data, the researcher concludes: “Torture, in one form or another, is not too different from the infliction of pain that occurs in everyday life. Institutionalized torture is at the extreme of a continuum, rather than something qualitatively different from everyday action” (p. 188). In the creation of torturers she finds parallels to initiation rites (rites of passage) that are found in anthropological research. To the author the situational approach “provides the major argument that the torturer is a person responding normally to abnormal circumstances” (p. 232). In the final pages of the book she formulates seven principles of violent aggression “that have withstood the tests of replication and criticism fairly well and are relevant to this study” (p. 233). They are followed by “seven compelling generalizations.” To repeat them here is tempting, but would take too much space. I rather refer the reader to the book itself.

The question arises what does a book like this mean to the counselor. Mika Haritos Fatouros ends the book with an impressive quote from Pastor (and former submarine commander — ND) Martin Niemöller, dated 19 October 1945:

“In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unions, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics. I was a Protestant and so I didn’t speak up. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for anyone.” (pp. 240, 241)

I offer a few observations: If one thing has become clear from this piece of research, it is that violence creates violence, and that children who have learned to obey and to