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An Analysis of Psychological Manipulation in Military Culture

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### Abstract

While strict discipline is substantiated as necessary by the armed forces, this creates an environment where individual decision-making is oppressed in favor of mob mentality. Much like how individuals adhere to the culture of common society, the military presents its own social structures for its soldiers. The film *A Few Good Men* (1992) explores these military institutions where its hierarchal structure emphasizes motifs of obedience, ideology, conformity, and labels, which are central to how it deals with unpredictable problems. Although necessary, these shape the underlying vulnerable psychology of soldiers who learn to view themselves as instruments for superiors, to coincide to militaristic morals, and to seek a sense of community. Psychosomatic research places these in context to the similar nature of identity depravity in prison, authoritarianism, and the reduced sensibility of actions through routinization--all of which play a role in the mental manipulation that the film analyzes in soldiers who conform to military ideals. This paper explores the potential moral, physical, and mental abuse that these military standards can provoke through the psychological exploitation of individual soldiers, which the overall military environment reinforces.

*Keywords:* obedience, conformity, labels, identity, authoritarianism, routinization, dehumanization

### An Analysis of Psychological Manipulation in Military Culture

Military culture can be brought to extreme excesses where innocent lives are slaughtered. Director Rob Reiner's film *A Few Good Men* (1992) is ideal in demonstrating how this can occur by illustrating how soldiers can be compelled to murder. In this film, the Marines Dawson and Downey are facing murder charges when they impose a Code Red, a form of military hazing which seeks to correct an underperforming soldier's behavior, onto their fellow Marine, Santiago, which results in his accidental death. However, these Marines obtain reduced charges when it is revealed that their superior officer Jessup ordered them to commit the Code Red. From this, important questions of why these Marines committed such an immoral order arise. The soldiers could have refrained from murdering Santiago, but still carried out the action. The explanation as to why is provided through modern psychological research that analyzes the concepts behind the nature of obedience and subtly defines the decision-making processes of the soldier. While authoritarianism reduces the perception of responsibility for actions to provide a basis as to why inhumane actions occur, the immoral excesses of military culture are rather caused by dehumanization of foreign social groups, and is psychologically justified through the innate desire for stable social identity as seen through contemporary research and history.

### Literature Review

#### Authoritarianism

An individual's feelings of responsibility for his or her actions can be circumvented through the nature of authoritarianism, which can lead them to commit unusually excessive actions. To explain the nature of authoritarianism, the social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted an infamous experiment to test its conduciveness to obedience in the 1960's. Under the experimenter's orders, a volunteer teacher would administer progressively stronger shocks that unbeknownst did no harm to a learner whenever the learner said memorized lists of word pairs incorrectly (Milgram, 1973, p. 62). Even when the learner painfully complained of a heart condition and the shocks approached dangerous levels, most volunteers would shock the learners anyway upon the experimenter's encouragement (Milgram, 1973, p. 65). Professors V. Lee Hamilton and Herbert Kelman explain this type of authority situation by stating how

“actors often do not see themselves as personally responsible for the consequences of their actions” (p. 16). The teachers felt as if they could commit these actions since the consequences were on the experimenter. It is not that the teachers intentionally put the learners in danger, but they were alleviated of the judgment necessary for moral actions by having their superiors tell them what to do. For instance, learners asked if the experimenter accepted all responsibility when they were about to dispense the ending, dangerous shocks, and they felt reluctance to deviate from their duties since obeying the superior was their job (Milgram, 1973, pp. 66-75). With the assurance that consequences would not befall them and how their role in the environment encouraged them to obey, they felt comfortable committing increasingly excessive actions.

The power dynamic behind authority also contributed to the obedient mentality. For instance, the volunteer teachers that painfully shocked learners in the experiment felt “proud of doing a good job” and of “obeying the experimenter under difficult circumstances” (Milgram, 1973, p. 76). In an environment where authority figures give orders, individuals are complicit to them instead of the usual considerations for decisions. Rather, “a different kind of morality linked to the duty to obey superior orders, tends to take over” under authoritarianism (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 16). Individuals feel proud for obeying and doing their duty instead of feeling proud for their moral decisions, especially when their social status as a subordinate demands it from them. They can only disobey orders by challenging the authority figures, which is difficult to do because of the resulting tension. In the military for example, disobeying orders could lead to one being “court-martialed” and “sent to death” (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 10), showing the difficulty of doing such an action due to the consequences, and how simply obeying is easier and encouraged.

### **Dehumanization**

Furthermore, the dehumanization of foreign social groups provides the encouragement to commit atrocities against them. The My Lai Massacre, in which hundreds of innocent Vietnamese civilians were slaughtered by the United States military in the Vietnam War, provides an excellent example (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 1). Many of the civilians in this massacre were thought to be the communist enemy

Viet Cong that the war was being fought against (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, pp. 3-4). As Lieutenant Calley, who oversaw this mission, stated “I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy...I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women, and children” (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 10). This concept is summarized well when Stanford psychologist Phillip G. Zimbardo asserts that “it is the label that is the reality which is treated and not the person” (Zimbardo, 2013, p. 116). In the massacre, labels were placed on these people as enemy communists, and they were not regarded as real people because of that characterization. The military company had an utter hatred toward those people since they were fighting them, and as a result, they could murder the civilians without any real guilt by dehumanizing them as enemy communists. Even more so, a controlled experiment by Zimbardo can illustrate this for clarity. His experiment placed volunteers into separate groups of prisoners and guards, where the guards were tasked with guarding the prisoners in confinement, to study the effects of imprisonment (Zimbardo, 2013, p. 106). The prisoners were only assigned a number to be referred by, and both groups were made to wear identical uniforms according to their status as a guard or prisoner (Zimbardo, 2013, p. 109). Increasingly, guards took escalating steps to control the prisoners. For instance, when prisoners rebelled by barricading their cell doors with their mattresses, the guards sprayed a fire extinguisher at them and started harassing them (Zimbardo, 2013, pp. 110-111). The lack of a name for prisoners allowed the guards to think of them less as human beings and more as objects. Especially when combined with how all the combatant prisoners wore the same attire and are viewed with condescension in society, it was easy for the guards to regard them as lesser and sadistically treat them as such. This demonstrates how dehumanization occurs since these prisoners were seen less as humans and more as objects of the guards’ duties that are to be subjugated in accordance to their social groups’ perceptions.

The nature of dehumanization can be further defined by analyzing how labels play into individual identity. Despite no training, the guards easily adjusted to their roles since the “media had already provided them with ample models of prison guards to emulate,” and the prisoners increasingly resigned to their social condition after increasing punishment from the guards (Zimbardo, 2013, pp. 109-111). In this, both prisoners and guards increasingly conformed to their label. The guards acted accordingly to what the

media had shown guards to be like; the preconceptions of society in which control and authority define guards. The prisoners acted more obedient and less combative as more time went by, in accordance with what the guards viewed as characteristics of a good prisoner. They adhered to the ideal socially defined label that their environment best enforced. When these individuals confine themselves more and more to the conceptions of their role, their individual, independent moral decision-making is increasingly halted in favor of what their label is defined as. Much like how soldiers in the My Lai massacre killed the civilians in accordance with their duties and how their label as a soldier in society encouraged them to kill all their enemies, all these individuals are dehumanized since they all conform to what society makes them to be instead of what they are individually. In the prison experiment, one instance exemplifies this idea well. Prisoner 819 wanted to leave the mock prison due to an emotional breakdown, and the guards were obligated to let him go since it was only a volunteer experiment. However, the guards had all the prisoners call Prisoner 819 a “bad prisoner” and made sure that he heard them (Zimbardo, 2013, p. 114). Surprisingly, Prisoner 819 soon wanted to remain in the prison to prove them wrong, and that he was in fact a good prisoner (Zimbardo, 2013, p. 114). Likewise, the prisoner wanted to conform to what his label of a good prisoner was instead making the normal, reasonable choice of leaving, evidence of the dehumanization that occurred. This shares some of the same characteristics as the shocking Milgram experiment. The teacher wanted to conform to the label of a good teacher, which was defined by obedience to the experimenter in that environment. In all these instances, these labels play on the individuals’ desire for acceptance into the community of their peer group and the fear of identity depravity. Their label is their identity that gives them social status, to the point that they ignore reasonable, individual human decision-making and act accordingly to their label. As Kelman and Hamilton emphasize, “Labels help deprive the victims of identity and community,” which is dehumanization (p. 19).

### **Social Conformity**

Moreover, social conformity provides the means for stability in an environment that further reduces the necessity for individual judgment for his or her decisions. In the mock prison, prisoners

stopped resisting the guards as much since this was “the safest strategy to use in an unpredictable, threatening environment” (Zimbardo, 2013, p. 113). This demonstrates how individuals will conform to common behaviors to bring as much stability to an environment as possible. For example, in the My Lai massacre, many soldiers resorted to this mob mentality to find stability, and to best survive in the unpredictable, threatening environment of Vietnam. Soldiers massacred apparent enemy soldier civilians, following how others were massacring civilians, and did so since it brought perceived security in a possible hostile environment. This social conformity contributes to routinization, which “reduces the necessity of making decisions, thus minimizing the occasions in which moral questions may arise” (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 18). The presiding officer Lieutenant Calley of the My Lai Massacre called the massacre “no great deal,” which demonstrates this concept of routinization (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989, p. 18). By normalizing killing to the soldiers, soldiers thought less of the massacre when it was occurring, and this minimized the necessity of their decision-making judgment and moral reasoning that would occur in a new situation like this. Instead, they conformed to the actions of their peer group to better bring about their desired, perceived stability in that environment, leading to the excesses of the massacre.

### **Discussion**

Therefore, these emphasized concepts illustrate how the immoral excesses of military culture can occur. Authoritarianism makes individuals place the primary responsibility of their actions on their authority figures as seen in the Stanley Milgram experiment, so that individuals feel emboldened in committing immoral actions because they no longer feel as if they have consequences for them. This plays much into military ideology, where obedience to authority figures is paramount and lack of which is punishable in military court. In a *Few Good Men*, Dawson and Downey committed a morally objectionable Code Red, and they did not feel responsible for their actions because they were commanded to do it. The ideology of their military encouraged complete obedience to a superior officer’s authority. This authoritarianism presents a new kind of morality, where soldiers are proud to perform their duties and to obey, instead of having a choice in their actions. This encourages soldiers to always commit to



carrying out objectionable orders without question. For example, Dawson and Downey most directly exemplified this through their adherence to the military code, which placed unit, corps, God, and country in proceeding order of importance in concepts most significant to them (Brown, Reiner, & Scheinman, 1992). This was used so that any action could be justified. Next, the military emphasizes eliminating enemies and having a lack of mercy toward them. When this concept is emphasized enough, enemies start to seem less like humans and more as objects, so that they are dehumanized. This characterization makes objectionable actions against others seem justified even when they would not be justified in normal terms, such as in the way soldiers felt justified in killing innocent hundreds in the My Lai Massacre. This is also seen in the film when Santiago was murdered by Dawson and Downey, and how his murder's perpetrators felt as if they did nothing wrong. Santiago was seen as an underperforming soldier that would not eliminate enemies well enough in war, and this dehumanizing ideology against this perception contributed to his murder (Brown, Reiner, & Scheinman, 1992). Furthermore, excessively defining what it means to be a soldier leads to labels that soldiers' decisions will be completely characterized by despite the true morality of their decisions. A soldier's repeated actions can desensitize themselves to the gravity of their actions. This is seen in how the prison experiment labeled the volunteers as prisoners and guards, in why the massacre of the civilians occurred, and in why Jessup ordered a Code Red to haze Santiago to toughen him as a protecting soldier despite it being possibly morally objectionable in *A Few Good Men*.

### **Conclusion**

Conclusively, by reducing the individual perception of responsibility for one's actions through authoritarianism, the potential basis for excessive military action is formed due to a perceived lack of consequences. Even more so, social groups are defined by labels, which dehumanizes individuals, since their actions then become more defined by what a social group's label presides for them to do rather than what the individual should do alone. In this, immoral actions can become justified due to an individual's desire for social conformity to their label. Altogether, authoritarianism, dehumanization, labels, and social conformity, can all lead soldiers to disregard the morality of their decisions and commit atrocities.

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