In trying to understand the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, it’s important to consider two different kinds of influences: (1) Contextual / situational, and (2) Individual / personality. The findings and recommendations contained in the report of investigation by Major General A. Taguba (Taguba, 2004) lead to the following inferences regarding both situational and individual factors that were likely of some importance for the military units involved:

**Situational / contextual factors:**

- **Ambiguity, uncertainty in the chain of command, and about who is in charge.** The most notable example from the Taguba report is the conflict between BG Janis Karpinski, CDR of the 800th MP Brigade, and COL Thomas Pappas, CDR of the 205th Military Intelligence Brigade. Soldiers were unclear about who was in charge (cf. FRAGO 19 NOV 03, placing CDR 205 MI BDE in TACON of all units, including MPs, at Abu Ghraib). Similar ambiguities existed at subordinate command levels.

- **Laissez-faire leadership**… leaders not visible or actively involved in mission activities, not communicating standards, policies, plans with soldiers, possibly conveying a sense of complicity or tacit approval of abusive behaviors toward prisoners.

- **Lack of training.** The Taguba report indicates a lack of training and preparation throughout the 800th MP BDE, particularly with respect to prisoner-handling procedures and techniques, and including familiarity with Geneva Conventions.

- **Lack of discipline.** Uniform wear and standards of behavior (including saluting) not established or enforced.

- **Psychological stressors** associated with the OIF mission are not recognized / appreciated by key leaders. The Taguba report indicates these factors included “difference in culture, Soldiers’ quality of life, and the real presence of mortal danger over an extended time period, and the failure of commanders to recognize these pressures contributed to the pervasive atmosphere that existed at Abu Ghraib Detention Facility…” So, the Taguba report points both to the direct impact of psychological stressors on soldiers, as well as failure of leaders to recognize and address these stressors in some way. Previous research into psychological stressors during military operations has identified the following five key factors: (1) Ambiguity, (2) Isolation, (3) Powerlessness, (4) Boredom, and (5) Danger (Bartone, Adler & Vaitkus, 1998). It would appear that all of these psychological factors are salient ones for U.S. soldiers presently in Iraq. Ambiguity

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1 Views and opinions expressed here are those of the author, and do not represent an official position of the National Defense University, Department of Defense, the American Psychological Association, or the Federal Government. Portions of this paper were presented at the 40th International Applied Military Psychology Symposium (IAMPS), Oslo, Norway, May 2004.
also includes uncertainty regarding who is the enemy, and who is a friend, and Boredom can extend to deep questions about the importance or significance of one’s activities. Today I would add to this list another factor, workload or operations-tempo stress, reflecting long work hours, frequent and longer deployment cycles, and inadequate staffing that can result from limited resources and/or failure to replace individual losses over the course of a deployment. The Taguba report indicates that U.S. forces at the Abu Ghraib facility were “undermanned and under resourced”, and that as a Reserve Component unit, the 800th MP BDE had no system for replacing individuals who were lost for reasons such as medical or having completed the required term of active duty service.

Individual / personality factors:

While contextual factors such as those listed above can be powerful influencers of human behavior, an extensive body of research demonstrates that not all individuals respond alike to the same contextual factors. Even Milgram’s (1983) and Zimbardo’s (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973) classic studies in obedience, conformity and social influence found that while many people conform to a surprising degree in inflicting pain and abuse on others, some individuals will resist social pressure and act in accordance with their own values and convictions about what is right. As the Taguba report points out, in the Abu Ghraib situation the majority of units and individuals, including leaders and soldiers, did not succumb to the psychological stressors or any of the other contextual factors or command failings observed. Clearly then, contextual factors alone are not enough to explain why some individuals engaged in, and/or tolerated prisoner abuse. To understand how the prisoner abuse occurred, one also has to consider the psychological – personality factors that can influence individual vulnerability, resilience and performance under highly stressful conditions. These include:

- **Personality “Hardiness”** (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi & Kobasa, 1982). Hardiness is a personality style or trait that includes a strong sense of commitment in life, belief in one’s own ability to exercise control, and a perspective on change as challenging and fun. While most early studies focused on the peculiar ability of high-hardy persons to remain physically healthy despite major life stress, more recent work shows that hardiness also influences short- and long-term healthy mental adjustment to major stressors, including war-related stressors (Bartone, 1998; Bartone, 1999; Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001). In addition, some studies have suggested that leaders who themselves are high in hardness help to generate a more positive social climate and increase cohesion within their units, which in principle would facilitate more healthy adaptation for all members of the unit (Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Brun and Laberg, 2002).

- **Big-Five Personality Traits** (Costa & McCrae, 1990). Studies applying the Five Factor Model of personality have identified personality factors related to leadership potential and effectiveness in various groups, including military officers and cadets (Bartone, Snook and Tremble, 2002; Costa, Bartone, Herbst, Brazil, Kelly, Friedman and McCrae, submitted; McCormack and Mellor, 2002). Evidence suggests that Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness all contribute to more effective leadership. Multiple studies also suggest that agreeableness is related to “Transformational Leadership” style (Judge & Bono, 2000), itself shown to predict greater leader effectiveness in various groups (Bass & Avolio, 1994). More studies are clearly needed to specify the Big Five personality factors and facets associated with better performance of both individual soldiers and leaders in military operations. Resulting knowledge may lead to more refined selection and assignment strategies. For example, it may be that persons high in
Agreeableness (including Trust and Altruism) make more compassionate and effective prison guards, less likely to engage in prisoner abuse (Paul T. Costa, Jr., personal communication, May 2004).\(^2\) Similarly, openness may also be an important personality dimension facilitating greater awareness and appreciation for other cultures and practices different from one’s own.

- **Psychological Development – “maturity.”** In addition to “trait” conceptions of personality, a developmental perspective may also help to shed some light on how individual soldiers in the Abu Ghraib situation could have tolerated and participated in prisoner abuse. Kegan (1994) has developed a comprehensive theory of psychological development that incorporates cognitive, moral and social domains of experience, and describes how individuals construct their world views over the lifespan. In Kegan’s framework, which is supported by multiple studies, most young adults define themselves largely based upon the people and organizations / programs / policies around them (what Kegan calls third-order consciousness, or stage 3). If this model is correct, this implies that most soldiers, like other young adults, are functioning at the third-order of consciousness, making them rather more susceptible to group influences for good or ill. In fact, recent studies on Army officers and cadets suggest this developmental framework applies quite well within the military (Forsythe, Snook, Lewis and Bartone, 2002). An additional implication here is that a stage four perspective – one that recognizes the value and legitimacy of different approaches to understanding the world – is the minimum essential vantage if one is to truly appreciate and respect cultural differences.

While contextual and individual factors are considered as distinct categories in the above comments, it should be understood that in many cases these influence factors will overlap and interact.

In addition to what has already been suggested, some broad conclusions can be drawn from the psychological research and theory reviewed above. One is that military leaders at all levels have a profound responsibility to establish unit social climate and conditions that support positive and ethical behaviors and interpretations of experience, as well as to quickly and effectively address any negative or unethical practices. Furthermore, as military operations and circumstances become more ambiguous, confusing and unstructured, there is an even greater need for military leaders who possess a mature self-structure, broad perspective, and strong “morale compass.” Especially in circumstances where the normal rules or standards don’t seem to apply, or where shared values come into conflict (e.g., loyalty vs. honesty), the “rules” must come from inside the self, not outside. Another way of saying this is that what those around you are doing is not always a reliable guide to correct behavior. Kegan’s conception of meaning-construction would suggest that at a Stage 3 level, where meaning and indeed self-concept reflects an external socially-defined perspective, individuals would have great difficulty behaving in ways that run counter to the immediate social surround. Kegan argues that over half of the world’s adult population is functioning at a Stage 3 level. This may in part explain how human rights violations and prisoner abuse such as that at Abu Ghraib may persist in some circumstances.

If Kegan’s position is correct, it once again implies that senior commanders and leaders must assure that external conditions and standards (including subordinate leadership levels) serve to reinforce appropriate perspectives and behaviors. For example, Taguba’s recommendation that all U.S. MP units prominently display the rules and standards for prisoner treatment, including the Geneva Conventions, is very appropriate and important. On international missions, leaders

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\(^2\) However, in other circumstances (e.g. open combat), too much Agreeableness may be a liability.
must further assure that agreed-upon standards and rules-of-engagement are effectively communicated (with translation as appropriate) across all contingents. This also underscores the critical importance of having a clear understanding and agreement in advance of an international operation by all participating nations / contingents as to the basic rules-of-engagement and standards of behavior, as well as the chain-of-command and lines of authority and how violations will be handled. Without such agreement, leaders on international missions may have a “mission impossible.”

While training and skills-development for soldiers is certainly important, the Kegan model implies that true development of the person to a level that permits a mature, confident, and autonomous world-view is a more fundamental psychological process, one that training programs alone are not likely to influence much. How to go about developing such leaders is a major challenge that needs to be addressed. Psychological research also points to personality traits of high potential value to both soldiers and leaders in stressful conditions, notably hardness and conscientiousness. The question of how to develop or increase these tendencies is also an important one that deserves attention.

The abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of U.S. military forces was something abhorrent and disturbing. It should never have happened in a professional Army, but it did. It is a stain on the honor and integrity of all who wear the uniform. The good news in the prisoner abuse scandal is that it does not characterize the vast majority of our soldiers and military leaders, and also that the U.S. military itself is actively seeking to uncover the truth and take corrective action. The bad news (or part of the bad news) in this incident is that all of those thousands who are serving honorably and well now have an additional burden of stress to carry, all the moreso given the wide dissemination of disturbing digital photos and images. If the key to healthy psychological coping and adjustment involves finding positive meaning in stressful experiences (as I believe it does), then that psychological task just got harder for U.S. forces currently serving. And while the U.S. military is quite correctly under a critical spotlight right now for these incidents, it is well to remember that the underlying forces involved are universal human ones, social and psychological forces that it behooves us all to try to understand better. Military psychologists clearly have an important role to play in developing this knowledge, and in applying it effectively within military organizations.

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3 Under the leadership of Dr. Gerry Larsson of the Swedish Defense College, a study of officer development is currently underway that explores this question using qualitative techniques and interviews with officers from Sweden, U.S., Netherlands, Czech Republic, Canada, Israel, Italy, Norway and United Kingdom.

4 It’s also a reminder of the “dark side” that exists in all humans, what Freud termed the id, that instinctive side that requires control and management by society and by the individual conscience or superego.
References


