Good and Evil and Psychological Science

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To me, evil means great human destructiveness. Evil can come in an obvious form, such as a genocide. Or it can come in smaller acts of persistent harm doing, the effects of which accumulate, like parents being hostile and punitive, or a child being picked on by peers day after day for a long time. Goodness means bringing about great benefit to individuals or whole groups. It too can come in an obvious form, like a heroic effort to save someone's life, or great effort in pursuit of significant social change, or in smaller, persistent acts.

Nations often act in selfish and destructive ways. But goodness by groups, small and large, does exist. In the case of nations, goodness often comes from mixed motives, as in the case of the Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe, but also was aimed at preventing the spread of Communism. At other times, as in Somalia – where intervention to help reduce starvation ended in violence and confusion – seemingly altruistic motives come to bad ends. The work of the Quakers in the abolition of slavery, and the village of LaChambon in France saving thousands of Jews during the Holocaust, illustrate goodness born of humane values and altruism.

What is the role of psychology in relation to goodness and evil? One obvious role is to study the influences that lead to great or persistent acts of harm or benefit. We can study the psychological processes, such as anger, hostility, the devaluation of groups of people, empathy or its absence, and a feeling of responsibility for others' welfare, that make a person act in destructive or caring ways. We can study the characteristics of persons, cultures, social/political systems and existing conditions that make either destructive or benevolent behavior likely. What are these processes and characteristics and how do they evolve?

Cultures and social systems influence not only group behavior but also shape individual psychology. Until not long ago, children were seen in many Western cultures as inherently willful. It was thought that to become good people, their will must be broken early, using severe punishment to do so. Such practices enhance the potential for both individual and group violence.

I will briefly discuss role of psychological science in a few specific domains of "good and evil": child rearing; the origins of genocide; and healing and reconciliation.

Raising Caring, Not Violent, Children

On the basis of my own research on child rearing and the research of many others, and my own experiences with the application of research, I believe that we know a great deal about raising caring and nonaggressive children. Affection and nurturance that help fulfill a child's important needs; guidance that is both firm and responsive to the child, democratic and non- punitive, based on values that are explained to children; and leading children to actually engage in behavior that benefits others are among the important elements.

So are positive peer relations. In our recent work in evaluating children's perception of their lives in school, from second grade to high school, we found, as have others, that even in good schools some children are the object of negative behavior, of bullying by others. Other children are excluded. Both groups report that they experience fewer positive emotions and more negative emotions in school. Bystanders, peers and teachers mostly remain passive. When they act, children who receive some protection feel better. So do the active bystanders themselves.

Psychologists ought to move, at this point, from piecemeal studies to holistic interventions, carefully evaluated, that aim to foster the development of caring, helpful and nonaggressive children. Doing so requires working not only with children but also with adults, since it is adults who have to provide affection, nurturance and guidance.

Intervention can center on creating caring schools, with communities that include every child and promote positive peer relations and constructive bystandership. Such intervention would help children who are badly treated and disconnected from people at home, and protect children in school. It may even stop such horrors as school shootings. Schools can also call on parents as allies, provide training, and help parents create a supportive community that fosters positive socialization.

An important point for me is that "intervention" is an essential aspect of the work of psychological science. Intervention aims to create a better world. But it is also a means of essential new learning. Only by combining the influences explored, usually individually, in controlled research, can we learn whether the whole is what we expect from a combination of the parts, whether the combination of influences usually required to create real change in the world actually does so. Our observation and experience in the course of such interventions – and careful evaluation with controls – can confirm old knowledge, but is almost certain to also give rise to new knowledge.

Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence

I have studied the origins of genocide and other group violence for a long time. Psychologists, who with some exceptions have just begun paying attention to this realm, have a great deal to do. Their research has to extend beyond the laboratory. The data we need include economic and political conditions in a society; a history of relationships between groups such as conflict and enmity; characteristics of cultures – such as devaluation of another group, strong respect for authority, past woundedness and the absence of pluralism; the actions of leaders; the evolution of increasing harm doing; and the behavior (passivity versus action) of bystanders. All of these have important roles (Staub, 1989; 1999).

It is essential to understand the characteristics and psychological processes of individuals and groups: Turning to a group for identity; scapegoating; ideologies or visions of life that identify enemies; changes in individuals and in group processes in the course of the evolution of increasing harmdoing; the psychology of leaders; and reasons for the passivity of internal and external bystanders. These are the proximal influences leading to violence.

Just as important is the issue of prevention. Understanding origins points to avenues for prevention. Some of these origins are not traditionally in the realm of psychology, but ought to be. For example, the passivity of nations encourages perpetrators. But such passivity has psychological elements, for example, the way leaders combine values and "interests" in decision making. Or the way leaders of

genocidal groups make decisions. It is often assumed, by political scientists and sociologists, that such leaders act to enhance their own power and influence. But I strongly believe that they are impacted by social conditions and culture, as are other members of their group. Their actions are the results of complex psychological processes that arise under violence-generating conditions. We must understand these to ultimately deal with them in preventive ways.

Healing and Reconciliation

My work in Rwanda, in collaboration with Laurie Anne Pearlman, Alexandra Gubin and Athanase Hagengimana, has focused on helping people heal and reconcile in the aftermath of genocide, as a way of preventing renewed violence there (for early partial reports, see Staub 2000; Staub and Pearlman, in press).

Without healing, people so victimized will feel extremely vulnerable and see the world as dangerous. They may engage in violence, believing that they need to defend themselves, but in the process become perpetrators (Staub, 1998). Healing by them is essential. So is healing by perpetrators. Past victimization and other traumatic events are among the influences that contribute to perptration. In addition, perpetrators of mass violence are wounded by their own horrible actions. Perpetrator and victims groups, or two groups that have inflicted violence on each other, both need to heal if they are to overcome hostility, reconcile, and stop a continuing cycle of violence.

In Rwanda we trained people who worked for organizations that work with groups in the community. We talked to them and with them about the origins of genocide, about basic human needs – the frustration of which contributes to genocide and which are deeply frustrated in survivors of a genocide, about the traumatic effects of genocide on people, and about avenues to healing. We had them talk to each other in small groups about their painful experiences during the genocide.

Afterwards, some of the people we trained worked with groups in the community. In both training and application, Hutus and Tutsis participated together. The people in these community groups reported fewer trauma symptoms after this intervention and a more positive orientation to people in the other ethnic group. These changes occurred both over time and in comparison to changes in people who participated in groups led by facilitators we did not train, or were in control groups that received no treatment.

Doing such work is difficult and demanding, but highly rewarding. Working on the prevention of group violence is a field with newly emerging theories, limited experience, and little research. Psychological scientists are much needed to contribute to our knowledge, as well as to actually reduce evil and promote goodness.

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