



Translational Research

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Hard Objectives and High Expectations: What Influences the Behavior of Marines? By Wendy Chambers, PhD

Marines adhere to a moral philosophy based on these special obligations that is also separate and more demanding than those of the larger society we serve.ⁱ

Charles A. Graner, Jr. received a 10-year prison sentence for his “assault, maltreatment, nonverbal conspiracy, indecent acts, and dereliction of duty”ⁱⁱ as a military guard at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in late 2003. Why would an Army Reservist/former Marine Reservist act unethically? Was his behavior a response to negative *situational forces*, such as the daily mortars, multiple prisoner insurrections, and negative or absent leadership, or a reflection of his *disposition* as an accused bad apple with a history of behavioral problems?ⁱⁱⁱ

To understand why Marines might engage in bad behavior, the role of both the situational and dispositional forces at play when Marines face ethical challenges warrants attention. While the means to conclusively demonstrate that any single behavior derives solely from external or internal forces does not exist, from an experimental perspective, social psychologists can at least manipulate a controlled environment and observe behavioral changes as a result of those external manipulations. While social psychologists can, therefore, more easily draw conclusions about external influences on behavior than dispositional ones, evidence for both exists because a single group of subjects never exhibits the same reaction to the same external manipulations.

Dispositional factors refer to variation in behavior that results from *who we are* independent of current situational forces, to include our multi-faceted identity (e.g. our affiliation with an organization such as the military, our gender, and our age, among other variables), values, attitudes, social skills and other aptitudes, knowledge, personality factors, and emotions. These do not refer to the *origins* of any aspect of one’s disposition which likely developed in response to many things. By definition, if only situational forces influenced behavior, no variation in behavior would exist – everyone would react in the same way to the same situational forces. And while many react similarly, which demonstrates the impact of such external forces, individual variation always exists, making evident that our dispositions still have a vote in how we act to a degree.

Drawing on one of the foundational studies in social psychology included in the Commandant’s 2012 Ethics Stand Down under the guidance of the Lejeune Leadership Institute, I will highlight how both dispositional and situational forces within this study influenced the behavior of the participants as well as address how the variation in participant behavior – something often overlooked – illustrates the impact of dispositional factors. The lessons I draw from this study reinforce the individual responsibility of Marines to make positive moral choices in the face of ethical challenges, but they also clearly demonstrate the magnitude of situational forces that make it challenging for them to do so.

Research Notes

“Ethics Stand Down”

As part of the response to a tasking from the Commandant to develop and provide Marine Corps-wide instruction addressing ethical behavior by Marines, Dr. Wendy Chambers and LtCol Beyer (Command & Staff College) delivered a ‘train the trainer’ ethics event to O-6 and O-5 level Commanders and their senior enlisted advisors between June 18 and 29 at bases and stations along the East Coast.

“Training Courageous Action”

In June, Dr. Frank Tortorello presented a multi-media look at how the USMC trains courageous action at the Culture in Conflict Conference at the National Defense University of the UK, and the Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Conference at the Universitat Abat Oliba in Spain. The presentation was based on Dr. Tortorello’s participant observation of two USMC Martial Arts Instructor Trainer Courses.

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The Stanford Prison Experiment: “Mr. Correctional Officer, do you think that when this job ends you’re going to have enough time to become a human being again?”^{iv}

Under a grant by the Office of Naval Research in the early 1970s, Philip Zimbardo and his research assistants conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment. This study involved running a simulated prison to examine the impact of assuming the roles of prisoner or guard and the prison environment itself on participants. College-aged male volunteers from around the country received \$15/day and were randomly assigned to play a prisoner or guard. Due to the abusiveness of several guards which quickly escalated, the study became hazing run amok. Half of the prisoners had to be released early due to various breakdowns. After six days and interference from an outside researcher, Zimbardo ended the study eight days prematurely.

What does this mean for Marines?

The results from the Stanford Prison Experiment help explain – in part – what occurred at Abu Ghraib. When given enormous power over others and placed in an unfamiliar situation where leadership remains passive, behavior can radically change. In the study, the guards controlled every facet of the prisoners’ existence, participants were given very limited guidance and no training, and Zimbardo never interfered with the guards’ abusive behavior. Similarly, the guards at Abu Ghraib wielded enormous power over their prisoners and received insufficient training^v for the mission. As in the Stanford Prison Experiment, their own chain of command remained uninvolved; yet unlike in the experiment, the guards additionally received active encouragement by Army intelligence officers, CIA agents, and private contractors to soften up the prisoners for interrogation.^{vi} In short, absent formal leadership, the guards took their cues of how to behave from informal (and inappropriate) leaders.

In addition, when unprepared and not properly supervised in an unfamiliar environment, particularly an environment punctuated by frequent mortars and rocket-propelled grenades, riots and numerous prisoner escape attempts, and manpower inadequacies,^{vii} memories of how to act and external familiar cues do not exist to prompt behavior – thus, someone who might behave ethically in familiar situations can be more vulnerable to acting unethically in less familiar situations. Due to the presence of so many strong situational forces in both the Stanford Prison Experiment and at Abu Ghraib, the behavior of some changed radically.

While all of the guards attested to the impact of situational forces in the Stanford Prison Experiment, individual differences among them did arise. The guard nicknamed “John Wayne” receives a lot of attention because, like Graner at Abu Ghraib, he stood out for his leadership role in his abuse and enjoyment of inflicting it. Not all of the guards, however, acted in this way. One guard left the prison yard whenever another guard started being abusive. Others stood aside and refused to participate in John Wayne’s antics. Some snuck food to the prisoners. Clearly, therefore, the disposition of the guards played a role in their reactions to this powerful situation. Similarly, despite bad behavior on the part of many individuals at Abu Ghraib, Sgt. Joseph Darby stood out as someone who made the right choice by anonymously submitting Graner’s infamous pictures to the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division, though others leaked the pictures to the media.^{viii}

Marine leaders need to be aware of how easily they can abuse their power, how those under them can act similarly if unsupervised or insufficiently trained, and how such abuse is more likely in an unfamiliar situation. In addition, Marines need to be sufficiently intrusive leaders – which Zimbardo admits he was not – to avoid a “John Wayne” type of Marine stepping up to lead. Furthermore, unlike the “good” guards in this experiment, Marines do not have the luxury of just not being cruel – they are expected to do the right thing. Therefore, Marines need to understand their own dispositions and the power of situational forces on their behavior and on the Marines they lead to best prepare for and navigate ethical challenges.

How can Marines prepare for ethical challenges?

Marines need to be aware of their weaknesses as well as their strengths in addition to rehearsing how to handle ethical challenges so that they become familiar with working through these types of scenarios. In this way, Marines are more likely to have a familiar behavioral script to recall when responding to an ethical dilemma. While ideally Marines would role-play responding to ethical challenges, working through an ethically challenging scenario as part of a tactical decision game or even mentally walking through such a scenario can also improve the ability to respond to situations in the future.^{ix} The Lejeune Leadership Institute has several online documents detailing ethically-challenging scenarios.^x

The following ideas are designed to assist Marines in actively preparing to face ethical challenges.^{xi} Marine leaders can encourage the following behavior by not only modeling it themselves but also openly addressing their own strengths and weaknesses and showing how such awareness can lead to better judgment and decision-making. Leaders can also help their Marines understand the dynamics of ethically challenging situations by highlighting such incidences in after-action reviews and pointing out how famous historical cases were ethically resolved (or not).

DISPOSITIONAL – Lifelong preparation

Get to know yourself physically and mentally and assess how your behavior differs in a variety of diverse situations (with your parents, friends, or family or at school, place of worship, concert, or professional gathering, etc.). Know your physical and mental strengths and weaknesses to understand what you bring to each situation and where you might need support. It is typically easier to be aware of your strengths, but how can you become aware of your vulnerabilities? While self-assessments^{xii} can be helpful for a basic understanding of your personality, self-reflection, which can be assisted by openly asking others their opinion of your behavior or even by assessing videos of your own behavior, is a much more challenging and worthwhile endeavor. Another approach is to be aware of the mental shortcuts and biases that influence your own decision-making, such as the following (illustrated by fictitious examples):

Representativeness.^{xiii} One mental shortcut people tend to rely on when judging probabilities (e.g., how likely is it that “x” will occur?) involves referencing unrepresentative samples.

- E.g., LCpl Lewis strongly distrusts religious authority figures because his mother left the family to marry the local minister when he was very young. Now he is in Afghanistan and he has been asked to help guard the local imam for various events. He is dreading the assignment and plans to minimize contact with the imam.
- How might his belief impact his behavior? What if the imam wants to talk to him? How might the LCpl’s reaction potentially affect the mission?

Own Race.^{xiv} We are more accurate at identifying races with which we are highly familiar. Typically, this means we are more accurate distinguishing those from within our own race unless we grew up around people of other races and they are equally or more familiar to us (for example, if a Chinese male was adopted by an African-American family that did not have other Chinese friends or family, he is likely to be much more adept at distinguishing between African-American faces than Chinese).

- E.g., Sgt Hollis is living on a joint security station in Iraq. He goes to get some supplies and sees, based on the uniform, a member of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) furtively stuffing his pockets full of bullets and magazines and then exiting without ever noticing Sgt Hollis. Sgt Hollis shortly reports this to his chain of command, and that evening he is asked to identify the culprit from among four different men who fit the general description he provided. While he feels he got a good look at the guy, now faced with these men, Sgt Hollis is less sure of what the culprit looked like, though he feels pressured to identify someone.

- What are possible repercussions if Sgt Hollis identifies the wrong person? What could he have done to verify that the man he witnessed committing a crime was a member of the ISF and not a civilian posing as ISF? How could he handle this right now to ensure a just outcome?

Confirmation.^{xv} We tend to seek out information that confirms our beliefs as opposed to approaching our beliefs more objectively, leading us to be more biased than we may realize.

- E.g., 1stLt Jamison believes hard work is the foundation of one’s moral character. He holds 1stLt Spellman in high regard because he always goes the distance for any duty and will forego sleep to make sure something is done right. He is therefore surprised when his superior officer comes to interview him about Spellman’s drinking problem and a subsequent accident while under the influence. He knew Spellman was a heavy drinker, but work hard, play hard, he always thought.
- How might a more objective assessment of Spellman by Jamison have potentially helped Spellman? How could Jamison reevaluate this belief in hard work and morality to be more balanced?

To appreciate your mental shortcuts and biases, you need to understand what you believe and why. Understanding how you might be vulnerable (your weaknesses, your biases, your limited insight or knowledge, etc.) is critical to compensating for such vulnerabilities in various situations. **By honestly assessing how you would act under various situations (below), you will get to know your strengths and weaknesses better.**

SITUATIONAL – Select a situation or scenario from historical sources or something you might face on your next deployment.

- **Identify** the various elements in the situation that could potentially make you vulnerable to acting unethically or *in a way you might not expect*. **Explain** why these elements could trigger you. **Acknowledge** the type of *emotions* you would likely experience in reaction to the situation.

- **Explain** why you would have those types of emotions.
- **Discuss** likely impulsive *reactions* based on those emotions. **Identify** courses of action to help you to resist those impulses instead.

- **Decide** the various steps involved in solving the problem in a way that supports the mission at hand and USMC values. **Explain** whether you would need others involved and in what capacity.

These suggested exercises require frequent, *active rehearsal* so that Marines can select from a range of behavior when reacting to ethically challenging situations. Like any type of training, the more Marines practice these exercises, the more likely they will remember and respond ethically when a similar situation arises.

Conclusion

Situational forces have a profound influence on behavior, as the Zimbardo study illustrates. However, even within this study, where the focus is on situational forces, the impact of disposition is evident. Most of the participants succumbed to negative situational forces; a significant minority resisted them to some extent. Through their training, Marines override many tendencies of the average human being. In contrast to what many untrained civilians might do, Marines are encouraged to run *toward* danger, “step in and toward” when engaged by an opponent,^{xvi} and, in the context of ethics, resist emotional impulses in response to revenge/frustration/stress. To achieve this, Marines need to know their strengths and vulnerabilities well and practice responding to ethical dilemmas so that they have a repertoire of reactions from which to draw when faced with a similar dilemma.

The message here resonates with the intent of Marine Corps training – ethically, Marines need to strive to overcome what many do not. Ethically, Marines need to strive to be the exception.

Notes:

ⁱU.S. Marine Corps, *Leading Marines* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1995), 32. Also, see materials used to support the Ethics Stand Down here: https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/sitepages/ethics_symposium.aspx.

ⁱⁱPhilip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2008), 374.

ⁱⁱⁱDavid Finkel and Christian Davenport, “Records Paint Dark Portrait of Abu Ghraib,” *Washington Post* (Saturday, June 5, 2004), accessed on July 20, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16832-2004Jun4.html>.

^{iv}Zimbardo, 10.

^vInternal assaults against guards (see Zimbardo, 351); Zimbardo cites from Maj General Taguba’s report about training on page 387, from Generals Fay and Jones’ comment about training on pages 392 and 395, and the similar conclusion by an independent panel headed by James Schlesinger on page 398. Interview with Schlesinger corroborating lack of training: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/july-dec04/abughraib_8-24.html. Taguba’s conclusion corroborated here: http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/052704_taguba.htm. Fay/Jones report conclusions corroborated here: http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/abu_ghraib_fay.pdf. Other factors were identified in these reports in addition to lack of training.

^{vi}General Taguba report, as quoted in Zimbardo, 383.

^{vii}Issues of safety, security, and resources identified in Maj General Taguba’s report, Generals Fay and Jones’ report, and Schlesinger’s report as cited in Zimbardo on pages 386-87, 393, and 399, respectively.

^{viii}CBS News, *Exposing the Truth of Abu Ghraib* (2007), accessed July 20, 2012, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560_162-2238188.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody.

^{ix}See http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/psychology/health_psychology/mentalimagery.html for some examples of imagery studies and <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0017798> as one example of the effects of one type of compassion training on behavior.

^xSee documents under “Ethics Branch” here: <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/LLeadership/default.aspx>.

^{xi}These recommendations follow the spirit of the training given during the USMC Program of Instruction on Ethics.

^{xii}Myers-Briggs Personality Assessment, <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>.

^{xiii}A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, “Belief in the Law of Small Numbers,” *Psychological Bulletin* 76, no 2. (1971): 105 – 110.

^{xiv}T.C. Brigham and R.S. Malpass, “The Role of Experience and Context in the Recognition of Faces and Own-and Other-Race Bias,” *Journal of Social Issues* 41 (1985): 139-155.

^{xv}E.g., Raymond Tufts, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises,” *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175-220.

^{xvi}Frank Tortorello, “Marine Cultural Training: Professional Judgment, Not Numbers” (Presentation at MORS Colloquium, March 2011), 8, 10.

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