

Social identification processes, group dynamics and the behaviour of combatants

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Abstract

In this contribution, respect for international humanitarian law among combatants is considered from a social psychological perspective. According to this perspective, the social identities derived by individuals from their membership of social groups provide norms and values used by the individual to interpret events, form opinions and decide upon a course of action. We argue that group identities are particularly salient in combat situations, and that they have a profound influence on combatants' decisions to respect or violate international humanitarian law.

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Violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) are carried out by individuals, but in order to understand such violations and hopefully prevent them from happening, we have to look at the determinants of such behaviour. We thus need to consider the group dimension, and more specifically the role played by social identities in framing the situation and guiding behaviour.

By social identities we mean “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a group together with the

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value and emotional significance attached to the membership”.¹ Although we may regard our attitudes and behaviours as idiosyncratic, in reality much of what we think and do is profoundly shaped by our connection to social groups, varying from extremely large and abstract groups such as ethnic or religious communities to small working teams or the family. All these connections provide nested and cross-cutting social identities that direct and define our experiences and prescribe ways of thinking, being and acting. In other words, they make us who we are, so much so that we may think of the individual as the emergent property of such social categories.

The attitudes and behaviours of combatants are no exception. We shall in fact argue here that social identities held by combatants are even more important in shaping their behaviour than is typically the case. Respect or disregard for international humanitarian law is therefore largely a matter of group behaviour, not only because it is usually small-to-average-sized groups of individuals who commit violations or decide to respect the law, but also, and perhaps most importantly, because the combatant is acting not as a unique individual but rather as a soldier either of an army of a certain country or of a non-state army which defines itself in political, religious or ideological terms. As is well known, much of the training of combatants, aside from the technical aspects, is a process of de-individuation both of the combatant himself and of the enemy.² The reason for this is that it is difficult for an individual to mistreat, torture or kill another human being, but much simpler for a member of group A to enact such behaviours towards a member of group B.

The two sections following of this article both deal with understanding violations through the concept of social identity, but they focus on different aspects of this concept.

The first part examines the role of collective identities in providing the behavioural guidelines for the individual. We briefly review the accounts for atrocities that emerged in the social sciences after the Second World War, and argue that although many of the earlier insights are still relevant (notably those advocating that a view of the perpetrators as individuals with disturbed personalities should be abandoned), it is important to understand that the perpetrator is acting as a group member. In order to understand how individuals end up committing atrocities, we need to realize that they often view them differently, namely as necessary behaviour that is morally required of them as group members. The second part further expands on the motives for social identification and seeks to relate considerations about identities grounded in large social categories, such as one’s country or ethnic group, to the group dynamics that characterize combat units.

1 Henri Tajfel and John Turner, “An integrative theory of intergroup conflict”, in William Austin and Stephen Worchel (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Brooks-Cole, Monterey, Calif., 1979.

2 Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, IB Tauris, London, 2004.

The role of group membership in prescribing behaviour

Although psychology is the study of mental processes and behaviour in general, the attention of psychologists is often devoted to problematic processes and behavioural patterns either at the level of individual psychopathology or at the societal, collective level: prejudice and discrimination, inter-group violence and conflict. To understand behaviour in war and, more broadly, respect for international humanitarian law, the theory and research findings emerging from social psychological research are most relevant, for they are primarily concerned with behaviour that is shaped by and directed towards social entities and institutions, and towards other individuals because of their membership of specific social groups. In other words, there is plenty of psychological theory that is relevant to understanding why one person commits atrocities against another person,³ but in most cases where international humanitarian law is concerned, what we are witnessing is behaviour that is unlawful (besides being unethical and morally repugnant) towards other persons by members of a group *because* of their group membership.

This may seem an obvious statement, but its implications are quite important, and they often go forgotten in the analyses put forward to explain violations – relying, as they do, on sadistic (or otherwise pathological) personality accounts. The attribution of this behaviour to specific character traits of the perpetrator is psychologically satisfying,⁴ particularly when the perpetrators are people of our own group,⁵ whose behaviour we need to consider atypical in order to maintain a moral and just view of ourselves – “the soldier who tortured the prisoner was a sadist, a monster”. While in some cases this explanation might hold some value, the proportion of variance explained by such factors is likely to be small: personality and personality disorders explain little of the atrocities that we witness.

In the social sciences this conclusion was drawn long ago and perhaps most eloquently by Hanna Arendt in her reporting of the Eichmann trial, when she noted that evil is, in fact, quite banal. Eichmann, according to Arendt, was no monster, no psychopathological case. He was terribly, normally, regularly human. His actions, resulting in the death of millions of people, were, according to Arendt, the consequence of his desire to do his job well. The fact that his job consisted of masterminding mass killings becomes secondary.

Arendt’s work was enormously influential and helpful in moving us away from an explanation of “evil” exclusively in terms of psychopathology, and her ideas are very consistent with the findings in classic social psychological

- 3 Russell Geen and Edward Donnerstein, *Aggression: Theoretical and Empirical Reviews*, Academic Press, New York, 1983.
- 4 Lee Ross, “The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: distortions in the attribution process”, in Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, Academic Press, New York, 1977, pp. 173–220.
- 5 Thomas Pettigrew, “The ultimate attribution error: extending Allport’s cognitive analysis of prejudice”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 5 (1979), pp. 461–76.

experiments such as Milgram's work on obedience⁶ and Zimbardo's prison study,⁷ which also testify to the fact that context can make most, if not all, individuals behave in unspeakable ways. What is lacking in these perspectives, however, is a clear definition of "context". Elsewhere we have argued that what is critical in understanding how people make sense of atrocities committed by their fellow countrymen is the level and type of identification with their in-group.⁸ In a series of studies we investigated whether in-group responsibility for atrocities (such as the killing of out-group members) moderates the use of moral disengagement strategies to deal with the psychologically challenging situation.⁹ In the most recent studies, we show that when it is the in-group, as opposed to another group, that commits the atrocities (such as the torturing and killing of prisoners), individuals dehumanize and devalue the victims more and show a lesser tendency to provide reparations to the (out-group) victims and to punish the (in-group) perpetrators. But this is usually more pronounced among individuals who hold a glorified image of the in-group. For instance, in another study we gave participants fictitious articles depicting torture carried out by soldiers of their own army (vs. another army) and subsequently asked them to summarize the events described in the article. We then analysed the language used in these descriptions, and found that when the perpetrators are in-group members (as opposed to out-group members), and when individuals have a high tendency to glorify (as measured by the in-group glorification scale),¹⁰ there is less attribution of responsibility, along with a tendency to minimize the events. In other words, high glorifiers construct a different reality when the in-group is the perpetrator, as compared with low glorifiers or with both of these groups of individuals when confronted with an out-group perpetrator.¹¹

These results were obtained not with combatants but with community samples in the United States (they replicate in other cultures).¹² However, they offer insights into the kind of contexts discussed in this article, namely respect for international humanitarian law. Indeed, we contend that the very link to the in-group is a key factor in understanding how misdeeds take place. Obedience to authority and "taking on the responsibilities of the job" are important factors and

6 Stanley Milgram, "Behavioural study of obedience", *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 67 (1963), pp. 371–8.

7 Philip Zimbardo, Craig Haney, Curtis Banks and David Jaffe, "The psychology of imprisonment: privation, power and pathology", in Zick Rubin (ed.), *Doing unto Others: Explorations in Social Behaviour*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974, pp. 61–73.

8 Emanuele Castano, "On the perils of glorifying the in-group: intergroup violence, in-group glorification, and moral disengagement", *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 2 (2008), pp. 154–70.

9 Emanuele Castano and Roger Giner-Sorolla, "Not quite human: dehumanization in response to responsibility for intergroup killing", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 90 (2006), pp. 804–18.

10 Sonia Roccas, Yechiel Klar and Ivo Liviatan, "The paradox of group-based guilt: modes of national identification, conflict vehemence, and reactions to the in-group's moral violations", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 91 (2006), pp. 698–711.

11 Patricia Slawuta, Bernhard Leidner and Emanuele Castano, ms. submitted for publication, 2008.

12 Sabina Cehajic, Rupert Brown and Roberto Gonzales, "Dehumanization of the Mapuches in Chile", unpublished ms., 2007.

can at times come into play independently of a person's group membership.¹³ Yet, by and large, misdeeds and – of specific concern here – violations of IHL occur because individuals see their behaviour as a moral duty at the group level, as opposed to “simply” non-reprehensible. The critical factor, as clearly elaborated by Reicher and his colleagues,¹⁴ is not only that the behaviour is “okay” but that it is morally required. In other words, it is not that it does not matter that some people are getting killed, and why that specific group is getting killed; on the contrary, it *does* matter. The perpetrators are likely to think that it is their moral duty to kill the others.¹⁵ We believe that those same in-group glorifiers who, as we have seen, devalue the victims more and go so far as to dehumanize them are also the ones most likely to engage in various acts of mistreatment, should the occasion arise.

In the preceding section we have presented what we consider to be a more accurate view of the determinants of atrocities at the inter-group level than the explanation (disturbed personalities) often put forward in popular culture and the media, as well as an account of dominant views in the social sciences, which are centred on the roles that individuals assume and on their desire to fulfil their superiors' expectations of them or those of their entourage. Specifically, we have discussed how a glorification of the in-group, and its dominant narrative, may be crucial factors in understanding violations of international humanitarian law. We shall return to this issue in the concluding remarks. Next, however, we would like to focus on another level of analysis and discuss how the contexts in which the combatants find themselves are particularly conducive to accentuating social identities and thus strongly affecting individual behaviour through group norms.

Social identification processes and group dynamics

Because human beings are social animals,¹⁶ it is obvious that most of their life is conducted in groups and that the social identities derived from such memberships are a constitutive part of who they are. Some evolutionary psychologists consider the group to be an important level at which selection occurs and that characteristics favouring the group are more likely to be passed on.¹⁷ Social

13 It should be noted, however, that even these two factors are intrinsically related to the social identity under consideration here. The preoccupation with doing a good job stems from the desire for advancement within a certain social environment or group and for the regard of other members in that group. Similarly, the authority to which obedience is offered does not come about in a social vacuum, but rather within a specific social entity or institution.

14 Stephen Reicher, Alexander Haslam and Rakshi Rath, “Making a virtue of evil: a five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate”, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 2 (2008), pp. 1313–44.

15 Of course, the reference here is not to soldiers killing other soldiers in battle; that does not require much theorizing. What we are referring to is mistreatment and the use of violence, often lethal, against unarmed civilians or prisoners.

16 Elliot Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 4th edn, Worth/Freeman, New York, 1984.

17 Linnda Caporael, “The evolution of truly social cognition: the core configuration model”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 1 (1997), pp. 276–98; Elliot Sober and David S. Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behaviour*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998.

psychologists have, moreover, as seen above, long recognized the importance of social identities in shaping attitudes and behaviour. In recent years increasing attention has been devoted to understanding the motives for social identification. In other words, while belonging to social groups is considered a given, the reasons why individuals identify with specific social groups, sometimes very strongly, has become a matter of investigation.

In the early work of Henry Tajfel, the European social psychologist and originator of the social identity theory, we find the nucleus of a motivational account of the development of social identities, which holds that membership of a social group helps the individual to know and have a coherent image of himself.¹⁸ These ideas have recently been further developed in the uncertainty-identity theory,¹⁹ according to which a fundamental need to reduce uncertainty, particularly about the self, induces individuals to identify with social groups – especially highly entitative groups.²⁰ Another account of why individuals identify with social groups comes from the merging of social identity theory with terror management theory,²¹ a general theory of human behaviour grounded in psychoanalytic theory and existentialism. According to this view, the fundamental anxiety that humans have because of their awareness of the inevitability of their own death needs to be warded off, and one of the psychological mechanisms that serves as an anxiety buffer is social identification – that is, by seeing themselves as part of a large, long-lasting entity, individuals symbolically escape the finitude of their own individual existence.²² A series of experiments provide support for this conjecture, showing greater identification with and clinging to the in-group when individuals are primed for death (either supraliminally or subliminally).²³

In addition to possibly serving these two fundamental needs of individuals, identification with a social entity has been shown to be a buffer against more mundane anxiety. Early findings in social psychological research demonstrate that when participants in an experiment were left waiting for the next phase of the experiment to start, they chose more frequently to wait in the company of others, rather than alone, if they had been made anxious about the experiment itself.²⁴ In other words, individuals when anxious seek intimacy and close proximity with others. Anxiety and stress, although different, are related

18 Henri Tajfel, “Cognitive aspects of prejudice”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 25 (1969), pp. 79–97.

19 Michael Hogg, “Uncertainty-identity theory”, in Mark P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 39, Academic Press, San Diego, 2007, pp. 69–126.

20 Emanuele Castano, Vincent Yzerbyt, David Bourguignon and Eleonore Seron, “Who may enter? The impact of ingroup identification on ingroup–outgroup categorization”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 38 (2002), pp. 315–22.

21 Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski, “A terror management theory of social behaviour: the psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews”, in Mark P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Academic Press, San Diego, 1991, pp. 93–159.

22 Castano, E., Yzerbyt, V.Y., & Bourguignon, D. (2003). We are one and I like it. The impact of entitativity on social identification. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, 735–754.

23 Emanuele Castano and Mark Dechesne, “On defeating death: group reification and social identification as strategies for transcendence”, *European Review of Social Psychology*, 16 (7) (2005), pp. 221–55; Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1992.

24 Stanley Schachter, *The Psychology of Affiliation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1959.

concepts, and it comes as no surprise that identification with social groups can potentially reduce stress too. Recent findings show that this is because social identification affects the degree to which a particular stressor is perceived as posing a threat to the self (primary appraisal), and the perceiver's assessment of his ability to cope with a threat (secondary appraisal). For instance, Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal and Penna²⁵ have demonstrated that among members of Royal Air Force bomb-disposal teams, work-related stress was determined by the level of identification with the team via its effect on the extent of social support they enjoyed from other team members. The stronger the identification with the team, the stronger the support felt and the lower the stress experienced.

Uncertainty, anxiety and stress: can we think of a situation that is more aptly characterized by the presence of these three conditions than combat? Combat breeds uncertainty and anxiety about our very existence: combatants literally do not know if they will live to see another day. Massive coping mechanisms are required to keep at bay not only the animalistic, instinctual fear of death, but also the existential anxiety discussed above. And as individuals in combat situations seek the social support needed to deal with the stress they experience, social identities pertinent to the conflict are likely to become very salient, with a concurrent polarization of beliefs.

The social identities of combatants are multiple and nested. In the case of a conflict between states these identities derive from national identity, the state army and ultimately the combatant's unit. At the beginning of the conflict we can, as shown above, expect views of the out-group to become more negative and out-group members to be demonized and dehumanized. This is particularly likely to occur among soldiers, who, we can assume, are more inclined to be in-group glorifiers than the average person. Soldiers are also more likely to see themselves as those whose duty it is to defend the morally superior in-group against the dehumanized out-group. From this it follows that international humanitarian law might come to be perceived as not entirely applicable – after all, the enemy is not quite human. The threat of sanctions therefore becomes even less relevant than it would normally be. Indeed, several scholars have spoken about dehumanization and similar strategies as moral exclusion or delegitimization.²⁶ The target is delegitimized and excluded from the moral community and therefore also from the scope of justice.²⁷

25 Alexander Haslam, Anne O'Brien, Jolanda Jetten, Karine Vormedal and Sally Penna, "Taking the strain: social identity, social support and the experience of stress", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 44 (2005), pp. 355–70.

26 Daniel Bar-Tal, "Causes and consequences of delegitimization: models of conflict and ethnocentrism", *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 46 (1990), pp. 65–81; Susan Opatow, "Moral exclusion and injustice: an introduction", *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 46 (1990), pp. 1–20.

27 An institutionalized form of this psychological process can be seen at work in instances where individuals are categorized so as to exclude them from certain privileges or protection. The intense battle over the concept of enemy combatant in the United States is one such example.

Literature on the Holocaust provides some insights in this regard. When Hitler's police battalions were sent to the newly conquered eastern territories to carry out massacres of the Jewish population and other targets such as the Bolsheviks, the commanders first ordered their men to shoot women and children whom they referred to *inter alia* as conspirators against the German people, the kind of propaganda with which Germans had been bombarded for years before the beginning of the war. It is widely accepted that this, among other strategies, was successful in convincing ordinary men to begin shooting children.²⁸ As many commentators have noted and empirical findings now show, it becomes easier and easier to kill once you have started.²⁹

Depiction of the enemy as an evil, subhuman creature creates a climate within which previously unthinkable actions can be contemplated. Such dehumanization of the enemy can take place at various societal levels. It can be broadly propagated by high-ranking politicians and government officials, or relegated to the army, which has to do the dirty work of war. We may think that, at least in Western countries, the lessons of the Second World War prevent that perverted logic from taking hold. But of course the only thing that changes is who the enemy is and, depending on the respective viewpoint, who is good and who is evil. As an anonymous US soldier reported during the Vietnam War, "You are trained "gook, gook, gook"³⁰ and once the military has got the idea implanted in your mind that these people are not humans, they are subhuman, it makes it a little bit easier to kill 'em".

The process through which demonization and dehumanization of the enemy by the overall group may affect the behaviour of combatants, causing them to commit violations of international humanitarian law, is quite clear. If we consider the specific circumstances in which combat units operate, it becomes even clearer how things easily get out of hand. Findings from research studies on confessions will serve to illustrate this point. Research on confessions made during interrogations on crimes such as murder has shown that individuals can come to believe they have committed the crime when in fact they have not. This is most likely to occur when the suspect is being interrogated in circumstances that create high levels of fatigue and stress (prolonged interrogation, lack of sleep, in addition to the obvious stress inherent in the situation) and by interrogation techniques that make the suspect believe that the victim actually deserved his fate, or at least that it is understandable why the suspect would have killed him.³¹ Many such confessions turn out to be false. A number of factors are involved in situations like these, but one of relevance here is how a person's willingness to confess to a crime

28 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, HarperCollins, New York, 1992.

29 Andi Martens, Spee Kosloff, Jeff Greenberg, Mark Landau and Toni Schmader, "Killing begets killing: evidence from a bug-killing paradigm that initial killing fuels subsequent killing", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 33 (2007), pp. 1251–64.

30 Derogatory nickname for Vietnamese.

31 Saul Kassin, "On the psychology of confessions: does innocence put innocents at risk?", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60 (2005), pp. 215–28.

he did not commit is affected by convincing him that the victims somehow deserved their fate (Interrogator: “I can see why you did it ... What man wouldn’t have done the same in your situation? She really asked for it”). What we think comes into play in these cases is the creation of a shared “reality” between the interrogator and the suspect, a “reality” in which the crime is presented as understandable and the perpetrator as not really guilty of much at all. Once the suspect signs the confession, of course, the true reality kicks in, and for the innocent suspect the consequences can be catastrophic.³²

A similar process may be at play in the context of combat. Unit members are continuously placed in highly stressful situations in which dehumanizing rhetoric about the out-group finds easy confirmation in everyday occurrences. The cohesiveness of the unit, already high for the reasons explained above, is likely to increase and lead to group dynamics through which the group ends up with behavioural decisions that are more polarized than those of each individual member.³³ It should be noted that polarization found in social psychological research does not suggest that group behaviour will always be more negative than individual behaviour.³⁴ In fact, the term polarization is used to convey the idea that the group will be likely to reach behavioural decisions (or to form attitudes) that are simply more extreme than those of individual members. If initial attitudes and behavioural intentions are positive, the group will probably be polarized towards more positive behaviour. In combat, members’ initial attitudes and behavioural intentions are biased towards the in-group and against the out-group; increased identification, cohesiveness and group dynamics are therefore likely to polarize towards allowing mistreatment or even killing of innocent civilians or of prisoners. Military training in state armies puts great emphasis on discipline and respect for rules (e.g. rules of engagement and international humanitarian law). However, given the importance of the group for the individual member, and particularly the small, cohesive unit that does so much for the individual member’s psychological equanimity, one wonders whether the reality matches the theory. The picture emerging from the only relevant data that has come to our knowledge is not very positive.

A recently released survey among US army forces serving in Iraq indicates that only half the soldiers or even fewer say that they would report a unit member for violations as grave as killing an innocent non-combatant.³⁵ These numbers are backed up by a junior non-commissioned officer, who states “we prefer to handle things within the unit; would only turn someone in if the violation put the safety of unit members in jeopardy”. Respondents to this survey (approximately 6,000

32 Saul Kassin, Christine Goldstein and Kenneth Savitsky, “Behavioural confirmation in the interrogation room: on the dangers of presuming guilt”, *Law and Human Behaviour*, Vol. 27 (2003), pp. 187–203.

33 Serge Moscovici and Marisa Zavalloni, “The group as a polarizer of attitudes”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 12 (1969), pp. 125–35.

34 Stephen Reicher, “Crowds and social movements”, in Michael Hogg and Scott Tindale (eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002.

35 James Conway, *Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) IV Brief*, US Army Medical Department, Washington DC, 2007.

soldiers and Marines) were also asked about the treatment of non-combatants and their views on torture. Only 47 per cent of soldiers and 38 per cent of Marines say that all non-combatants should be treated with dignity and respect, while 17 per cent of both groups say that non-combatants should be treated as insurgents. Furthermore, 41 per cent of soldiers and 44 per cent of Marines say that torture should be allowed if it will save the life of a soldier or Marine and 36 per cent and 39 per cent respectively say that torture should be allowed in order to gather important information about insurgents.

These percentages are problematic in absolute terms, for as many as half the soldiers and Marines polled expressed attitudes and beliefs about how to conduct themselves while on duty that constitute violations of international humanitarian law. There are currently over 100,000 military personnel in Iraq. That means that some 40,000–50,000 soldiers or Marines are conceivably conducting operations in which, if they behave in line with their answers to this survey, they would be committing violations. In discussions with military personnel from different countries on various occasions we were informed that the US army is considered to be among the best-trained in the world with regard to rules of engagement and international humanitarian law. Yet half its personnel currently deployed in Iraq demonstrate beliefs, attitudes and behavioural intentions that bluntly contradict both those codes of conduct.

Furthermore, a comparison of answers by soldiers with those of Marines conveys an interesting message. Overall, Marines come across as less respectful of rules of engagement and of rules regarding how to treat non-combatants, and as more sympathetic to the use of torture. Such differences are not large, but they are systematic and should cause us to reflect upon another influence that social identification of subgroups within the same army may have. Because requests for the raw data on which the report is based have not been responded to, we have not been able to establish whether such differences are due, for instance, to greater exposure of Marines to combat and thus to its detrimental consequences on mental health.³⁶ However, data suggest that, if anything, Marines are less likely than soldiers to know someone seriously injured or killed, suffer casualties among members of their own unit, see dead or seriously injured Americans or be directly responsible for the death of an enemy combatant. Accordingly, they also report higher morale and are less likely to screen positive for mental health problems. This means that the overall more “violating” attitudes and beliefs of Marines, at least in the sample surveyed here, do not seem to be explainable in terms of higher stress or mental health problems. What remains is group norms: it would seem that Marines have norms for the treatment of non-combatants, torture and rules of engagement that differ from those of army soldiers. This observation suggests that different entities within the same military forces have a different understanding of what are expected to be universal principles and specific norms

³⁶ Screening positive for mental health problems means that one is twice as likely to commit violations such as destroying Iraqi private property or unnecessarily hitting a non-combatant. See Conway, above note 35.

regulating their actions as combatants. We would venture to say that Marines receive, if anything, more training than soldiers, and it would be interesting to investigate how this apparent disregard for what is supposed to be an important aspect of their training comes about.

In this second section we have reviewed social psychological theory and findings concerning the motives for social identification, and have concluded that combat is a context in which several of the factors likely to lead to close identification with, and increased cohesiveness of, one's unit are strongly at play. Furthermore, we have seen how this can lead to attitudes and beliefs that are inconsistent with international humanitarian law, primarily because the unit members are likely to see themselves as being at the forefront of the battle against evil in which the larger group (ethnic, religious, ideological) to which they belong is engaged. Finally, we have reviewed some of the statistics from a recent survey among US soldiers and Marines deployed in Iraq, which gave a bleak picture of respondents' beliefs concerning the treatment of non-combatants, the use of torture and the need to respect the rules of engagement.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have set out to show how group membership, and particularly the social identities that individuals derive from such memberships, are important aspects that must be considered for a thorough understanding of combatants' behaviour and specifically of their violations of international humanitarian law. Our contention is based on extensive social psychological theory and research findings which converge in suggesting that (i) individuals identify with social groups for a variety of motives, ranging from broad existential to epistemic ones; (ii) the context of application of international humanitarian law is inherently an inter-group context and thus respect for such laws, and violations thereof, are determined by norms developed at the level of social, not individual, identity; (iii) conflict in inter-group contexts is likely to be characterized by processes that lead to the glorification of the in-group and dehumanization of the "other", with a consequent view of the annihilation of the "other" as a moral duty; and (iv) in combat, social identities are very important and more strongly polarized inter-group behaviour is likely to occur, given the circumstances leading towards greater disregard for the "other" and the consequent relaxation of norms such as rules of engagement and international humanitarian law.

Building on our own work and on the conclusions reached by other colleagues,³⁷ we have argued that there is more to the atrocious behaviour routinely displayed by combatants (or, for that matter, non-combatants) towards prisoners, other soldiers or simply the civilian population than a distorted personality or the indifference and banality on which previous explanations have

37 Reicher, Haslam and Rath, above note 14.

focused. We contend that the very story a group tells itself when entering a conflict – the story about themselves, the group they are in conflict with, and their relationship (sometimes rooted in the distant past) – is of great importance.³⁸ The glorification of the in-group and the concomitant depiction of the other as the evil to be eradicated from this world converge to create a context in which the annihilation of the other is not only unproblematic, but also morally required. Against this psychological background, group dynamics at combat unit level lead to the enactment of behaviours that are both immoral and forbidden by the rules of engagement and by international humanitarian law.

Where does this leave us? If atrocities are not committed by psychopaths, screening our armies for psychopaths will do little to improve respect for international humanitarian law. If atrocities are not only the consequence of bureaucratization, the division of labour and the distancing of the perpetrator from the victim, monitoring these processes will not solve the problem. But if atrocities are habitually committed because an inter-group conflict is often, if not always, framed as a battle of good versus evil and combatants are likely to take this view to extremes and act upon it, then preventing violations will be an even more difficult and demanding task, particularly since such violations are not observed exclusively among guerrilla groups or untrained militias. While the problem may be more pronounced in those cases for want of the military professionalism that might mitigate the influence of such beliefs about the enemy, state armies are not a safe haven either, as shown by recent events ranging from the Srebrenica massacres of civilians by the Serbian army³⁹ to the torture of prisoners in Iraqi jails and at Guantánamo by US military personnel.⁴⁰ If even well-trained US army personnel display very limited battlefield ethics, as clearly shown by the data reported here, improving respect for international humanitarian law among combatants would appear to be very complex indeed. Our analysis suggests that demonization of the “other” at all levels might play an important role in influencing combatants’ behaviour and, in this regard, progress might have been made. When the United States launched the invasion of Iraq in 2003, President Bush made it clear that Saddam and his entourage (vaguely defined) were evil, not the Iraqi people. This is an important, welcome distinction, which may help to undermine some of the negative processes outlined above. But did it really make a difference? The reality on the battlefield is very different from that in which such distinctions can be easily maintained. When we fear for our life or seek revenge for our losses, the enemy “all look alike”⁴¹ and those distinctions are less likely to be maintained.

38 Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1999.

39 Adam LeBor, *Complicity with Evil: The United Nations in the Age of Modern Genocide*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006.

40 The redefinition of torture by the US administration (or, for that matter, the American Psychological Society) changes nothing, in our view, with regard to the actions undertaken by its military and intelligence personnel.

41 Brian Mullen and Li-Tze Hu, “Perceptions of ingroup and outgroup variability: A meta-analytic integration”, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 10 (1989), pp. 233–52.

Even if they are, what we have defined as evil is still ultimately another human being, and inhumane treatment therefore remains immoral, wrongful and in most cases illegal. Even more radically, we could ask ourselves what the meaning of this distinction is when our actions consist of bombing civilian-inhabited areas with the estimated loss – in the Iraq war, for instance – of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives?

The conclusion that follows from our analysis is not very optimistic. We suggest that violations of international humanitarian law might be caused or at least facilitated by an in-group narrative that becomes particularly destructive for the out-group in conditions of conflict. This narrative is a formative part of the group identity, and may thus be difficult to eradicate. Furthermore, a political discourse that would undermine such narratives is likely to encounter strong opposition and be labelled as unpatriotic. Yet we should not be entirely discouraged. The first step towards intervention to reduce the likelihood of violations of international humanitarian law is identification of the factors that contribute to its violation. It is our opinion that efforts to disseminate knowledge of international humanitarian law and incorporate it in training as much and as widely as possible should continue to be made, with an eye to making respect for certain norms central to the soldier's identity (as opposed to an afterthought) and ensuring that military units, particularly when engaged in violent conflict, do not become psychologically isolated from the larger entities of which they are part.

Insofar as violent conflict between humans continues to be a part of our existence, violations of international humanitarian law will continue to occur. Nonetheless, we hope that the insights we have gathered from psychological research on social identification processes will help guide the efforts of those attempting to reduce the occurrence and scope of such violations.