British psychology's response to the Iraq War 2003–4

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The official response of the British psychological community to the Iraq war is examined by surveying material published in The Psychologist. *Evidence suggests a failure to engage with the substantive issues raised by the war in Iraq.*

> Until the lions have their historians,
> Tales of hunting will always glorify the hunters
> *African Proverb*

IN THIS ARTICLE I examine coverage of the Iraq war in *The Psychologist*, contrasting this with non-war related material deemed worthy of its attention, and professional voices from other quarters which have been raised about the conduct and consequences of the war. I begin with a brief summary of what is so far known about the invasion initiated by US and UK forces in March 2003.

Ahmed (2003) provides compelling evidence, that far from being a humanitarian effort to liberate Iraq, the invasion was an illegal, orchestrated assault upon the integrity and independence of a sovereign state, which posed no threat to the west. The assault on Iraq, preceded by a 12-year campaign of sanctions designed to destroy the living standards and morale of ordinary Iraqis was estimated by the UN's Iraq child mortality survey to have cost 1.7 million lives (Ahmed, 2003). One study (Roberts *et al.*, 2004) has estimated 98,000 fatalities are directly attributable to the war – a war which has seen the slaughter of civilians, execution of injured Iraqi combatants, targeting of journalists, abuse of POWs and bombing of the Red Cross. Pierre Krähenbühl, of the Red Cross was moved to comment on the 'utter contempt for the most basic tenet of humanity: the obligation to protect human life and dignity' which has been exhibited during the war and reminded the 'multinational force' that complying with international humanitarian law was 'an obligation and not an option' (Krähenbühl, 2004). Numerous organisations throughout the world protested at the joint US/UK action. Sadly the British Psychological Society wasn't amongst them.

The war was sold to the public on the pretext of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capable of deployment within 45 minutes. Thus, only the white knights of the US/UK coalition could save the international community from the threats to world peace and security posed by a third world country, whose industrial and military infrastructure had already collapsed. It is now recognised that Iraq possessed no WMDs, having been effectively stripped of them in the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent UN inspections (Curtis, 2003).

Thus the UK Government is entrenched in an illegal war, killing thousands of civilians, its soldiers and its political leaders are committing war crimes and the public is being systematically deceived about the motives, conduct, and consequences of the war. Curtis's (2003) examination of British foreign policy in recent times suggests this is no isolated picture. The UK appears to be an 'outlaw state' engaged in systematic brutality worldwide, shoring up the activities of repressive governments, flouting international law and killing innocent people. What relevance does this have for psychologists?

Psychological issues

Undoubtedly massive psychological change followed 9/11; increased fear – of terrorist actions, civil chaos, xenophobia, loss of civil liberties, and totalitarian government. With a plausible interpretation of the events of recent years, asserting that the current

global emergency was engineered by neo-conservatives to permit a more aggressive foreign policy, increased surveillance of the public and a takeover of Central Asia's energy reserves (Ahmed, 2002), one might characterise state actions in the US and UK as a war of terror rather than one against it.

A further issue raised by the invasion of Iraq is how players in the theatre of war understand their own actions. Iraqi combatants may be certain they are fighting an aggressive invader intent on stealing their country's natural resources; Western forces, however, are more likely believe that they are fighting to liberate Iraq. Contrary to UK media portrayal, it is likely the 'insurgents' have a firmer grasp of the situation, with American and British forces alienated from the reality that the new military humanism is a pretext for a fight to make Iraq safe for foreign investors (Chomsky, 1999a; Ahmed, 2003). Thus for people in the West, it is a functional explanation rather than our forces' view from the ground which better explains the conduct of the war. At present the general public are not well placed to distinguish between these. Another consideration is state propaganda with its intention to manipulate belief, to present the intentions of Western forces as benign and humanitarian and to reduce information about death and suffering. These intentions extend beyond the UK population to influence international opinion about the motives underpinning the UK actions and increase support for it. Under New Labour this is called 'information support' at home and 'public diplomacy' abroad (Curtis, 2002, p.25), more evidence, were it needed, of the Orwellian subterfuge at play. That psychologists have been employed in some capacity to design and orchestrate these operations for the government is more than likely.

Finally, there is the immense physical and psychological damage to people and combatants resulting from the US/UK actions. This has received little media attention – and perhaps here the silence of the British Psychological Society is most damning, for the impact of war on mental health is well known (e.g. Herman, 2001).

Comparison of responses from the British psychological and medical communities

A survey of *The Psychologist* from March 2003 to November 2004 is revealing in the attitude of UK institutional psychology. During this period, the President's column contained no reference to the war. Two articles during this period are potentially relevant. Bull (2004) discussed public communication with politicians, though again without mentioning the war, British foreign policy or the propaganda used to justify it – this despite a title implying our politicians are customarily economical with truth. By failing to confront the use of lying to pacify the public, about actions described by former US Attorney General Ramsay Clarke as genocide, the article conforms to the same placid standard, of sanitising and distorting reality adopted by much of the British media.

The other article of potential relevance (Silke, 2004) considers the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York. Incredibly, no mention is made of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Silke acknowledges the response of the behavioural science community to the events of 9/11 has, in the UK at least, been muted, but his discussion of 'terrorism' concerns only 'our' responses to 'them' – understood as terrorists or religious extremists. There is no consideration of state terrorism practised for decades by the Western powers, nor any awareness that it is our actions which go some way toward explaining the existence of 'them' to begin with – for example the funding and training of the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and the Afghan resistance by the CIA and MI6 (Curtis, 2003). One could add to this roll call of responsibility, the role of the US in preventing resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Chomsky, 1999b) and how this fuels the sense of injustice and powerlessness throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Curtis makes the point that until we began large scale arming, training and funding of the Afghan resistance, terrorism, as we understand it, was largely confined to resistance movements in distinct geographic regions of the world, rather than the dispersed global pattern we now have. In

a letter responding to Silke's article, Banyard (2004) remarked;

> If there is to be an impact on psychology, hopefully it will encourage us to describe and understand why groups of people decide to wreak havoc on civilian populations for political ends, and to help develop forums for dissent that are peaceful and constructive. I hope the impact is not, as menacingly suggested by Silke, to focus research on 'attitudes to extremism among ethnic communities' and so risk increasing xenophobia (p.624).

Elsewhere in *The Psychologist*, any mention of the war is in the context of minor and frivolous pieces found on the back page 'Media Watch'. The following extract (May, 2003) sets the tone:

> War is something of a topical issue right now. And our press office has understandably been taking a flood of media requests for psychological comment. But I was surprised to learn that until the first shots had been fired, the psychological angle had not been a priority - a mere trickle of enquiries. I scoured the papers too, and found nothing. There were articles on many aspects of the crisis – even the usefulness of protest songs got a mention! (Bailes, 2003, p.280).

The writer then proceeded to discuss a study of football referees. It seems the major interest in the war for the British Psychological Society (BPS) is whether psychologists are appearing in the media. Two months later, we find the more seriously titled 'Blame and responsibility in Abu Ghraib' (McDermott, 2004). After a promising start this again descends into the lugubrious obsession with psychologists in the media:

> It is entirely appropriate that psychologists should be finding their voices within the media to comment upon and enhance the analysis of these dehumanising and degrading forms of behaviour (McDermott, 2004, p.424).

Finally, in another minor piece entitled 'Time to make love not war' which appeared

the month after war began (Joinson, 2003), US forces' employment of psychological operations is deemed worthy of a couple of sentences, before moving on to the more serious business of Celine Dion and pop songs.

Further illumination comes from comparisons between *The Psychologist* and two leading UK medical journals – *The British Medical Journal (BMJ)* and *The Lancet*. Over the same period in which I surveyed *The Psychologist*, the *BMJ* published 22 news items on aspects of the war. Clark (2003), referring to MEDACT estimates of casualties, provides an indication of the kinds of concerns that are absent from any of the meagre offerings in *The Psychologist*:

> The results of an eight-month survey of publicly available health data and expert organisations in and outside Iraq estimates that as many as 55,000 people have died since the war in Iraq began, and thousands of combatants and civilians have received severe injuries and mental trauma. Many Iraqis live in poverty and have limited access to clean water and sanitation and health services (Clark, 2003, p.1128).

Further pieces address political issues, organisation of healthcare and specific health problems that the people of Iraq are experiencing. These include: civilian deaths from munitions (Dyer, 2003a), withdrawal of aid agencies (Tayal, 2003), lack of UN humanitarian aid (Hargreaves, 2003), funding of healthcare and mental health services (Dyer, 2003b), increases in perinatal mortality (Dobson, 2003) and infectious diseases (Dyer, 2004), levels of radiation in the country (Moszynski, 2003), and child malnourishment (Moszynski, 2004). Even if one considers the more frequent publication of the *BMJ*, considerably more column inches have been devoted to the consequences of the war than in *The Psychologist*.

A search of *The Lancet* revealed 115 articles and news items over the relevant period. In addition to the survey and editorial examining mortality from the war (Roberts *et al.*, 2004, Horton, 2004), numerous articles examined its political and humanitarian aspects as well as the consequences of pre-war

sanctions. Writing three weeks before war broke out, Benjamin *et al.* (2003) wrote of the likelihood of a humanitarian disaster and warned:

> A military campaign that does not address the needs of the civilian population of Iraq, and that is likely to result in disproportionate levels of morbidity and mortality of non-combatants, is of dubious legality and questionable morality (p.874).

Attempting to draw lessons in the aftermath of war, Burkle Jnr and Noji (2004) argued that the armed forces should in future be prevented from dominating humanitarian assistance. One of the more frequent themes in the journal is torture. Rubenstein (2003) argued that the medical community must speak out more forcefully against it and noted that:

> One of the perverse effects of the war on terrorism has been the revival of the idea that torture can be legitimate in so-called exceptional cases (p.1556).

In the period under study the silence of the British Psychological Society on this matter is striking. Not until March 2005 when the BPS formally adopted a commitment to human rights has the issue of torture received any kind of official condemnation from it.

Conclusion

The evidence presented above suggests that the Iraq war is not an area that *The Psychologist* considers relevant to psychologists. In fact the editors of this august publication refused to send an earlier draft of the current article to any referee for consideration. The lamentable stance adopted by the BPS stands in contrast to the efforts of some psychologists in the UK. John Sloboda at Keele

University for example, has been instrumental in setting up the Iraq Body Count project, which seeks to establish an independent database of media-reported civilian deaths in Iraq resulting from the action of US/UK forces (see www.iraqbodycount.net). He has also drawn attention to the absence of engagement of British psychology with the issues raised by the war (Sloboda, 2003). We have seen that space in the journal reserved for Presidential and news comment, which originates with the editors and journalists responsible for copy, contains barely a mention of the war. In contrast the emphasis on trivia, gossip and professional power has become an increasing feature of the publication, and a source of dismay to many psychologists.

I believe this content is not unconnected with the general direction in which British psychology is heading. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that British psychology as represented by the contents of *The Psychologist* has adopted a stance in which controversial political issues of the day, no matter how relevant, are avoided. We must ask in whose interests this agenda of denial is being pursued, and what type of psychology will emerge should it continue. There exists a danger of British institutional psychology constituting a reactionary force, concerned only with those apolitical issues that satisfy the curiosity of those citizens of the world who have yet to confront the military reality of Anglo-American capitalism.

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