Contesting Torture

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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1 Why Perpetrators Matter

Jonathan Luke Austin

The study of torture is centuries – millennia, perhaps – old.[1] At the core of most accounts, however, is the question of what torture does to human bodies, subjectivities, societies, and institutions. For example, ethical accounts tend to denounce torture based on the harmful effects it causes victims and (world) society, as well as the fact that those harmful effects render any utilitarian justification for its use (gaining information, etc.) null and void.[2] Most lawyers, for their part, similarly stress torture as a violation of individual and collective rights that, in turn, risks the corruption of the body politic in different ways.[3] Social theorists, anthropologists, sociologists, and others – meanwhile – still tend to draw on a variant of Elaine Scarry's (1985) image of the body (of the victim) in pain as the starting point for their analysis and a metaphor for the corruption of social stability and justice.[4] Put simply, the contested nature of torture as a practice stems from a concern for the harm it causes human bodies and the ways in which that harm ripples outwards to fracture broader society. Now, this focus seems quite logical and, more, ethically crucial. As Hagan et al. (2006) describe it, the prohibition against torture is one of the 'harder' human rights because of the ways in which it directly violates individual rights in especially direct (i.e. face-to-face, body-to-body) ways and because the intentionality of the abuse appears to be relatively indisputable and so (despite efforts to the contrary[5]) ethically indefensible within the normative frames laid out by discourses of human rights.

Against that backdrop, this chapter attempts a delicate task. It begins from the proposition that while focusing on the harm caused by torture is ethically, politically, and socially crucial, it also risks reinforcing a reductionist account of the conditions of possibility that see torture emerge. Specifically, it risks us too readily averting our gaze from the analysis of one figure whose understanding would seem crucial to appreciating how it emerges: the tortur*er*. The figure of the perpetrator is the body through which political power flows so as to make its violence possible; quite literally. But the torturer remains a true 'blank' in social scientific understanding. As Darius Rejali (2004, 517) once simply put it, 'we know very little about torturers.' And this remains true almost two decades later. While several studies do exist of torturers, they remain nascent, limited, and – in a majority of cases – seek to

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expose the actions of torturers and so hold them accountable.[6] Indeed, consider one of the most prominent texts that takes as its focus the study of the perpetrator: Huggins et al.'s (2002) *Violence Workers*, which explores police torturers in Brazil. While the text does engage with perpetrators in person, via interviews, its goal cannot be said to be a full understanding of the personhood of those torturers. Instead, the authors develop a method for 'outing' perpetrators of torture, and of engaging in research 'espionage' to 'penetrate' the defences and secrecy of their interlocutors. Together, they term this process 'deposing atrocity,' blending legal judgement with a political process of removing 'from a position of authority' (Huggins et al. 2002, 45–52). This approach is justified by the view that:

> If we allow the deeds of human rights abusers to go unchallenged and unpunished, we are all responsible for the evils they commit … Engaging in … violence work is a personal and moral decision.
>
> (Huggins et al. 2002, 267)

Now, while the importance of documenting and holding responsible those implicated in torture is clear, my difficulty with accounts like these is a slippage between that task and making claims about the process that makes torture possible. The idea that 'violence work is a personal and moral decision' is an assumption grounded in a modernist ontological understanding of human autonomy, free will, and the purpose of conflict and violence, rather than an empirical or even phenomenological finding. But the assumption has rarely been challenged because, quite simply, we have yet to *listen* to the 'personal' and 'moral' subjecthood of perpetrators in full. If the perpetrator has previously been engaged, then it is – indeed – through their own interrogation. This interrogative stance and resistance to the deep personal study of the torturer is grounded, first, in the ethical inclination not to 'give voice' to those who inflict suffering and so to further silence those who have already been silenced. This ethical imperative then feeds into an intensification of social scientific suspicion. As many have noted, the social sciences as a whole adopt a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in their methodologies (Felski 2015; Austin 2019a). This hermeneutics is designed to resist our being credulous of the claims made by research subjects and instead to look for 'deeper' driving forces (ideology, racism, patriarchy, imperialism, etc.) as things our subjects are hiding (perhaps even from themselves). Such work is crucially important for grasping at the broader social structures that enable practices like torture. For example, torture has been extensively shown to be raced, sexed, and grounded in an imperialist logic.[7] Nonetheless, the approach risks 'blanking out' the full complexity of the lifeworlds of torturers and in doing so warping our understanding of the actual dynamics of those worlds. Moreover, as I will try to show here, this is not just an academic question. If the reality of perpetrating torture is distinct from that portrayed in the social scientific

literature, then we might also be introducing limitations in our capacity to prevent its violence.

The goal of this chapter is thus to offer a few insights into the actual practice of 'doing torture' on a quotidian basis and through the words of torturers themselves. Those insights are grounded both on primary source testimonies from torturers found in memoirs, interviews, and reports and series of longitudinal interviews I have conducted with Syrian perpetrators of torture since 2014. Those latter perpetrators were all 'ordinary men' in the sense of not having previously been predisposed to carrying out this violence. They were soldiers, prison guards, and police officers whose 'role' in Syria shifted radically after 2011. But the goal of my conversations with these figures was not to ask them *why* they tortured. The risk with such 'why' questions when interviewing violence workers is simple. Everybody who has done something bad can, quite quickly, construct an 'auto-biographical' narrative that self-justifies their actions around the contours of their lives (Damasio 2012; Austin and Bocco 2016). And while these constructions are interesting, they tend to be quite distinct from the actually 'lived' experience of any phenomenon. In consequence, my conversations with torturers focused on the 'how.' I sought to understand precisely what torturers 'did' on their day-to-day basis: to follow their footsteps through detention facilities. To get them to re-enact their facial gestures and the mannerisms of their actions. To get them to re-perform the intricacies of torture techniques in front of me. To get at an ethnographic understanding of torture *in action*.[8]

On the basis of those conversations, this chapter presents – in the terms of this volume – a series of themes whose usual (social-scientific) exposition is directly contested by the actions, practices, emotions, and affects of perpetrators. Put differently, I explore how torturers themselves contest (our understandings of) torture in different ways. Therein, my goal is to show how the complexity of the lived reality of being a perpetrator contests our traditional view of 1) whether or not torture is hierarchically ordered or the ways in which it is fitted into broader schemas of political repression, 2) whether or not torture is directly trained for, and 3) whether or not individuals (i.e., torture*rs*) actually want, desire, or find it 'easy' to torture. In articulating these contestations my claim is not that these are the only explanations for how torture emerges, nor do I wish to undermine the crucial importance of approaches that stress greater degrees of intentionality and structural influences. Instead, my hope is that laying out the ways in which the practically grounded experience of perpetration contests these three themes will allow us to 'complexify' the depth of our understanding in ways that may in fact be crucially important for furthering efforts to prevent the enaction of torture. Uncomfortably, I thus ask whether or not achieving that goal might require we engage with the perpetrator on more human terms, terms that might allow us to leverage that figure's own contradictions and contestations towards erasing the possibility of their becoming a subject of inquiry in the first place.

Is Torture Ordered?

Most explanations for torture embrace an 'organizational' logic in which the focus is placed on the enabling institutional or political factors that allow torturers to torture (Austin 2019b). For example, it is generally posited that non-democratic governments enact (or are even 'pro') torture more frequently due to the specific pathologies of that system of government (Vreeland 2008). Likewise, it is assumed that organized criminal groups or military organizations are – in some sense – more predisposed to this form of violence due to their functionally differentiated role in society. Two core claims generally follow from these understandings. First, that torture is 'ordered' in one way or another by higher-ups (politicians, military leaders, etc.) and second, that torture is – therefore – an intentional and purposeful act. Indeed, the idea of torture being hierarchically structured such that the individual torturer's actions are subsidiary to a broader purpose is embedded in the United Nations Convention against Torture (CAT), *viz*:

> The term 'torture' means any act by which severe pain or suffering … when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.[9]

This view is legalistic. It is necessary for the purpose of 'holding to account' those who participate in torture. But this legalistic understanding is a construction whose claims should not be automatically assumed to always be true. It is notable, indeed, that this assumption is largely based on deep historical precedent or more recent historical examples of the hierarchical ordering of torture. Indeed, the post-9/11 extraordinary rendition and torture campaign orchestrated by the United States government appears to show a clear-cut case of a government authorizing and organizing the abuse of detainees.[10] Likewise, the use of torture during the 1970s and 1980s across Latin America, as well as in communist states, appears similarly clear-cut in its purposefulness.[11]

But what do torturers have to say? Do they always articulate their actions as being directed from above? As if they were just a cog in a machine? Consider first the experience of an interrogator who admitted to torturing detainees in US-occupied Iraq and who described a:

> Mechanism of many interlocking parts that pushes the thing forward. It grows like an ink stain and spreads like a disease, and along the way its face changes, so you end up in a place totally unlike where you started.
> (Lagouranis 2007, 244)

These words directly contest the idea of torture always being hierarchically ordered, articulating its emergence instead as analogous to an infection, disease, or corruption that 'pushes the thing [torture] forward' with

minimal thought or direction. For a fuller example, consider Kenneth Bell, a US Army platoon leader operating in Afghanistan in 2008. Bell (2011, 42) describes how 'on the ride home after a particularly long mission, we drove into a near ambush that killed my gunner and left me bloody and shaken. Going on with life was the hardest thing I ever did, but the mission demanded it.' A few days later, Bell received information from an informant that he believed identified the man responsible for that ambush. He planned a raid on the village where the man was thought to be. Bell (2011, 42) notes that although he 'was long used to the mechanics of these sorts of operations,' 'everything happened so quickly once we arrived at the village that there was no time to stop and consider where I really wanted the mission to end.' Finally coming face to face with the suspect outside his home, he details his emotional state as he began questioning the man:

> I felt the bile of hatred rising … inside of me. I slowly realized what I had wanted to do all along. I was tired of playing by the rules. He was in my grasp and with him the facts about the local attacks … My interpreter and I could find a way into the home with the suspect, and he could either tell me everything about the networks in the area or he could bleed … The bold words that I had long ago spoken to my soldiers about the importance of morality in combat were forgotten … Just as I turned to my interpreter to suggest that we dip inside the home for a private chat with our host, my hatred caught in my throat like a bone. In that pause, I scrambled for the right reason to make a decision. Torture. Don't torture. Where there should have been an answer there was only darkness. It would be wrong to say that I made a choice.
>
> (Bell 2011, 43)

In cases like these, the torturer is neither ordered to torture nor chooses to do so. Instead, a heterogenous combination of 'ecological' factors (stress, fatigue, affect, emotion, materiality, etc.) seem to constitute that 'mechanism of interlocking parts' propelling individuals into the act of torture. In Algeria, conscripts described this process in terms of a *glissement* – a slippage – towards violent interrogation:

> We let ourselves slip [*on se laissait glisser*]. And then we became indifferent, the slaps, the insults, the blows we inflicted on the prisoners, it didn't affect us anymore. We were caught in a dirty game, everything seemed natural.
>
> (Sanyal 2010, 64)

Such *glissements* are not what we usually think about when torture occurs. But they appear to suggest that torture's emergence cannot always be reduced to its having been ordered in one way or another. Instead, its use often appears linked to habitual reflex that people 'slip' towards (Austin and Bocco 2016). Indeed, my own conversations with torturers have generally reflected

such an understanding. The most common explanation across those conversations for why a perpetrator came to torture in any particular situation was startlingly simple: *it just happened*. To try to understand these words, let me now turn in some depth to my conversations with a man named Ali.[12] Ali was a young man from the countryside around the Syrian city of Homs who had been living in Beirut for several months. Working illegally in a restaurant, Ali slept with six other refugees in a tiny apartment building on the outskirts of the city. Once clean-shaven, he had now grown a scruffy beard and chain-smoked the cheapest cigarettes you could buy. Earlier in his life, Ali had been planning to study literature at Damascus University. But before he could fulfil that ambition, he was conscripted for his mandatory service in the Syrian army in late 2010. Quickly he found himself on the front lines of the nascent Syrian uprising. Sometime later, a transformation affected Ali. He became – step by step, path by path, encounter by encounter – a torturer. A man we think of as doing evil deeds, holding and hurting people in darkness. In my conversations with Ali, I asked – as I did the other men like him I was meeting – 'how' precisely he had come to act out his very first moment of torture. What passed through his mind, and how did he come to stand in a room with a handcuffed body before him 'intending' to do what he did? How did all that flow together and assemble this moment of suffering? Quite simply, *how did this happen*? He paused the first time I asked this question as if searching for the answer, and replied bluntly:

> I don't know. It just happened.

I tried several variations on this question, always receiving the same response. And there seemed to be truth in this claim of an explanatory blank. Ali could recite the general narrative over how Syria reached the situation it was in, and he could charge the rebels with innumerable abuses themselves. That narrative was not the problem. The problem was giving a specific 'why' to the torture of a specific body in a specific place: there was no answer to that question: *no reason, no how, and no why*. This answer frustrated me, as a researcher seeking answers, as well as Ali himself who as an individual was unable to offer an explanation for his own violence. Now, we have all had this experience in our everyday lives. Those small or big things that we have done which, if we were asked the question: *how did that happen?* – we would also answer: *I don't really know*. But when the things we have done are important enough to profoundly 'scar' our psyches in particular ways, this lack of an answer will clearly haunt our bodies or minds: it becomes a profound aporia.

So, paradoxically, torturers often directly contest the idea that their activities have been ordered from above in the usual sense that this claim is made. Nonetheless, men like Ali can easily lay out an autobiographical narrative stressing certain 'causes' for the *why* of torture: the crimes of their enemies, the international conspiracy of terrorism, communism or fascism they were aligned against, the necessity of stabilizing the nation and the state, and so on.

Likewise, men like him readily admit that torture is 'accepted' and certainly known about by those in positions of authority. These antecedent factors provide a certain 'authorization' for torture. But a specific order – X – given to torture a particular person – Y – at a specific time – Z – can rarely be identified. What the contestations of men like Ali suggest, then, is that we must draw a distinction between the fact of torture occurring within more broadly repressive systems, and the precise circumstances in which an individual and local act of torture is enacted. Put differently, the possible 'authorization' of torture should be seen in most cases as necessary but not sufficient social, institutional, or political condition for torture. Something else frequently drives the *glissements* that torturers describe as having driven them to torture at particular moments in time. Something that exceeds the usual gaze of social scientific inquiry.

Is Torture Trained For?

The idea that torturers are trained is common. But the roots of this claim are located in several particularly prominent cases that are not more widely empirically evidenced. This most notably includes the suggestion that the military training programmes established at the so-called School of the Americas (SOA) were used by the United States to train troops in torture techniques during its dirty wars across Latin America (Blakeley 2006; Kuzmarov 2012). However, even these cases are less clear-cut than it is assumed. While the manuals distributed at the SOA were indeed used to train troops in violent counterinsurgency techniques, the manuals in question also repeatedly note prohibitions on torture and even quote the Geneva conventions (Austin 2017a, 163–65). In fact, where it occurs, training in torture is very rarely explicitly supported by manuals or PowerPoint slides. Instead, it is more usually carried out informally during, say, cigarette breaks where soldiers brag of the techniques they have used or through simple mimicry (where one torturer's practices are copied by another person present). Indeed, as Darius Rejali (2007, 11) writes in the most authoritative text on contemporary torture practices:

> There is little evidence of top-down systematic training in specific techniques in the history of modern torture.

This absence of training in torture correlates with the absence of hierarchical orders permitting its use described above. Moreover, it is notable that even the most organized of torture programmes are remarkably 'ad-hoc' in their construction: they are improvised. Take again the CIA's extraordinary rendition and torture programme. One of the program's most infamous detention centres was established in Afghanistan in September 2002. It was given different names: *Cobalt,* the *Dark Prison*, and the *Salt Pit*. It was here that one CIA detainee, Gul Rahman, died under torture. But despite being set up to gather intelligence, this site was in no way an especially 'organized' facility (c.f. Ahuja 2011;

McCoy 2012). The CIA 'site manager' for Cobalt, Matthew Zirbel, arrived at the facility with zero experience in prison operations, and was not told until three days after his arrival at the facility that he would be commanding its operations. It was then a man named Bruce Jensen – a trained psychologist with, again, no real-world experience in interrogation or detainees – who began the use of techniques that resulted in torture and death, to a large degree unsupervized. Indeed, the decision to induce sensory deprivation through blaring music was dreamt up at Cobalt itself, where a stereo system was then promptly locally purchased.[13] Put simply, the perpetrators directly involved in even this most 'organized' of cases were untrained in the task at hand.[14]

These facts now beg the question – of course – of how people know 'how to' torture and why torturers use remarkably similar techniques across time and space (Austin 2016). To see how this occurs, if not by training, let me turn back to Ali. In one of our conversations, I was asking Ali to lay out the practical contours of the use of a torture technique known in the Middle East as the *falaqa*. This technique involves immobilizing a victim on the floor and raising their two feet in the air before the soles of the feet are then whipped. In many Middle Eastern countries, the use of this technique is especially unusual because a rifle – typically a Kalashnikov variant – is used to immobilize the feet. The rifle is used as a kind of 'stick' onto which the feet can be bound, before being held up on either side by two figures, whilst a third whips them. My interest was in discovering how the rifle had come to be used for this purpose when, in other contexts, more obvious tools (brooms, etc.) are used to achieve the same end. Ali's response to this question was simple:

> It just works. It's there and you know how to use it. It's an easy tool.

As I pressed him to expand on this, Ali became frustrated at my ignorance and suddenly got up and left the room. I was annoyed with myself, and thought the interview was over. Perhaps I hadn't developed enough of a rapport at the beginning, or perhaps my questions – well, certainly – were annoying. Nonetheless, before that thought was over, Ali had returned holding an AK-47. This was surprizing, to say the least. Sensing my apprehension, as my eyes snapped to the rifle, Ali laughed and said, '*Don't worry ya akhi* [my brother].' Grinning, and with a cigarette in his mouth, he then pointed the rifle at me and conducted a brief mock execution. The firing pin pinged, and he burst out laughing. I was, to say the least, confused. Soon, however, Ali was passing the rifle over to me. The first thing you notice about a rifle, if like me you are not used to holding one, is how heavy it is. Promptly, my arms drooped under its weight and the barrel came to point at the floor, with my hands more grasping its sides than holding the thing properly. At this, a sense of embarrassment suddenly came over me: half a general wish not to look inept and a half – no doubt – a kind of masculine desire to look like the kind of man I was talking to. Not to look too weak. Without thinking, I thus recall shifting my legs a little wider, and my shoulders upright, and the tendons in my arms tensing as

I swung the rifle upwards, shifting the stock into the correct position against my shoulder, grabbing the pistol grip, placing a finger around the trigger, and tightly gripping the handguard with my left hand. Now, I surprized myself with all this. There was surely much wrong with how I was holding the rifle, to a specialist. But I looked far more competent than I had a moment ago. And this had happened in seconds, automatically, and preconsciously. My arms, muscles, and bones – my body – just moved into this position. Ali laughed again and, looking hardly impressed, remarked:

> Counter-strike, huh?

His reference was to a popular 'First-Person Shooter' (FPS) video game that I had, indeed, played as a child. His implication was that I had learned to hold a rifle from popular cultural referents, rather than direct engagement in this practice. He was certainly correct. From this brief collective enactment of the moment of torture, Ali later explained:

> You see how good this tool is? It tells you what to do? Once you've played a game or seen it on TV or something … that's how it works. Even for you! I've seen the *falaqa* used like this before. When we were training [after conscription to the Syrian army], they [higher rank soldiers] used it against us, and – well – this is just a children's punishment here. We've seen it on TV, everywhere … That's how we know, I guess.

With these words, perpetrators like Ali describe how their knowledge of how-to-torture can be located within a broad set of 'cultural' repertoires that extend far beyond formal settings of violence (the military, the police, etc.). This includes popular cultural artefacts (computer games, television shows), forms of violence that are considered legitimate (forms of punishing children, sporting rituals, hazing rites, etc.), and beyond. In short, these words suggest that people torture with the knowledge they *already have*, wherever it comes from (c.f. Ten Brink and Oppenheimer 2012). And so – simply – training is frequently not needed (Austin and Bocco 2016). Put differently, men like Ali suggest that we *all* already know how to torture. Just as I suddenly knew how to hold a rifle. And the importance of this claim rests on how it 'generalizes' the conditions of possibility for acts of torture beyond specific zones of conflict or repression, suggesting that its violence remains possible due to widely entrenched forms of social and cultural practice that we are *all* susceptible too. Torture is not just 'over there' in the world, somewhere far from our own psyches.

Do Torturers Want to Torture?

Across studies of torture, the actual 'task' of carrying out violence is remarkably underexplored. As described above, the generalized focus on the 'systemic' or 'organized' nature of torture draws our gaze away from the

actual flesh-and-blood moment of its enaction. In large part, this bias extends far beyond torture into our social understanding of violence itself. Indeed, both social science and wider society tend to perceive violence as relatively 'easy' to enact once a motivation of one sort or another exists (Collins 2007). The consensus has been to see the translation of a social or political problem (a clash of interests, the radical dehumanization of others, etc.) into violence as relatively unproblematic if the necessary material and/or organizational capacities are present. It remains commonplace to view violence as lurking beneath the surface of the social contract as something only constrained by our institutional, social, and/or personal capacities to overcome the motivations that may emerge for its use by either an individual, group, or polity. Indeed, this is something that even our discussion on the 'generalized' nature of torture knowledge described above would seem to affirm. Nonetheless, those who have actually observed violence in action or – indeed – participated in it, often find things to be very different. Carrying out violence, not as an abstraction, but in reality, is 'hard.' And it is hard whether or not a motivation exists for its use. As microsociologist Randall Collins (2007, 24) puts it:

> Violence is hard, not easy. Virtually no cultural discourse admits this; neither perpetrators nor pro-violence groups, nor victims, nor altruistic or righteous observers-from-a-distance. Everyone thinks violence is easy to perform … But the micro-situational realities of talking about violence fall into ritual patterns of bluster and bluff, and these rituals provide an ideology that covers up the real nature of violence—that it is hard to perform … we need to get beyond taking them [perpetrators or others] at their word.

Evidence for the difficulty human beings have in carrying out violent acts is recorded not only by microsociologists like Collins or his colleagues.[15] It is also recognized as a fact of human behaviour by military practitioners, who have sought to train against this difficulty (from their perspective) for almost a century (Grossman 1996). And, finally, this is affirmed by the words of the perpetrators themselves. This is most evident in the psychological costs that torturers suffer when carrying out these acts. This includes the expression of an array of contradictory, and almost always negative, emotions: fear, envy, despair, etc. For example, victims often remark about their torturer:

> How little he values himself. He envies the prisoner for his ideas, his relationships, his political loyalty. He envies his knowledge, his culture, the books he's read.
>
> (Liscano 2004, 27)

In extreme cases, where the torturer is forced to live alongside his victims, this lack of self-worth extends into a substantial disruption of their wider

life: the torturer no longer feels they can go home, no longer feels the same emotions of love and empathy for their family, and can no longer – quite simply – be 'themselves' anymore (Tognato 2010). Indeed, beyond feelings of frustration, envy and alienation from ordinary life, torturers find their violence 'bleeds' into normal life quite dramatically. Frantz Fanon (2004, 199), for example, wrote of the mental disorders created by the predations of colonial violence within their perpetrators. He spoke of a European police inspector who smoked five packs of cigarettes a day and had recurrent nightmares. The inspector was involved in the daily torture of Algerians, but what troubled him was the way in which that violence escaped the interrogation room and saw him start to beat his wife and children. The inspector was thus seeking treatment from Fanon to help him keep torturing but stop attacking his family at home. Violence here is shown not to be containable 'in the mold of an instrument' but instead as bleeding 'beyond the limits imposed by a given task and [becoming] a reality, an opacity or inertia that inevitably saturates all relations' (Dodd 2009, 75). This finding is unsurprising, of course, if we consider the similar mental illnesses suffered by regular soldiers carrying out legitimate forms of violence (shooting, bombing, etc.).[16] Moreover, these disturbances paradoxically echo those of the survivors of torture. In clinical terms, being tortured often results in psychological dissociation, 'a structured separation of such processes as memory, identity, emotions, and thoughts' punctuated by 'intrusions of horror in which [victims] experience themselves as detached from the self' and from reality 'in unreal or distorted ways' (Ray et al. 2006, 825). It is the case, then, not only that doing violence is hard, but also that it profoundly traumatizes the perpetrator: it destroys the world of tortured and torturer alike (Shapiro 2003; Osiel 2009; Wolfendale 2009). The reasons for the traumatic nature of tortur*ing* seem to lie in what Lawrence Keeley (1996, 180) has described as the psychic unity of humanity:

> All members of our species have within rather narrow limits of variation the same basic physiology, psychology, and intellect. This concept does not exclude individual variations in temperament or even the various components of intellect, but finds that such variations have no value in explaining social or cultural differences between groups … Anthropologists have long recognized that the many and profound differences in technology, behaviour and political organization, and values found among societies and cultures can be best explained by reference to ecology, history, and other material and social factors.

One central aspect of this psychic unity is what Keeley calls a universal distaste for violence. Violence is (almost) everywhere, but it is also seen as a bad thing (almost) everywhere. In short, most people do not want to torture others, even if they might hypothetically support it. The act is somehow incomprehensible, and hence the figure of the torturer is always radically

othered. It seems to be because of this that once the state or another authority is removed as a causal variable ordering violence, most explanations turn towards individual psychological pathology. This is what occurred at Abu Ghraib, for example, where perpetrators were seen as 'bad apples' (Danchev 2008). But there is no evidence that interrogators, guards, and soldiers who torture in detention facilities are uniformly pathological. The great majority are born normal in their 'psychic unity' against violence. Indeed, the pathology explanation is by and large folklore. If this is the case, however, then torture should be impossible. If torturers are not pathological, and they (often) are not ordered to torture, nor (often) trained in its contours, then torture should not happen. But it does. If we are to see why we must keep listening to the voices of perpetrators in full. How do torturers overcome their disinclination once they have 'slipped' towards circumstances in which it becomes possible or necessary?

There are surely many answers here but one that I have discovered to be particularly prominent in my conversations with torturers rests on their use of micro-level coping mechanisms *at the very moment of torture.* These coping mechanisms de-intensify the corporeal sensuality of violence and – in doing so – allow the perpetrator to 'forget themselves' and their work. To see how this operates, consider now another of the perpetrators I have spoken to, a man named Mahmoud. Mahmoud had a similar story to Ali. He had been a guard at a detention facility and had considerable experience in torture. What particularly interested me with Mahmoud was the speed with which he articulated an intense hatred for the 'enemy' he was harming – those he referred to as 'dogs' – whilst simultaneously expressing dislike for the violence he had to commit against them. He did not like torturing. In fact, no torturer I have met does. As Mahmoud said:

> Yes, they are dogs. But even when dogs scream you feel bad. Maybe less if you are angry. But a person? It is not human to hurt them like this. We all know this.

How, I thus asked, did he overcome this distaste?

> When you are doing it [torture] it is you know not real … You just play that role. And you give them a role. You get it done because you have to.

To get a better feel for the 'role-playing' described by Mahmoud, I asked him what kind of 'roles' he was describing, and what kind of 'scene' they fitted into. He was not quite sure how to respond to this, so I prompted him with a reference to the Syrian soap opera *Bab Al-Hara.* This soap opera is one of the most popular in the Middle East and depicts the old city of Damascus during the French-mandate era. Its plot follows everyday life in the city, as well the life of Syrian rebels resisting the French occupation. I asked Mahmoud if the situation was similar – an occupation-style setting of

friends versus a clear-cut enemy in which battle lines are quickly drawn – and he responded:

> Yes, like that, yes. We've all heard stories like this, no? Since we are children. And this war, here in Syria, it is also international like that: the Americans, the Russians, the Saudis, they are all here. Bab Al-Hara is a good example. What can you do, but resist? When we were fighting, we fought like that, like brothers … You know it was like we were playing … we would give names to each other from TV or films … I called myself … And others different names. We played around with it. It helped us to realize who we were fighting and how bad they are but, *yani*, it was a way of forgetting what we were doing.

In this example, Mahmoud describes how violence can be framed as 'unreal' by deploying quite literally fictional references. This process provides men like him a 'way of forgetting what we were doing.' These words go far beyond the idea that 'popular culture can be used as a mirror to reflect on how societies think about themselves' (Buzan 2010, 75). Instead, they indicate the power of audio-visual popular cultural artefacts to *allow*, *permit*, and *distantiate* ourselves from 'reality' as we normally think of it *whilst still participating in it*. This process has been evidenced elsewhere, not only vis-à-vis torture, but war more generally, terrorist recruitment, and beyond (Flynn and Salek 2012; Oppenheimer 2013; Crone 2014; Austin 2017b). Framing violence as something outside real life appears to be one important coping mechanism enabling perpetrators to overcome the 'hardness' of violence. And, above all, such coping mechanisms seem to aim towards a 'de-intensification' of the affective, emotional, and psychological costs of perpetrating torture.

Indeed, such coping mechanisms appear to be crucial for the enaction of all forms of violence. For example, the Nazi regime went to extreme efforts to develop a method of killing that tried to ensure 'victims 1) had no anticipation of death; (2) need not be touched, seen, or heard while being killed; (3) died gently; and (4) instantaneously' (Russell 2019, 262). Their goal therein was not to be humane to their victims but to de-intensify the work of perpetrators (Russell 2019). Likewise, historians have noted the ways in which the copious availability of alcohol was crucial in allowing 'ordinary men' to participate in the Holocaust (Westermann 2016). Similar findings pertain to the use of amphetamines among perpetrators of terrorism or hashish by militia members (Austin 2020b). Though these latter examples depart from the case of torture, they are particularly interesting for stressing the ways in which even state (or military, etc.) authorities who specifically order and desire violence must 'negotiate-with' or 'accommodate' the affective reluctance that perpetrators of violence frequently display. This final way in which perpetrators contest our usual understandings of their actions thus further complexifies the ontological conditions under which torture becomes possible. It demands we take more fully into account the ways in which

the human aversion to carrying out violence of this kind can be overcome through a heterogenous set of practices, objects, and affects that are rarely our main object of study. As we now move to explaining in depth, moreover, such a micro-level understanding of the enabling conditions of torture may also prove crucially important for expanding our repertoire of approaches towards preventing its use across the world politics.

Can We Care for Perpetrators?

Perpetrators matter because they have experienced a certain 'reality' about torture that others have not. Of course, this is not the only reality surrounding torture nor – more importantly – the one that we must ethically or socially privilege. That would surely be the reality of the victims and survivors of torture, as well as the fractures torture has inflicted upon the societies that they form a part of. But it is a reality that we must take seriously analytically and politically. Perpetrators matter because they are the flesh and blood conduits through which the violence of torture flows and – as such – are one of the main conduits that must be disrupted. But to be disrupted, perpetrators must first be understood. While it has typically been assumed that their actions can be prevented through a focus on reforming the institutions they form a part of, the social conditions that enable mass violence, or even through punishing torturers post hoc to deter future perpetration, the words of perpetrators suggest something else may be required to complement those approaches.[17] If torture is often not ordered, only rarely trained for, and is something that is disliked but enabled through micro-level coping mechanisms, then these more 'top-down' interventions do not suffice.

But what else can be done? The ways in which perpetrators of torture contest our regular understanding of its contours are profoundly unsettling. While I hope to have shown that listening to perpetrators can provide important contestations of our usual (social, political, scientific) understanding of torture, what all that means for questions of responsibility, accountability, and justice is where we must conclude. Even if listening to torturers reveals a different 'reality' behind this phenomenon, is it not fundamentally dangerous to give voice to its contours? To begin addressing this question, it should be noted that the account offered here should not be read as reducing the possibility of holding to account perpetrators or those they represent. On the contrary, I believe the discussion here hints at the possibility of substantively expanding our conceptualization of accountability. If torture very frequently occurs because of the *glissements* described earlier, then it is incumbent upon us to ask what enables those slippages and, more pertinently, what is not being done to prevent them. One way in which to think about this is in terms of what I have previously termed 'abilityresponse' (Austin 2017a; 2020a) and Haraway (2016) alternatively calls 'response-ability.'

A focus on abilityresponse gestures at the need to balance a classic understanding of the necessity of holding perpetrators responsible for their actions

with a need to explore how capable they were to act differently: the degree to which they had the 'ability' to 'respond' in another manner. In asking that latter question, we are also able to adjudicate whether other figures are partially responsible for an inability to respond (i.e. not to torture). This would clearly include political and military leaders who are frequently aware of – for example – the clandestine sharing of torture knowledge and the use of coping mechanisms that enable violence. But it would also necessarily include society at large. Too often, public and social scientific attention is placed on torture only when a particular 'shock' brings it to our attention (Strange 2006). The images from Abu Ghraib; the Caesar photographs from Syria; the memoirs of colonial officials. Upon the background of this aesthetics of shock, it becomes too easy to distance ourselves from torture as a global social problem that is to some degree deeply entangled with others forms of violence (domestic violence, legitimate military violence, police violence, etc.). Put differently, listening to perpetrators forces us to ask in what ways global society at large must also be held to account for failing to tackle torture more fully.

Concretely, conceptualizing modes of preventing torture through ability-response would necessarily focus on shifting the 'material-aesthetic' ecologies through which perpetrators emerge (Austin 2019c; 2019b; Austin and Leander 2021). For example, if the frequent material poverty of detention centres produces affective conditions that enable the *glissements* underlying many cases of torture (see Austin 2016), then substantive social and social scientific attention should be placed on how we might re-design detention settings, as well as other affective drivers of violence, at the micro-level. While social scientists cannot achieve this alone, the ethos of abilityresponse would also allow us to hold to account more fully those governments or other institutions who might resist such changes (for whatever reason). Nonetheless, before getting there, the first step in expanding our understanding of accountability and possible prevention mechanisms rests on social science and society at large taking the uncomfortable step of listening to the words of torturers, exploring their worlds in depth, and perhaps even attempting to offer a measure of 'care' for them as figures who – however much we might like it to be the case – we cannot neatly separate from ourselves and society.

Notes

1 For reviews see, *inter alia*, Du Bois (1991), Asad (1997), Crelinsten (2003), Antaki (2007), Elmer (2007), Rejali (2007), and McCoy (2012).
2 See, *inter alia*, Shue (1978, 197), Bufacchi and Arrigo (2006), Johnson (2012), Matthews (2012), and O'Donohue et al. (2014).
3 See Hajjar (2009); Lewis (2010). For an exception, see Dershowitz (2002).
4 See Feitlowitz (1998), Gordon (2008), and Kelly (2012).
5 On such exceptions, see Dershowitz (2002) and Scarry (2006).
6 The most prominent of these studies include Huggins (2000), Huggins et al. (2002), and Zimbardo (2007). Interestingly, there are far more meditations on the figure

of the torturer within cinema or literature than social science. See, for extensive discussion, Ten Brink and Oppenheimer (2012).

7 For discussions, see Ahuja (2011), Khalili (2012), and MacKenzie (2020).

8 In attempting to reach this understanding, I drew on the ethnographic interviewing method outlined in Spradley (1979).

9 Available at: https://tinyurl.com/8vj64kh2.

10 For discussions see, *inter alia*, Grey (2006), McCoy (2012), Khalili (2012), and Open Society Foundation (2013).
Barnes (2016).

11 For excellent discussions of some of these examples, see Feitlowitz (1998), Rejali (2007), and Capdevila and Frederique (2009).

12 All interview respondents cited hereafter have been anonymized. Other anonymizing procedures may have been applied in line with ethics guidelines.

13 For all these details, see https://tinyurl.com/t4s6mbbp.

14 To be clear, none of these facts should distract from the remarkably organized nature of the CIA's torture programme, nor others that have existed across history. Nonetheless, they do underline the contingency and uncertainty surrounding even these most organized of cases of torture. Improvisation and disorder appear to generally rule over these facilities.

15 See Downey (2007); Collins (2013; 2015; 2007); Weenink (2013; 2014; 2015).

16 For discussions, see Creamer et al. (2011); Fisher (2014).

17 For an excellent and comprehensive discussion of current torture prevention approaches, see Carver and Handley (2016). For emerging approaches linked to that described here, see Austin and Bocco (2016) and Celermajer (2018).

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