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Perceptions of Evil from Abu Ghraib: Female Prison Guards and Sexual Violence

Theresa Porter & Helen Gavin

Abstract

In 2003, the world was presented with images of sexual torture from Abu Ghraib, a U.S. military prison in Iraq. For many people, part of the shock of the images was the fact that several of the guards were women. Lynndie England, Sabrina Harman, Megan Ambuhl and Janis Karpinski quickly became the infamous face of the U.S. imperialism. The involvement of women celebrating prisoners' sexual humiliation and pain, was extremely difficult for people to comprehend and it forced western society to realize that simply adding women to the military did not automatically make that military less prone to brutality.

The aftermath of Abu Ghraib included extensive analysis from multiple perspectives. Conservatives claimed being in the military has 'masculinized' the perpetrators and made them violent. Some feminist theorists stated that England et al were just scapegoats who lacked any power or authority both as women in a patriarchal system and as common soldiers. Sociologists discussed the role of group dynamics and how violence towards the enemy has historically been one of the ways to increase a team's cohesion. Others noted the connection to colonialism in the fact that all the victims were men of color while the perpetrators were Caucasian. Throughout these analyses, the focus has been on the perpetrators as soldiers, but downplayed their role as prison guards. However, as this paper will demonstrate, this role may be useful in better understanding the actions at Abu Ghraib. A large body of data shows that, in the USA, female prison guards are responsible for the majority of sexual crimes against male inmates and a large percentage of sexual crimes against female inmates. This paper will discuss how the sexual torture at Abu Ghraib can be seen as existing on the same continuum of other sexual crimes committed by female guards in civilian prisons.

Key Words: Abu Ghraib, sexual violence, prison guards, Stanford Prison Study, Milgram Obedience Study.

Introduction:

While the 2004 images of Lynndie England forcing a hooded prisoner to publically masturbate or dragging a naked prisoner with a leash caused an uproar, the reality is that the events at Abu Ghraib should not have come to a surprise, since similar events have been occurring in American prisons. Three years earlier, in 2001, Washington DC courts awarded a Ms. "D." \$350,000 in damages after finding evidence that, while awaiting sentencing for drug charges, she was sexually victimized and abused on a weekly basis by prison guard Captain Yvonne Walker. The court found that, on multiple occasions, Yvonne Walker had forced female inmates to perform striptease dances for an audience of male and female guards and to simulate performing sexual acts in public; those who refused were assaulted and placed in solitary confinement. The appeals court noted that these were not isolated incidents but rather, were part of a series of events that well-known within that prison.¹ In actuality, it was part of a wide-spread problem in many American prisons.

In the 1990's, the U.S. started analyzing sexual violence against inmates. The expectation was that male guards were victimizing female inmates and the research would help design ways to prevent this. What has come out of the research, however, has been overwhelming evidence that female prison guards are engaging in high rates of sexual offending against adult male and female inmates as well as juveniles. This information has

been ascertained various ways; by surveying both current inmates and ex-cons after their release from prison and by using prison records for substantiated incidents. The data shows female guards were responsible for between 40% and 62% of verified incidents of staff perpetrated sexual abuse of male inmates.^{2 3} For example, while inmates are unable to consent to sexual contact with guards, researchers attempt to designate whether an inmate was 'willing' or 'unwilling' to engage in that contact. A 2008 study found that nearly 50% of the cases of staff-on-inmate sex in the men's jail were 'unwilling'.⁴ While the majority of the sexual abuse of female inmates appears to be perpetrated by male guards, female guards are implicated in 28%-37% of cases in female prisons and jails.⁵ The highest rate of sexual abuse by female guards appears to occur in juvenile detention centers. One study of over 2,000 juvenile offenders found that 92% of the youths reporting sexual abuse by staff identified female perpetrators⁶. Eighty-six percent of the youths reported that their female victimizers used force. These statistics are made more noteworthy by the fact that, nationally, less than 50% of the guards at juvenile detention centers are female.

Given the prevalence of sexual aggression by female prison guards, then why is it not more well-known? One reason is that, unlike Abu Ghraib, there has not been widespread media coverage with salacious pictures. Another reason is that the issue of female perpetrated sex crimes directly contradicts the western discourse regarding gender, sex, and violence. In a dichotomous, heteronormative and hypermasculine perspective, men prey on women; there are no other options. Therefore, research such as that referenced above is doubted because it causes cognitive dissonance in those who hold these gendered views. The male prisoners must be lying about their sexual victimization, the female prisoners must have consented and the female guards must have been in love.^{7 8} We minimize the experiences of the victims. For example, in a case in Georgia in 2006, a judge noted that, while there was no doubt that the female guard had denied food to male inmate who refused to masturbate on demand, the judge felt the incident was too trivial to be worthy of any sanctions.⁹

Prison Guards:

While the traditional narrative that frames women, including women guards, as vulnerable rather than predatory, we must ask if these traditional gender views are germane in the context of a prison.^{10 11} What do we know about guards and about prisons that can help explain, although not excuse, the problem of their sexual exploitation of inmates?

Women, like men, may be drawn to work as a prison guard or to join the military because both jobs are seen as stable and well-paid compared to some other options. However, prison guard and soldiers are rather low status positions and it has been noted that people high in power and low status positions are more likely to engage in degrading, abusive behavior.¹² The most famous version of this theory came out of study done at Stanford University in 1971, when a group of college-age volunteers were assigned to role play either guards or prisoners in a mock prison for two weeks. The study had to be terminated after 6 days due to the amount of physical and psychological abuse the mock guards performed against the mock inmates. After Abu Ghraib, the Stanford Prison Study (SPS) was repeatedly referenced as evidence that prison guards are doomed to become corrupted by their power and seemingly normal people could become monsters in put in the right situation. In other words, the situation transforms the person. Commentators noted that, as in the SPS, the guards at Abu Ghraib were acted against their character when they entered a situation that gave them excessive power over prisoners.

The problem with using the STS to explain Abu Ghraib is that the study did not actually show that a prison situation would actually make ordinary people act in a manner counter to their pre-situation character or personality. The young men in the STS were not conventional people. When they answered the advertisement to be part of a mock prison scenario, they self-selected or biased the results. This is because the characteristics of the type of person who might want to be in a mock prison for 14 days could have been significantly different than the characteristics of the average person. A follow-up study 2007 later compared the personalities of people who volunteered to be in a mock prison study with those who volunteered to be part of a more vaguely described psychology study.

The people who self-selected to be in a mock prison were significantly different than the control group, with elevated scores in authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance, as well as decreased scores in empathy and altruism.¹³ This strongly suggests that the personalities of the mock guards in the 1971 study were primed towards abuse and only needed the opportunity to do so.

If we can't explain the sexual violence by female prison guards at Abu Ghraib or in U.S. prisons because of the corruptive influence of power, then how else can we explain the events? Their choice to enter these positions may hold the answer. Who might self-select to be in a position of total authority over another person, to operate in an isolated, punitive environment? Research on the personalities of prison guards in the U.S. suggests that, as a group, guards are superficial, somewhat manipulative and more focused on meeting their own needs rather than those of others. A distinctive sub-group of guards were noted to be hostile, aggressive, and impulsive.¹⁴ Rather than becoming corrupted by being in a position of power, it is more likely that these individuals sought out positions of power. There is similar research regarding who joins the U.S. military. Volunteers for the U.S. military are more likely to believe in punishment by authority figures, are less empathetic and were less accepted by their peers during their adolescence.¹⁵ In other words, those who decide to volunteer for the military have punitive, authoritarian and un-empathetic personalities. Rather than simply becoming 'masculinized' by entering the military, rather than being corrupted by being in a position of power as a guard, the situation of guard, the situation of soldier can draw certain character types to them.¹⁶

We all make choices to enter into situations that allow let us express our personalities, and if that environment reinforces those personality traits, we would expect the personality and the behaviors to be amplified.¹⁷ If one has an interest in dominance or hierarchy, then one will seek out those environments and institutions that reinforce the interest. The more extreme the environment is, then the more extreme the individuals drawn to it.¹⁸ The situation and the person interact, allowing someone with a tendency or interest in abuse to express that predilection more fully. In the case of Abu Ghraib, some of the individuals involved had specifically volunteered for that assignment and were selected by those in command for having attitudes that conformed to the specific situation. If a woman had an authoritarian nature, if she were Machiavellian and exploitative, if she enjoys the experience of power over others, she might do well to place herself in a military prison, guarding the 'enemy other', just as she would do well in a civilian prison, guarding 'bad boys' in a safe and controlled environment.

Besides the Stanford mock prison study, the other psychological study often cited in the analysis of Abu Ghraib was the Milgram study of obedience. In 1963, volunteers were asked to deliver electric shocks to a second, hidden person if that person gave the wrong answer in a learning trial. Milgram had designed the study because of an interest in the phenomenon of people claiming that they were not evil but had simply followed orders. He wrote that, despite hearing the protestations of the hidden victim, many of the test subjects obeyed the instruction to keep shocking the other person. The problem with using this study to explain Abu Ghraib is that many of the volunteers actually refused to follow orders to shock the victim. An analysis of the transcripts of the study showed that the volunteers did deliver shocks when the researcher said "Please continue" but once the researcher issued an order to shock the victim, all the volunteers refused to deliver a shock.¹⁹

Official vs. Recreational Torture:

At Abu Ghraib, it is true that the Bush administration had authorized the use of 'enhanced interrogation techniques' to break prisoners who may have useful information. The techniques included not just the traditional tortures of sleep and food deprivation, sensory disorientation via the use of hoods and blindfolds, and pain, but also sexual humiliation.²⁰ While rape and humiliation of the enemy has long been a fixture of war, the Bush administration followed the writings of anthropologist Raphael Patai, author of a simplistic and fundamentally flawed book 'The Arab Mind'.²¹ He claimed that Middle Eastern males were particularly homophobic and vulnerable to sexual humiliation. While

the use of any torture is inexcusable, the problem with blaming the behavior of the women at Abu Ghraib on following orders to use the 'enhanced interrogation techniques' is that they weren't ordered to. Of the 11 identified victims of sexual abuse and humiliation, only one was ever interrogated at all and that was done by a soldier other than the guards implicated in the sexual abuse. The remaining prisoners were not questioned, were not interrogated. After dogs were made to lick peanut butter off a prisoner's genitals, after naked prisoners were stacked into a pyramid, after they were sodomized with chemical lights and broom handles, after they were forced to stand against a wall and publically masturbate, the prisoners were not questioned.^{22 23} These women did not simply follow orders to use sexual torture as part of an interrogation; they weren't involved in interrogation. So if this wasn't part of a technique to break down prisoners and obtain vital information, then why was it done?

I propose that it was done because it met the needs of the women involved. Just as the female guards in juvenile detention centers in the US enjoy coercing sex from the youths in their care, the women at Abu Ghraib enjoyed humiliating and molesting the prisoners in their power. If we start with the assumption that these women did not simply have agency but were operating in a situation that provided them with power over an abject other, then we can see that these women took pleasure in their actions²⁴. Lynndie England used the prisoners for a form of foreplay before having sex with a fellow guard.²⁵ The press tended to focus on her short stature and girlish appearance, as well as the fact that the crimes occurred early in her pregnancy; this is a safe and traditional construction of women. In reality, she was noted by witnesses to have fondled herself during the humiliation of inmates²⁶. Sabrina Harman attached electrodes to the genitals of prisoners, forced them into a naked pyramid and forced them to publically masturbate. She also took 'selfies' with the bruised corpse of Mandel al-Jamadi who had been tortured to death. When asked about it, she reported, 'It was just, "Hey, it's a dead guy, it'd be cool to get a photo next to a dead person." I mean that was it'.²⁷ One prisoner describing how he was anally raped with a chemical luminescence stick testified "And the two American girls that were there when they were beating me, they were hitting me with a ball on my dick. And when I was tied up in my room, one of the girls, with blonde hair, she is white, she was playing with my dick"

Conclusion:

It is impossible to give a definitive, all-inclusive analysis of Abu Ghraib because the events were the result of an intersection between imperialism, orientalism, gender, homophobia and race. Those who brutalized and sexually humiliated the prisoners did not function in a vacuum and their superiors should all be held accountable for those abuses. Similarly, those in charge of US prisons are responsible for their lack of scrutiny of guards' behavior, for the lack of access to human rights group inspections and media reviews. However, individual human desires and predilections should not be left out of the analysis of sexual abuse by female guards generally and at Abu Ghraib specifically. If, as posited here, sexual abuse by female guards was not an unusual, one-off event at Abu Ghraib but rather, was part of wider problem of sexual abuse by those in power over prisoners, then we would expect to see reports of similar behavior at other US military prisons. These reports exist, although they have garnered far less attention. Sergeant Selena M. Salcedo was accused of sexually humiliating Afghani prisoner Dilawar, kicking him in the groin and ordering subordinates to leave him chained to the ceiling. She and her team had been ordered not to touch prisoners after another prisoner's death. Instead, she grabbed his head and slammed him up against the wall, forced him to sit against the wall as if in a chair until his knees gave out. Witnesses reported that, at no time during this was Dilawar questioned or interrogated. He later died of blunt force trauma while in U.S. custody.^{28 29} At Miramar, the US military prison in California, after Lance Corporal Lacey Kohlman was accused of sexual misconduct with a male inmate, investigators found that the rate of problem sexual behavior by guards was twice that of most US prisons but not as high as that at the military prison at Fort Lewis, Washington.³⁰ While it would be easier to view the behavior of the female guards at Abu Ghraib as due to something other than a sexualized will to power, the

available evidence indicates that, like their counterparts in prisons stateside, the guards sought out positions of power and exercised their dominance for their own arousal and gratification. Sexual sadism exists in women as well as men and while women may not often have the opportunity to indulge in such behavior, the evidence is that prison settings allow those with the predilection to gratify themselves at the expense of vulnerable others³¹.

Notes

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- ⁷ Chris Faulkner & Cheryl Regehr. 'Sexual boundary violations committed by female forensic workers', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online*, 39(2011): 154-163.
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