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## Lessons from Social Psychology for Complex Operations

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## Chapter 7

### Lessons from Social Psychology for Complex Operations

*Rosa Brooks*

“Complex operations” are, as the term implies, complex—which is generally a polite euphemism for “really hard.” Counterinsurgency operations are hard; stability operations are hard. They are particularly hard in the context of cultures that are rife with corruption, factionalism, tribalism, and extremism. Well-meaning efforts to promote rule of law and good governance run up against popular mistrust and entrenched forms of nepotism; funds for economic development projects vanish into the pockets of local powerbrokers; efforts to inculcate a sense of unified national purpose run afoul of tribal dynamics that pull people in the opposite direction. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has spent hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands have lost their lives, but prospects for future peace and stability remain doubtful.

It would be wonderful if social science could offer simple recipes for turning the hard into the easy, but no such recipes exist. Nonetheless, examining some insights from social psychology can help explain just *why* it is so difficult for outsiders to bring about cultural change (particularly rapid cultural change). Most important, understanding the social dynamics behind tribalism, extremism, and factionalism may help us make some modicum of progress, against the odds.

Social psychology is the branch of psychology that looks at how individual human beings interact with each other. It is concerned with questions of social perception, social influence and social interaction: how individuals understand themselves in relation to groups, how individual behavior is influenced by others, and how group dynamics work. Individuals may view themselves as free agents, basing decisions about what to think and how to behave on their individual preferences and individual reasoning. Social psychology tells us that this view is, at best, incomplete: much of the time, at least, individual beliefs and behaviors are shaped far more by the social settings in which we find ourselves. Our families, friends, colleagues, neighbors, teachers, leaders, and even our enemies influence our reasoning and our behavior, often in ways we don't fully realize—and sometimes in ways that would dismay us if we understood them fully.

This short essay looks at several social forces that powerfully affect human behavior, often trumping individual “character,” personality, knowledge, and even deeply held moral beliefs. Specifically, this essay looks briefly at issues of obedience, conformity, and group

polarization, discussing the ways in which they can affect and distort individual behavior. Ultimately, this essay suggests, understanding these dynamics can have important implications for how we think about counterinsurgency and stability operations.

## **Obedience**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of “moral progress” was popular; in Europe and the United States, serious intellectuals and political leaders spoke confidently of the dawning of an age in which violent conflict, war, and killing might be utterly eliminated.

The following decades destroyed that optimistic fantasy. Two World Wars demonstrated that humanity was less advanced than utopians had believed, and the willful atrocities of the mid-twentieth century left many formerly optimistic thinkers reeling. The Nazi death camps killed six million civilians, and in Stalin’s Russia and Mao’s China, millions of “counter-revolutionaries” were executed or sent to their deaths in hard labor camps.

In 1961, far away from the battlefields and the death camps, Dr. Stanley Milgram of Yale University’s Psychology Department struggled to understand the Holocaust and similar mass atrocities. How could people have *done* such things to other people, Milgram wondered? How could ordinary people turn on their neighbors, their colleagues, their friends? During the Holocaust, how could so many Germans “just follow orders” and participate in the killings, and so many others turn a blind eye?

Assuming that the German nation had simply produced a disproportionate number of evil people seemed far too simplistic an answer. Dr. Milgram suspected, though, that there might be some characteristics that rendered particular cultures more susceptible to “going bad” than other cultures. Perhaps, Milgram hypothesized, Germans were socialized to obey authority more than, say, Americans or Englishmen or Frenchmen. If Germans were brought up from an early age with an unusually high degree of respect for authority, he reasoned, a political leader like Hitler could readily bend that to evil purposes. A “culture of obedience” might help explain the Holocaust.

“From 1933 to 1945 millions of innocent people were systematically slaughtered on command,” wrote Milgram. “Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacture of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could only have been carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of people obeyed orders.... Facts of recent history and observation in daily life suggest that for many people obedience may be a deeply ingrained behavior tendency, indeed, a prepotent impulse overriding training in ethics, sympathy, and moral conduct.”

Milgram set out to evaluate varying cultural levels of obedience through a series of carefully designed experiments. His plan was first to evaluate levels of obedience in a control

group of American subjects, then repeat the same experiment with German subjects. If it was indeed the case that Germans were uniquely prone to offering unquestioning obedience to authority figures, thus explaining why so many Germans had been willing to inflict pain on others during the Nazi era, then it ought equally to be the case that people from less authority-oriented cultures would be more likely to resist orders to inflict pain. Americans, reasoned Milgram, prize independence and freedom. As a result, Americans should be particularly resistant to blind obedience.

The experiments Milgram conducted to test his hypothesis are now considered classics of social psychology. Milgram recruited several assistants and then advertised for undergraduate volunteers to participate in what was purportedly a study of educational methods. The volunteers were offered a “cover story” to keep them from knowing in advance that their obedience levels were going to be evaluated, which might have distorted their response. They were told instead that they would be participating in an experiment designed to see if threats of punishment would induce “learners” to concentrate more effectively on simple academic tasks. The volunteers were placed in a room with a small electrical device in it and told that they could set the device to deliver electric shocks of varying intensity to other volunteers—the “learners”—who were in a separate room, from which they could be heard but not seen.

The other “learners”—who were actually Milgram’s assistants, unbeknownst to his volunteer subjects—were asked to complete simple mathematics problems. Milgram’s volunteer subjects were told that if the learners completed a problem incorrectly, they should administer a small electric shock, with shocks to increase in voltage if the learners continued to come up with incorrect answers. The voltage on the electric shock machines could be dialed up by the volunteers, from mild shocks to 450 volts, a voltage marked “lethal” on the machine.

Of course, the machine was a fake: it delivered no electric shocks at all, because Milgram’s feigned interest in the effect of punishment on learning was only a pretext for his real experiment. Instead, Milgram wanted to find out how obedient to authority the average person was: would ordinary American volunteers be willing to administer painful or potentially lethal electric shocks to total strangers for no reason except that a man in a lab coat told them to? Or would they refuse?

Before conducting his experiments, Milgram took it for granted that most normal Americans would refuse to inflict serious pain on complete strangers—in fact, prior to conducting his experiments, he asked 40 other psychologists to estimate the percentage of American volunteers they believed would willingly administer the full 450 volt “lethal” shocks. His colleagues estimated that less than 1 percent of the volunteers would do so.

But neither Milgram nor his 40 colleagues got it anywhere near right. In his first experiment, a full two-thirds of his subjects were willing to administer the maximum 450 volts to

“learners” who repeatedly offered incorrect answers, even in the face of loud cries of pain and increasing desperate pleas from the “learners.”

Milgram was astonished and appalled. He repeated his experiment almost twenty times, each time varying a few details. Would housewives or plumbers or carpenters be less willing to inflict pain than undergraduates? Had he inadvertently conducted the experiment on a group of sadists? Would it matter if the experiment was conducted in an old warehouse rather than in a building on Yale University’s campus? What if the volunteers could see, rather than just hear, the “learners”? Would obedience be reduced if orders were not given by a respectable-looking Yale professor in a white lab coat?

In the end, through all the variations of the experiment, an average of two-thirds of the American volunteers were willing to administer potentially lethal shocks. Depending on how the experiment was structured, Milgram found, his subjects’ average obedience levels could be ratcheted up or down slightly: up when the gradations between shock levels were smaller and the increase in voltage more gradual, for instance, and down when the volunteers were informed repeatedly that they did not have to continue and that many other volunteers had decided against continued participation. But the bottom line was depressing. Even in the lab, even when nothing more than an educational experiment was at stake, Milgram found that two-thirds of ordinary Americans could be readily persuaded, in under an hour, to deliberately administer a potentially lethal shock to an innocent stranger.

Would Americans have been more likely than Germans to have resisted Nazism? Ultimately, Milgram was forced to abandon his initial assumptions about “cultures of obedience.” As he put it, assessing his experiments, “Stark authority was pitted against the subjects’ strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects’ ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not.”<sup>1</sup>

Milgram’s experiment was repeated by other psychologists around the world, who reported almost no significant regional or cultural variation. From Europe to Asia to Africa, roughly the same percentage of people could be quickly induced to inflict grievous harm on innocent strangers.

Other experiments on the effects of obedience on perceptions and behavior were conducted by social psychologists elsewhere, and generally produced results consistent with Milgram’s findings. At Stanford University, for instance, Dr. Philip Zimbardo created a mock prison, assigning students randomly to play the roles of prisoners and guards. The “prisoners” had to wear prison garb and stocking caps and were assigned numbers in lieu of names; the “guards” were issued truncheons and mirrored sunglasses. After only a week, Zimbardo was forced to end the experiment prematurely: the “guards” had begun to humiliate and abuse the “prisoners,” and several “prisoners” seemed close to experiencing mental breakdowns.

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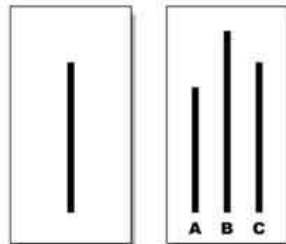
<sup>1</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974).

Zimbardo's conclusion: most people automatically begin to play the social "roles" that they're assigned, and those roles can quickly trump their individual personalities. <sup>2</sup>

At Princeton, psychologists John Darley and Daniel Batson conducted a famous series of experiments known as the "Good Samaritan" experiments. The experimental subjects were Princeton Theological Seminary students, who were told that as part of a study of vocational preferences, they should prepare a short practice sermon that would later be delivered in a building a short walk away. Some of the students were then instructed that they were running late, and should rush to deliver their practice sermon. Others were told that they had plenty of time to get to the location at which they would deliver their sermon. Darley and Batson had an assistant planted along the route the students would have to take, and when each student approached, the assistant feigned sudden illness, slumping over, coughing and groaning. Darley and Batson found that although 63 percent of the students who had been told there was no rush offered to help the apparent victim, only 10 percent of the divinity students who had been instructed to hurry offered to help. Even those students who had just finished preparing sermons on the parable of the Good Samaritan were more influenced by the experimenter's instructions to hurry than by the ethical lesson of the story on which they planned to preach.<sup>3</sup>

## Conformity

A decade before Stanley Milgram began his experiments on obedience, another psychologist, Solomon Asch, asked his volunteers to look at a picture of a line, then at another picture of several lines of varying lengths, and identify the line that most closely matched the line in the first picture.



When assessed individually, his subjects effortlessly and correctly performed the simple task. But when they were placed in groups, and the other members of the group (confederates of the experimenters) provided false answers, Asch's subjects were shaken. Although most of them

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Haney, Curtis Banks and Philip Zimbardo, "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison," *International Journal of Criminology and Psychology*, I, 69-97 (1973)

<sup>3</sup> John M. Darley And C. Daniel Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational And Dispositional Variables In Helping Behavior," *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology* 1973, Vol. 27, No. J, 100-108.

continued to offer the correct answers, about a third of Asch's subjects began to doubt the evidence before their own eyes, and changed their answers to agree with the other members of the group.<sup>4</sup>

Asch was troubled by his findings: either a third of his subjects had literally ceased to trust their own perceptions simply because others expressed different views, or, perhaps worse, a third of his subjects had lied about their own perceptions in order to go along with the group. Either way, it was disturbing. It was of course true, Asch acknowledged, that "Life in society requires consensus as an indispensable condition. But consensus, to be productive, requires that each individual contribute independently out of his experience and insight. When consensus comes under the dominance of conformity, the social process is polluted and the individual at the same time surrenders the powers on which his functioning as a feeling and thinking being depends. That we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern."

His concerns were not misplaced. Later experiments conducted by others provided additional support for the idea that being in a group could substantially alter an individual's perception and behavior. In 1968, for instance, psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latane found that people in groups were substantially less likely than people on their own to help someone else who seemed to be in distress: those in groups tended to assume that someone else would help, or that if no one else was helping, there must be some good reason not to help.<sup>5</sup> In another series of experiments, Darley and Latane found that, if left alone in a room that appeared to be filling up with smoke, most individuals would promptly raise the alarm. But if left in a room in which other people seemed undisturbed by the smoke, individuals would ignore the smoke themselves.<sup>6</sup>

In many ways, this is not particularly surprising: humans, like all social animals, are highly attuned to the reactions of others in the herd or pack. When we're in groups showing alarm, we feel alarmed; when others in our group seem relaxed or indifferent, we tend to assume that there's nothing to worry about—even if that means selectively ignoring the evidence of our own eyes and ears. Conformity is a very powerful influence.

## Group Polarization

Group dynamics can profoundly influence individuals in other ways as well. Individuals within groups of similar people reinforce each other, for instance. When groups are made up of individuals who start out sharing similar attitudes, studies have found that after group

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<sup>4</sup> Solomon A. Asch, "Opinions and Social Pressure," *Scientific American*, 1955

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., John M. Darley and Bibb Latane, "Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1968, Vol. 8, No. 4, 377-383

<sup>6</sup> Darley and Latane, "Group Inhibition of Bystander Intervention in Emergencies," *Journal at Personality and Social Psychology*, 1968, Vol. 10, No. 3, 215-221

discussions, the individual attitudes of group members tend to intensify.<sup>7</sup> In other words: if a group is put together from individuals who are politically conservative, individual attitudes after group discussion of politics are even more conservative. Conversely, when groups are made up of moderately liberal individuals, group members will each express even more liberal views after spending time in group discussions.

Internal dissent can make a difference: if experimenters plant a confederate in a group who is instructed to start out agreeing with other group members and then gradually shift to express doubt, group members will often modify their views.<sup>8</sup> This effect seems to be largely dependent on the degree to which group members view the dissenter as “one of us,” however: placing a single self-identified liberal in a conservative group, or vice versa, merely reinforces polarization, in which other group members take on even more extreme versions of the attitudes they held at the beginning.<sup>9</sup>

## The Social Self

The discussion above barely scratches the surface of what social psychologists have come to understand about social perception, social influence, and social interaction. Other studies have examined phenomena such as “priming” and found, for instance, that when trusted peers or authority figures inform individuals that a new person or group possesses certain characteristics (trustworthiness, kindness, brutality, bias, etc.), individuals will tend to ascribe those characteristics to the new person or group even in the face of conflicting evidence.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, a conservative presented with a paragraph offering a conservative political analysis of an issue will tend to agree with the statements if told that they come from a respected conservative, but will tend to disagree with the statements if told they come from a prominent liberal. (The same is true for self-identified liberals, whose agreement or disagreement with statements can similarly be manipulated.)

The bottom line? Although we tend to see ourselves as rational individuals, making decisions based on reason, factual information, and moral principles, we’re often wrong. Much of the time—perhaps nearly all of the time—our beliefs, decisions, behavior, and even our

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Myers, David G.; G.D. Bishop (1970). "Discussion effects on racial attitude." *Science* 169 (3947): 778–779; Walker, Thomas G.; Main, Eleanor C. (December 1973). "Choice shifts and extreme behavior: Judicial review in the federal courts". *The Journal of Social Psychology*. 2 91 (2): 215–221.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Baron et.al. *Group Process, Group Decision and Group Action* (1999)

<sup>9</sup> Dominic Abrams et al., “Knowing What to Think by Knowing Who You Are,” 29 *British J. Soc. Psych* 97 (1990).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Snyder, M., Tanke, E.D., & Bersheid, E. (1977). “Social perception and interpersonal behavior: On the self-fulfilling nature of social stereotypes,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35, 656-666



perceptions are invisibly but powerfully influenced by those around us. Our families, friends, colleagues, superiors, and subordinates all change how we engage with the world. What is more, these social factors are so powerful that they can trump even our deepest individual convictions. As Stanley Milgram found in the 1960s, it takes remarkably little to convince ordinary people to violate their deeply held moral beliefs.

## **Implications for Complex Operations**

What implications does all this have for how we think about complex operations? The implications aren't earth-shattering: we already know that stability operations, counterinsurgency (COIN) and irregular warfare are difficult, complicated and slow. These insights from social psychology don't offer any magic bullets. Instead, they help us understand the reasons our efforts so often fall short.

In Afghanistan, for instance, we are frequently frustrated by the persistence and resilience of traditional power structures and belief systems. All too often, elections fail to alter the role of local warlords. Tribal loyalties continue to trump national loyalties. Governance and development projects have little impact on local support for extremism or the Taliban. Costly information operations efforts make no dent in local attitudes.

If we cling to the belief that individuals are free agents, making decisions based on reason and facts, the persistence of what we view as self-destructive behavior seems irrational, foolish, and stubborn. We've all heard this frustration expressed: "What's *wrong* with these people? Why don't they understand that we're trying to help them? Why can't they see that they'll be better off if they stop supporting the Taliban [or use courts rather than rely on tribal elders, or send girls to school /vote, etc.]"

But Afghans (or Pakistanis, Yemenis, Somalis, Iraqis) are no more free moral agents than the Yale undergraduates Milgram studied, the Princeton Theological Seminary students in Darley and Batson's "Good Samaritan" experiment, or the Stanford undergraduates in Zimbardo's mock prison. Like the subjects of these famous experiments, and like all humans, Afghans exist in a social context, and that context influences them profoundly. Deciding not to support the Taliban seems like an "easy" decision when viewed from a conference room at the Pentagon or the State Department. Viewed through the lens of social psychology, it's much more complex. Assuming that a simple injection of new people and new information will trump life-long relationships, assumptions, and patterns of behavior is naïve.

This does not mean that social context is destiny. Cultures and behaviors do change, and sometimes they change quickly and unexpectedly. Sometimes, individuals defy every expectation and dissent; creative and principled leaders and dissenters can emerge out of the most homogeneous and authoritarian societies and can serve as powerful agents of change.

We still have only a limited understanding of the factors that lead to rapid change or that enable some individuals to break free of the herd. This is an exciting area of research, and perhaps, in years to come, we will have a more nuanced understanding of the social factors that enable change. For now, though, the main lesson from social psychology is that we should keep our expectations low and avoid making easily avoidable mistakes. This has several concrete implications for complex operations.

First, we shouldn't expect rapid change. Our own imperfect American democracy developed through centuries of struggle — we shouldn't imagine that Afghanistan or any other society will transform overnight. Modern communications and transportation technologies may have accelerated the pace of cultural change, but enduring change is still generally a project of generations.

The World Bank's 2011 *Report on Conflict, Security and Development* offers some cautionary numbers. Looking at states that have undergone significant institutional transformations in the 20th century, it finds that the twenty fastest reformers took an average of 27 years to meaningfully control corruption, 36 years to attain substantial government effectiveness, 17 years to reduce the military's role in politics to acceptable levels, and 41 years to achieve significant progress on core rule of law indicators.

That said, we shouldn't give up on the idea of reform, and we should be wary of slipping into the assumption that Afghans (or Iraqis or Somalis or Serbs, or any other group) "aren't ready" for democracy or human rights. No society is entirely homogeneous and, as individuals, may long for things their groups prevent them from obtaining. Stereotyping other societies as "primitive" or unchangeable is just as naïve and dangerous as assuming that change can always be rapid.

Second, and relatedly, we should look for low-hanging fruit and focus our efforts on areas where there is already internal debate and some momentum for reform. For instance, changing entrenched patterns of low-level corruption may simply be impossible in the span of a few years—but cracking down hard on egregious examples of high-level corruption may be more likely to succeed, since ordinary Afghans may identify far less with corrupt senior officials and be more likely already to condemn their behavior. A single successful reform may empower internal reform advocates to press for more. At times, small changes in some areas can trigger rapid change in many areas at once. Consider the Arab Spring, for instance: change was slow in coming, but when it came, it came in a tidal wave.

Third, we should continue and expand existing efforts to enhance the linguistic and cultural know-how of our military and civilian personnel. It's not feasible to teach every enlisted soldier Dari and Pashto or other local languages, but we should certainly be able to insist that everyone representing the United States government learn enough about the cultures with which

they will work to avoid unintentionally insulting host nation residents—even if it’s only a matter of learning twenty words such as “hello,” “please,” “thank you,” and the like.

Similarly, we can and should train all U.S. personnel in the basics of culturally appropriate behavior. How many times have we all seen American soldiers cursing, in English, in front of Afghans, on the apparent assumption that the Afghans won’t understand? Thanks to the globalization of media, if there are one or two English words virtually every person around the world now understands, they’re probably four-letter words. Small acts or omissions such as the failure to remove sunglasses when speaking directly to someone may be perceived as insulting, while offers of food or drink can be an important sign of respect.

There are a multitude of simple ways we can communicate respect or insult, and though these vary from culture to culture (and even from region to region and tribe to tribe), we should bear the burden of making sure we know and abide by the basic local rules of courtesy. There will be circumstances in which the niceties of local etiquette simply can’t be followed—but there’s no excuse for not observing the courtesies when it’s possible to do so. We should insist that leaders hold their subordinates accountable for behaving with respect—including through making it clear that derogatory terms for locals are unacceptable. (“towelheads,” “ragheads,” and so on). Such terms dangerously dehumanize the people we must work with or win over, thus increasing the risk of abuse.

Fourth, we should discard the “war of ideas” metaphor once and for all. It badly misunderstands and oversimplifies the relationship between ideas, attitudes, and behavior. To paraphrase the National Rifle Association: ideas don’t kill people, people kill people. Viewed through the lens of social psychology, we know that “ideas,” in the abstract, may play very little role in people’s behavior. Reading a book, hearing a sermon, or watching a video is unlikely to turn an ordinary young man into a committed terrorist, for instance, unless quite a few other factors are pushing him in the same direction. “Ideas” and emerging ideologies aren’t entirely irrelevant, but neither are they necessarily central to what makes a particular individual support the Taliban or al Qaeda.

The “war of ideas” metaphor is dangerous, for it leads us to fixate on the notion that behavior will change only if we can come up with the right “message” or better “counter-narratives.” But as foreigners, we’re the least likely people to persuade locals simply through our messaging. If anything, our messaging may be counterproductive.

Fifth, we should redouble our efforts to identify and empower credible local change agents. Conformity, obedience, and group polarization studies all tell us that those who are perceived as “outsiders” are far less likely to change a group’s attitudes than those perceived as insiders. But dissent from “insiders” can be extremely powerful, profoundly altering group dynamics. We can’t manufacture “insiders” by simply anointing some favored local interlocutor as our emissary to those who differ from us—groups can easily distinguish between “true”

insiders and false ones. Insiders need to be found, not created. Once identified, however, access to external resources (whether informational, logistical, technical or financial) can help increase the effectiveness of internal change agents. The United States didn't create credible leaders such as Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi—but, at crucial moments, support from international actors may have been vital in helping ensure her message could be widely spread.

Relatedly, we should keep in mind that there is no single “Afghan culture,” just as there is no one “American culture.” Every society has some degree of internal heterogeneity, though it may be hard for outsiders to see it. Different regions, different tribes, different professions—each may have its unique internal culture (or cultures). The old saw that “all politics is local” applies in spades to COIN and stability operations: tactics, rhetoric, and people persuasive to one group may have the opposite effect in another. Identifying and empowering local change agents is key, but effective only if we understand that the determinants of credibility may vary substantially from sub-culture to sub-culture.

A sixth lesson from social psychology is that we should be as attentive as possible to issues of institutional architecture. Understanding the situational factors likely to influence individual perceptions and behavior not only helps us comprehend why others behave as they do, it also helps us design better institutions as reforms move forward. Milgram and those who followed him found, for instance, that even a small amount of internal dissent could dramatically change the behavior of individuals and groups. This insight that has practical implications. Whether we are advising partners on restructuring police units or developing new local governance structures, we should consider institutionalizing mechanisms for fostering internal debate and protecting dissent. Such mechanisms can take many forms, from institutionalized “red-teaming” built into strategic, operational, and tactical planning; to developing anonymous “dissent channels” that, when used, can trigger automatic reviews.

## **Conclusion**

Social psychology offers no panaceas, but it sheds light on why even the most seemingly counter-productive beliefs and practices can be so enduring and resistant to change. Individuals don't exist in a vacuum: all individuals are profoundly influenced by their interactions with others, often in ways they don't recognize. Understanding this can allow us to develop more finely calibrated tools for promoting change and reform.

A final cautionary note: we too are products of our social context in ways that may not be apparent to us. Just as much as Afghans or Iraqis or anyone else, we Americans are influenced by social factors. Stanley Milgram's most fundamental finding, perhaps, was that few people are immune from the situational pressures he explored in his famous experiments. We too can succumb to the invisible forces of authority, conformity, group polarization, and priming; we too have our own tribalisms and our own forms of factionalism and extremism; we too are shaped and constrained by the institutional cultures we inhabit. Like the subjects of Solomon

Asch's experiments on conformity, our perceptions may be subtly altered by invisible pressures from our social groups. Our understanding of what is necessary, appropriate or acceptable is shaped (and perhaps distorted) by our peers, superiors, and subordinates.

No one can entirely escape these invisible pressures. But recognizing them is a necessary first step towards understanding—and ultimately changing—not only “other” cultures, but our own.