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Understanding the Past II

Book Review:

The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Forensic Neuroscience

Edited by Anthony R. Beech, Adam J. Carter, Ruth E. Mann and Pia Rotshtein

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'The rise of so-called 'neurolaw' cases is becoming more pressing in that forensic practitioners are grappling with understanding the impact neuroscience is having upon the forensic field' both for legal proceedings and rehabilitation (p.5). The premise and timely need for a handbook of forensic neuroscience is very aptly set with this introduction.

The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Forensic Neuroscience (henceforth referred to as 'the handbook') opens with the claim that an individual's cognitions, genetics and environmental factors together underline their neurobiological makeup and guide pro/antisocial behaviour. Recent research vehemently supports the idea that offending aetiology and predisposition relies heavily on the interaction of nature and nurture. Therefore, the first volume of the handbook (both are sold together) sets out to consolidate existing peer-reviewed research in the field of neuroscience relating to different aspects of forensic relevance. It is crucial to note that the book is very self-aware in its extent and content alike. The

authors make clear that neuroscience research is not at a level where they can 'tell a parole board to release someone based on a brain scan' but not too far from it either (p.6).

The book is structured very well in three parts — introduction, general neuroscience research and neurobiology of offending — with standalone chapters discussing a wide variety of topics ranging from aggressive behaviour to offending with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It is important to talk about the structure of the book because it is an immense strength of this volume. It could, however, use an appendix at the end of Volume 1 to allow for quick-referencing and easy lookup(s). (It is situated at the end of Volume 2).

You don't need to have prior knowledge of the very formidable names such as 'anterior insular cortex' or the 'ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC)' to know how they interact with empathy or psychopathology. Each chapter starts with a basic explanation of neuroscience and then relates it to the construct being talked about in a very accessible language. This is especially helpful for practitioners trying to learn more about a specific deficit, or looking for help with a particular offending behaviour. Students and researchers alike have so much to look forward to and learn.

The volume successfully combines the various authors' academic prowess and the years of practitioner and research experience that the accomplished editors bring with them. This means that the book charts out the origins of neuroscience in forensic settings right from the

phrenology days to good old Phineas Gage and the 'social brain'. For me, the winning moment for this section is when they critically examine all the contributions made by researchers within the bigger context of social impact. For example, when talking about Kraepelin's 'influential' work and him being the father of modern psychiatry, the authors clearly recognise his role in the support for eugenics and racial cleansing. It is of immense importance to situate most, if not all, research we rely on in a retrospective lens to gauge the harm they may have caused to marginalised communities, and use it accordingly. Therefore, as a person of colour, I extend my gratitude to the authors for doing this throughout this book.

The book progresses onto key concepts of forensic neuroscience in Part II and looks at aggression, sexual behaviour, reward sensitivity, emotion regulation, empathy and deception. All of these ideas are covered in great detail with an impressive number of approaches, for example, social factors, neuroimaging research, genetics and personality trait interactions. Chapters include advanced neuroimaging data to show high-quality brain scans or reader-friendly diagrams highlighting the regions of interest, accompanied with very clear and comprehensive captions. Each chapter comes with a handy Key Points box at the start, followed by 'Terminology Explained' which is a very helpful tool for reference. In addition, the text is substantiated with extra and related information in different 'Boxes' which are very concisely

written. Furthermore, if you want a swift snapshot of the chapter or want to know more than what was listed in the Key Points, each chapter has an insightful 'Conclusions' section along with 'Implications for Forensic Applications'. This can easily become your quick go-to guide bridging all the research discussed in each chapter along with evidence-based practice suggestions and future directions.

The chapter on social neuroscience of empathy made some very insightful comments about distinguishing empathy from morality. It was noted that empathy can imply engagement in pro-social behaviours and moral decision-making, while being influenced by 'interpersonal relationships and group membership' (p.162). They also illustrated that despite empathy playing a key role in care-based morality development, 'by no means is morality reducible to empathy and emotion sensitivity' (p.161). All other chapters in Part II follow similar lines of interesting research and approachable writing while discussing a plethora of concepts.

Part III of this volume deals with the 'Neurobiology of Offending' and delves deeper into the underpinnings of psychopathology, Antisocial Personality Disorder, offenders with ASD, violent and sexual offending, brain injury, adolescent offending and alcohol-related aggression. These chapters discuss risk factors, possible predispositions to higher chances of offending, rehabilitation needs and concept-specific in-depth research. The claims made are backed by extensive evidence and show a clear humanitarian approach in dealing with vulnerable groups, such as at-risk youth or individuals with ASD.

The authors make important connections about comorbidities in

a clinical-forensic population and discuss how the interactions of factors such as earlier victimisation, poverty, poor parenting and questionable ability to form intent (in the case of ASD) might lead to debunking the monolith of the 'criminal offender'. One of the highlights in this section was a clear statement that should act as a word of caution for people designing treatment programmes for sexual and violent offending — when you efficiently treat a socially unacceptable behaviour, you also reduce the potency of its socially acceptable counterpart. Specifically, in the case of pharmacological interventions for forensically relevant sexual behaviours, they can alter testosterone to inactive levels and even change serotonin activity. It is important then to weigh out the social benefit costs of these treatments with the price being paid by the individual in focus.

In conclusion, this first volume of the handbook imparts knowledge on various core aspects of forensic neuroscience in clear and comprehensive writing styles which are successful in engaging both the layperson reader and specialised researcher. I strongly recommend it as a well-researched and thorough volume and cannot wait to read and review Volume 2. This handbook is, therefore, an essential text for anyone looking to know the current status of forensic research at the basic, intermediate and advanced level across multiple forensic settings. Something for everyone!

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Classic Book Review

The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil

By Phillip Zimbardo

Publisher: Rider books (2007)

ISBN: 978-1-84-604103-7

(paperback)

Price: £12.99 (paperback)

Having reviewed over twenty books for the Prison Service Journal, it is without doubt, that that this classic by Phillip Zimbardo was the book I have most eagerly anticipated reading. It allowed me to hark back to my undergraduate days as a Psychology student, where the Stanford Prison Experiment was a staple reference in so many Social Psychology essays. However, my research for essays at the time never delved in to the minutiae of what actually went on over those six fateful days in the summer of 1971. In fact, apart from a few press stories and the occasional research paper the full account has never been published before. However, in this book, Zimbardo has recorded what happened to an excruciating level of detail, and I use that adjective because of the difficult reading it makes to get through those eight chapters that cover less than a week of almost immediate and escalating abuse of power. Indeed, Zimbardo explains in the preface that he found it 'emotionally draining' reviewing the videotapes and other records that helped him construct these chapters in particular.

Zimbardo grew up in a poor Sicilian family in 1930s New York where his prejudicial treatment at the hands of authority figures and experience of crime, elicited an inquisitiveness into other people's behaviour. Having excelled in academia, he accepted a position as Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, where with a grant from the US Office of naval research, he commenced the

infamous study that would make his name and be so roundly ethically criticised.

What prompted the authorship of this book, the first detailed analysis of the Stanford Prison Experiment over twenty-five years after the event, was Zimbardo's involvement as an expert witness in the trials of US military reservists involved in the torture of detainees in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The similarities between the experiment and the Abu Ghraib scandal are striking, and well laid out in the book. When, within six days, ordinary students, randomly assigned to the roles of prisoner or 'guard', were abusing their power by committing horrific acts of sexual humiliation on other students in the experiment, it becomes profoundly obvious, that a situation like Abu Ghraib could occur in a much more hostile environment. The similarity between both situations is also reinforced by the photographs that accompany each chapter; in particular a photo of hooded and chained 'prisoners' in Stanford awaiting a visit from the 'parole board' and another some two hundred pages later of a hooded detainee in Abu Ghraib, hooked up to hoax mains power wires.

It also becomes overwhelmingly obvious throughout the book that this could occur in any custodial situation due to the natural power imbalance, in the absence of necessary leadership, checks and balances. Indeed, Zimbardo laments his own 'evil of inaction', in his identity confusing dual role of lead researcher and 'Prison Superintendent'. His participation in the experiment, prevented him from seeing the wood from the trees and highlights the important roles played by morally aware leaders in custodial settings and those that provide external checks on prisons in this country, for example Independent Monitoring

Boards, HM inspector of Prisons, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman and the UN Committee Against Torture. Similarly, Zimbardo describes an absence of leadership or checks at Abu Ghraib.

This inaction is described as leading to a 'banality of evil' which reflects the quote misattributed by JFK, namely that 'the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.' It also powerfully highlights how anybody can be influenced towards 'evil' by situational dynamics that generally trump individual power. As an expert witness in the case of one of the guards in Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo argued for the power of situational factors influencing individual behaviour and that those guilty of absent leadership was where the blame for these atrocities should be focused. Earlier in the book, Zimbardo interestingly relates the individual-situational dynamic of 'evil' to that of the medical-public health approach to illness (is it the individual responsible for the medical issues related to their obesity, for example, or the situation of the availability, cheapness and aggressive marketing of sugary foods). Zimbardo goes on to argue powerfully that beyond individual power and situational power is a much greater systemic power (based on culture, politics, economics, religion etc) that if not changed, will mean that behavioural and situation changes can only ever be temporary, and these kind of events will reoccur. For Zimbardo, the most important method for these situations to occur is dehumanisation, where systems and situations allow 'others' to be viewed as less than human and some can then think that they are deserving of torture or worse. Indeed he describes experiments where simply labelling people 'animals' rather than 'nice

guys' can lead to increased acts of cruelty by subjects. This really resonated when considering the way much commentary take place in the public sphere on whether those in custody should be labelled residents, prisoners, offenders, cons or worse.

Having waded through fairly dark reading for 90 per cent of the book, Zimbardo does offer in the final chapter methods of resisting this kind of negative conformity, including a ten step programme to resist unwanted influences. He also examines 'heroism' as an opposing factor to the 'evil' he previously has described. Satisfyingly, an argument emerges that compares the banality of evil (inaction) to a banality of heroism, described as small actions that inspire system change. Here Zimbardo outlines how, as anyone is capable of evil, so the same applies to heroism, although he does qualify that by suggesting that you cannot become a hero if your action, no matter how great, does not inspire system change. At this point he highlights how his partner at the time happened to attend the Stanford experiment on day six, realised what was happening, and made an impassioned speech, at which point Zimbardo recognised the descent into depravity he had facilitated and finally ended the study early.

Overall, this is a fascinating and detailed read for anyone who is remotely interested in the Stanford Prison Experiment and its ramifications for a wide range of areas in society. Reading in great detail the six days of the experiment is a shocking eye opener for anyone who has ever had to seek ethics approval. Most notably from the start when families and participants are distressed at the realistic 'arrests' that take place in full view of friends and neighbours before things degenerate further. This is clearly a useful read and reminder

of how things can go wrong for those who are practitioners and leaders in custodial settings. Furthermore, it can also be useful for others who study, observe, comment or critique these very institutions.

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Classic Book Review

The Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety: Report on a Study of the Nursing Service of a General Hospital

By Isabel Menzies-Lyth (1959)
ISBN-13: 978-0901882066

In the late 1950s a London Teaching Hospital approached the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations to undertake a study. The purpose of the study was to explain and help address the high rate at which nurses left the profession, many before completing their training. One of the outcomes of the study was the article, which appeared in the Tavistock Institute's journal in 1959, which is the subject of this review. The article was subsequently republished in a volume of selected essays by the person who led the study, Isabel Menzies Lyth, a psychoanalyst who died in 2008. The article, while of seminal importance in establishing her reputation, was not all for which she was remembered. She was also behind the Tavistock's widely respected work on the dynamics of authority and leadership. Indeed, Menzies Lyth's obituary in *The Times*, published on 25th February 2008, noted that her reputation for the studies of nursing 'was embedded in a

lifelong commitment to investigating and supporting processes of change in individuals and institutions.'

The conclusions Lyth drew about how individuals and institutions devise the means of protecting themselves against the emotional and psychological difficulties of their work remain of interest. The value of this retrospective review of a 'classic' is the parallels that may be drawn between Menzies Lyth's findings in hospitals and what may be observed in prisons. This is not to suggest that the literature on this aspect of prisons is wanting, indeed there is a rich and distinguished archive on the work of prison officers in particular. While parallels and analogies lack the rigour of proper research, the hope is that those which may be inferred here may more than idly amuse.

Menzies Lyth found that much of the nurse's anxiety stemmed from the proximity to intimate body functions and the issues of life and death. She saw that instead of devising methods of coping with the anxieties that would inevitably arise from working with ill people, nurses and hospitals devised mechanisms to avoid or displace the anxieties — principally in terms of projection and sublimation. By avoiding rather than addressing their anxieties, the nurses and the hospitals actually sustained and even intensified them. This in turn affected the quality of the work nurses and hospitals undertook and their efficiency.

The means by which anxieties were avoided in hospitals are features commonplace to many organisations, although they are not always used as defences against anxiety. The features Lyth observed at the London teaching hospital (features which she had observed as typical of other

hospitals too) included splitting-up the nurse-patient relationship; the depersonalisation of the individual; the use of professional detachment; and displacing responsibility.

Splitting up the nurse-patient relationship was achieved partly by requiring different nurses to attend to different needs of one patient; and partly by the use of a rigid task-list with each task minutely prescribed. Diluting the individual nurse's contact with one patient and emphasising the importance of the technique of the task (however mind-numbing — like the importance of 'hospital corners' on bed linen) rather than the contact with the patient, provided a distance. This necessarily reduced considerably the individual nurse's scope for discretion — and in 1956 her colleague Elliot Jaques had identified how important a correlation there is between responsibility and discretion.

The depersonalisation of the individual, which Menzies Lyth observed as a defence mechanism, was reflected partly in the erosion of discretion and was reinforced by the importance of uniform and hierarchy for nurses; and in ways patients too were depersonalised. Instead of referring to patients by name even, Menzies Lyth heard such references as 'the liver in bed 10'. In this way the delivery of what are fundamentally personal services and care to fellow human beings was depersonalised.

Reinforcing the effects of this depersonalisation of the individual was the importance attributed to professional detachment. Menzies Lyth refers to it as the 'stiff upper lip'. (Ben McIntyre, the historian, recently described this 'British characteristic' as essentially an unwillingness to confront embarrassing or emotionally challenging reality). Emotional outbursts — by patients as well as

by staff, Menzies Lyth noted — were not merely frowned upon but in the case of staff particularly they were reprovved.

Another telling feature of the 'defence against anxiety' Lyth noticed was how responsibility was displaced. This manifested itself in a number of ways. Often responsibility was diluted by having a system of checks and counter-checks — and not only in situations (such as the dispensing of dangerous drugs) but in more commonplace decisions. Linked to this was the tendency to 'upward delegation', again underpinned by the restriction of personal discretion at the nursing level. And compounding this was what she

saw as the tendency to obscure responsibility by the lack of clarity about who was responsible for taking decisions in the management chain.

In her concluding remarks in this essay, Menzies Lyth commented that 'the social defence system represented the institutionalisation of very primitive psychic defence mechanisms...which facilitate the evasion of responsibility but contributes little to its true modification and reduction'. She also concluded that in spite of the obvious difficulties of the nursing task those difficulties were not enough to account for the high level of anxiety and stress she

observed. She inferred that this inversely affects patients' recovery rates. And finally she remarked, 'The success and viability of a social institution are intimately connected with the techniques it uses to contain anxiety.'

While the way we recruit, train, retain and support staff in institutions today may better anticipate the anxieties they will experience, the insights this seminal essay offers may afford some interesting reflection.

William Payne is a former prison governor and member of the PSJ Editorial Board