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*"Life is Beautiful:"* a social psychological perspective

# "Life is Beautiful:"

**By**

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The genocide experienced by the European Jews during World War II has provoked a number of social psychological investigations into the human mind and the evil will to destroy other human beings (Volpato & Contarello, 1999). Correspondingly, in everyday life, books, movies and personal accounts have sought to inform the world of the cruelties experienced through the Holocaust. While the media explored the experiences of the victims, social psychologists have focused mainly on the perpetrators (Volpato & Contarello, 1999). For example, classical works such as Milgram's obedience to authority experiment concluded that the effort to destroy the Jews was a direct consequence of individuals who obeyed authority (1974). Other authors such as Kelman investigated the processes of routinization, dehumanization, and authorization as mediating efforts in genocide participation (1973). In 1969, Zimbardo studied deindividuation as a process in which self-observation and self-control decreases yielding increasingly aggressive behavior. On the other hand, as a recent example of a media exploration, Roberto Benigni's "Life is Beautiful" recounts the life of the Jew Guido Orefice and his son Joshua, and how they endured life in the concentration camp. Unlike classical studies<sup>9</sup> focus on perpetrators, he integrates both perspectives. Through media means, nonetheless, Benigni reveals, with or without intending to, three social psychological phenomena: Dehumanization, Self-fulfilling Prophecy and Self-

persuasion, each of which describes the relationship between the victims and perpetrators of genocide.

The instance of dehumanization illustrated by Benigni is when Guido and Joshua are already living at the concentration camp. Guido meets an old acquaintance whom he once served as a waiter. The doctor gives him an opportunity to wait tables at a party in hopes his friend would help him escape. While he is preparing for the dinner party, he sees a group of German kids playing hide-and-go-seek. He decides to bring his son Joshua among them so he could enjoy the company of kids his age because the Jewish kids once brought into the camp were all dead. In the middle of searching for one of the German kids, the nanny calls all the kids to dinner. Suddenly the nanny spots Guido and Joshua together and believes Joshua to be German. Because none of the Jewish kids are suppose to be alive, Guido warns Joshua to play the "game of silence." If Joshua follows the rules and stays silent, they will be closer to winning their 1000 points and their tank. Over and over, Guido emphasize the importance of staying silent just as the tall, looming nanny approaches the father and son. When the nanny reaches them, she asks Guido why he was speaking to the child when he is told not to speak to anyone. When Guido responds to her question, she interrupts him to reprimand him for trying to speak to her.

This scene illustrates the dehumanization and delegitimization employed by the Nazis to resolve their cognitive dissonance. The victims of concentration camps were mostly civilians; as a result, any killing, hurting, and cruelties on the part of oppressors were allegedly unjustified by their conscience. Therefore, they were assumed to experience conflicting emotions caused by their discrepant behavior (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999). The cancellation of normal human relations, such as speech, served to efface the victim's membership as a part of the human race. Because speech is a process which distinguishes man from animals, the elimination further supports "bestialization" as practiced by the Nazis (Volpato & Contarello, 1999). This thematic restriction of speech is repeatedly emphasized throughout the movie. As Primo Levi notes, "if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand: " in effect, prisoners were forced into a collective herd, "they are ten thousand and they are a single grey machine; they are exactly determined; they do not think and they do not desire, they walk (Volpato & Contarello,1999)." This was one way in which dehumanization and bestialization allowed the suffering and torment experienced by the Jews. However, reducing dissonant conduct has escalating consequences because of the need to justify increasing violence and perpetuate even greater cruelty each time (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999).

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In 1977, Fein defined the concept of people within a "universe of obligation" as those who "must be taken into account, to whom obligations are due, by whom we can be held responsible for our actions (Fein, Walter & Herbert, 1994)." As a result, once the Nazis defined the Jews outside those bounds, transgression were no longer normative violations and did not have criminal consequences. In due course, dehumanization is a way to exclude a group from this universe and became a necessary condition for the Holocaust (Fein, Walter & Herbert, 1994). The stages of Nazi dehumanization include being physically stripped, elimination of one's name, the tattoo on one's arm, and the enforcement of harsh and arbitrary rhythms of life. Guido and his son Joshua are the only rebellious figures within the story. After arrival at the concentration camp, they are the only ones who speak. This set them apart from the rest of the prisoners. Moreover, Guido is able to resist the dehumanization experienced by other prisoners because each day he came home, he has to create a fantasy world for Joshua and himself. This consistent need to modify present circumstances into a game, keeps Guido talking and he is able to protect Joshua and himself cope with the psychological atrocities experienced by the other prisoners.

By employing vehicles of oppression, predictably, the Nazis created a self-fulfilling prophecy. They believed the Jews to be a disease, subhuman, depraved and crippled; as a result, they treated them that

way. In the movie, this treatment in turn coerced the Jews to be partially consistent with the original prejudice. One scene which illustrates this theory is when Guido and his son Joshua first arrive at the concentration camp. After they get off the train, they are herded into their rooms. Each room holds over one hundred Jews dressed in the same pin-stripped outfit with an identification number. The atmosphere within the room is complacent. There is no social interaction among the new arrivals and the old arrivees. No emotions of either happy reunions or rebellious attitudes are expressed; everyone looks depressed and repressed, creating a sense of loss of individual characteristics. Even little Joshua says that he wants to go home because it smelled, hinting at the process of bestialization.

Although this scene demonstrates the consequences of the self-fulfilling prophecy, throughout the movie the delegitimized group is bombarded with fascist beliefs. In the very beginning, when Guido first arrives in Italy, he encounters an inspector whose sole purpose in Italy is to instruct school children of the superiority of the German race. Then at the engagement party, a woman describes Jews in non-human terms such as financially burdening cripples. Finally, when Guido's uncle's horse was vandalized as the "Jewish Horse," (another reference to bestialization) his uncle tells Guido to accept these acts of barbarianism. Yet it is exactly this acceptance or inertia that alludes to the persistent

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nature of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Lack of response from the Jews supported fascist beliefs of the "uselessness of cripples," the weak and subhuman nature deserving of ill treatment. Note however, once the Nazis held racist beliefs, there was nothing the targeted group can do to influence their convictions.

As Volpato and Contarello observed, "the use of the verb *fressen* for the act of eating is an example of how the dominant group uses and imposes terms, in reference to the minority group, which are not usually applied to humans but only to animals (Volpato & Contarello, 1999)." In Primo Levi's If this is a Man, he testifies for prisoners' perception of themselves as permeated by dehumanization. He uses a great deal of animal imagery, comparing himself and other prisoners to "tired beasts," "ants," and as sheep hiding to protect themselves [Volpato & Contarello, 1999). Similarly, the prisoners in "Life is Beautiful" saw themselves as "non-men who march and labor in silence, in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen who one hesitates to call...living: one hesitates to call their death death (Volpato & Contarello, 1999)." As a result, such behaviors help to falsely excuse the Nazis beliefs.

In contrast, Guido Is able to defy the urge to comply with the inertia which transforms other prisoners into the nonhuman objects as perceived by the Nazis. Because of Joshua, Guido had to keep a happy mask to cover the torment he experiences physically and mentally. This

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dissonant behavior keeps him alert and human. For example, after arrival, while camp rules were explained to the new prisoners, Guido attempts to maintain the game scenario for Joshua by pretending he could speak German. He transcends the Nazis methods of oppression and transforms the rigid codes of the concentration camp into satirical rules for 'How to Get a Tank.' Precisely because of these cognitively stimulating exercises, Guido is able to ward off the self-fulfilling influence of fascism.

Despite the cruelty experienced by other prisoners, Guido was able to protect Joshua by using self-persuasion and avoiding the reactance theory. The reactance theory states that when people feel their freedom restricted a state of reactance is aroused, so that this state can only be reduced by performing the threatened behavior (Aronson et al., 1999). Throughout the movie, Guido makes the hardships they experience seem as if they were a choice. They had the choice to take a trip, to ride a train in celebration of little Joshua's birthday. When they enter the concentration camp, they split up in order to play a game where the winner gets a real tank. However, after spending days with almost no food, no companionship, and no mother, little Joshua wanted to go home.

If Guido told Joshua that he had no choice but to stay at the camp, Joshua would have been roused to a state of reactance, and ruin

Guido's efforts to hide and protect his son from the cruelties they experienced. However, Guido made it seem like they are going to win the tank very soon, and that construction of the tank is almost finished, but going home would forfeit their lead in the race to get 1000 points.

Because Guido did not restrict Joshua's freedom and even put on his sweater for him and walked out the door, Joshua came to realize through self-persuasion what was best. By telling Joshua mildly what he should do, Joshua is able to persuade himself not to go home because he is so close to getting a real tank. Thus, self-persuasion instigated a long-lasting change in his attitude because he convinced himself going home was no longer desirable (Aronson et. al., 1999).

Similarly, Judson Mills's experiment on cheating exemplified the concept of self-persuasion. Those students who wanted to cheat but resisted persuaded themselves that cheating is immoral in order to justify for giving up the attractive prize when they chose not to cheat (1958). In addition, Jonathan Freedman found children who were mildly threatened as opposed to severely threatened played with the toy only one third of the time while the severely threatened condition or roused in a state of reactance kids played with the toy twice as often (1965). Like Joshua who never wanted to go home again after self-persuasion, several weeks later, the mild threat still kept the kids from playing with the

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twice as often (1965). Like Joshua who never wanted to go home again after self-persuasion, several weeks later, the mild threat still kept the kids from playing with the forbidden toy because they convinced themselves that the toy was no longer desirable (1965).

Dehumanization and self-fulfilling prophecy contribute to a psychological explanation of genocide. Self-persuasion was the coping mechanism used by Benigni's character to adapt to the atrocities Guido and Joshua experienced. Through these three psychological principles, Benigni elaborates on our understanding of sanctioned massacres by using social psychological theories to explain mental processes of both the perpetrators and victims of genocide. He further explored coping mechanisms that helped the Jews survive their experience. This all-encompassing approach, in addition to increasing social psychological theorization of excessive situations, also reaches across language barriers to keep alive the collective reflection of these extremities.

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