

Stereotyped Behaviour of Perpetrators: “Critical Period” during Pre-adolescence for Tolerance and Empathy?

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ABSTRACT

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One of the dramatic aspects of the “Syndrom E” is the involvement of children who become perpetrators. A recent film by Jonathan Littell (“Wrong Elements”) has dealt with this question for Ouganda but the transformation of young children in fanatics and stereotyped killers is a very general problem extending back in history and still going on today . They are often recruited by force at preadolescence and adolescence. I have for several years proposed that there is a “Critical Period” for acquiring tolerance precisely within this age range and that an international law should protect them.

In the frame of this question I will first briefly review some brain mechanisms concerning the acquisition of stereotyped behavior. I will then present some recent studies we have done with the groups of D. Cohen and of O. Houdé in Paris, with G. Cioni in Pisa, and with some other groups in Rennes, Brest, Poitiers, Siena, using several new paradigms for self-other interactions.

The studies concern the acquisition, between 5:7 and 12/15 years of age, up to adulthood, of the capacity to “change point of view”, a fundamental basis for tolerance and empathy. I will also propose that if at this age range a child is prevented from

acquiring this by ideological or any other narrowing of his view on others, he or even she, may become a perpetrator for a durable amount of time.

