

Questioning the Predictive Value of Syndrome E

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TO CITE

Rechtman, R. (2022). Questioning the Predictive Value of Syndrome E. In *Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study* (Vol. 19).

https://paris.pias.science/articles/SynE2_2016_07_questioning-the-predictive-value-of-syndrome-e

PUBLICATION DATE

09/05/2016

ABSTRACT

The Brains that pull the Triggers. 2nd Conference on Syndrome E, Paris IAS, 09-10 May 2016 - Session 2 - Pathology: One of us or one unlike us?

Why do ordinary men turn so easily into mass murderers?

Since WW2, this question has given rise to different hypotheses. The “situationist” perspective focuses on the situation into which ordinary men were suddenly projected, ignoring potential psychological factors. Lifton’s concept of “atrocities producing situations” applied to Vietnam veterans, Browning’s “ordinary men”, or Welzer’s “ordinary Germans”, all try to explain how almost anyone could become a mass murderer in certain situations. The psychodynamic approach, focuses on archaic psychological instincts rather than situational variables, but represents in fact a similar perspective. In this case, it is not the situation itself, but the “death instinct”, present in every human being, that explains how evil men can be(become).

This idea of “an evil man” doing “evil things, not being rooted in empirical studies, sociological and psychodynamic perspectives attempted to assert that almost everybody can indeed become a mass murderer. The social context of war, persecution, extreme violence and so on, in the one hand, the submission to authority and the death instinct, on the other hand, were enough to “explain” how ordinary men can become mass murderers.

However, from an empirical point of view the fact that everybody **does not** become a mass murderer - even in the same context of extreme violence - is an undisputable fact. This issue readdresses the question of predictive factors. Who, how and why most men or women, but not all of them, accept to kill defenseless peoples.

Itzhak Fried's Syndrome E is an attempt to respond from a neurocognitive perspective to the issues of predictive factors. In this presentation I will discuss the paradigm of predictive factors as it emerges from Itzhak Fried proposition and especially its direct connection / opposition with the notion of “ordinary men”.

In fact the notion of “ordinary man” that emerged in the aftermath of WW2 was less a psychological assertion of the “normality” of perpetrators, than a way to avoid the myth of perpetrators as monster – i.e. non-human. In other words, I will try to demonstrate that because an “ordinary man” is nothing else than a human being, with all the potentials of any human being, one can anticipate that all types of psychological functioning - from pathological to quite normal - may be found among mass killers. This does not mean that almost everybody can become a killer, or that only few specific pathological types might become mass murderers.

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