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Responses to Killing in State-Sanctioned and Unsanctioned Killers: Pathways of Construing

David A. Winter

Department of Psychology, Sport, and Geography, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

ABSTRACT

Examples of responses to killing are provided from three groups of state-sanctioned killers: executioners, perpetrators of genocide, and members of the armed forces; as well as violent offenders. The extent to which such individuals experience guilt and shame is related, from a personal construct theory perspective, to the degree to which their actions are consistent with their core roles as construed by themselves and others. Drawing upon examples from situations of warfare, it is argued that one mechanism for the avoidance of guilt and shame may be hostile extortion of evidence that the individual's actions are ultimately the responsibility of another, and that cycles of hostility may foment and perpetuate the conflicts concerned. Other such mechanisms that are discussed are reduction of permeability of moral constructs, depersonalization of killing, and dehumanization of victims. By contrast, guilt and shame are likely to be more fully experienced, and possibly to lead to reconstruction, when the individual's encounter with their victim is one that engenders both commonality and sociality.

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I commenced writing this paper when I was in Sri Lanka soon after the government had reintroduced the death penalty. This change in policy was celebrated by posters at the airport in Colombo, which—beneath a picture of a noose—warned that "Drugs can take you higher than you think." An advertisement was published in a state-sponsored national newspaper inviting applications for the post of executioner from people of adequate physical and mental strength and "an excellent moral character" (Associated Press, 2019). The fact that there were over 100 applicants (including one from the USA) led me to wonder how the prospect of killing others could sit comfortably with these, and other such, individuals.

Executioners

Let us begin with the story of George Kelly. No, not the founder of personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955), nor even George (Machine Gun) Kelly, the American gangster.

CONTACT David A. Winter d.winter@herts.ac.uk Department of Psychology, Sport, and Geography, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, AL10 9AB, UK.

The author is grateful to Joseph Papalia for permission to quote from Tom Ryan's interview on September 12, 1989 with General Paul Tibbets (Atomic Heritage Foundation, 1989).

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Instead, it is George Kelly of Liverpool in England, a petty criminal who was wrongly convicted of the murder of a cinema owner and hanged five years before the other George published his magnum opus. It was not until 53 years later that his conviction was quashed, much too late for the unfortunate George. The sentence was carried out by the UK's most famous, or infamous, hangman, Albert Pierrepoint, who, over a 24-year period, hanged 435 people. He was so skilled at his craft that he was flown by private plane to Germany after the Second World War to mete out justice to the Belsen war criminals, hanging 13 of them in a single day. American executioners were given the high-profile job of executing the Nazi leaders convicted at the Nuremberg war crime trials, but, unlike Albert, they botched these executions as they had had no previous experience of hanging, only of the electric chair and gas chamber. Albert also carried out numerous executions in Ireland. As he said, "I love hanging Irishmen—they always go quietly and without trouble. They're Christian men and they believe they're going to a better place" (O'Donnell, 2014).

George Kelly was not the only innocent person to die at Albert's hands. For example, there was Timothy Evans, wrongly convicted of the murders carried out by the serial killer John Reginald Christie, who was himself eventually hanged by Albert. There was also Derek Bentley, a young man of limited intellectual ability who was convicted of murder for shouting "Let him have it" before his friend, who was too young to be hanged, shot a policeman. It is quite possible that his words were merely urging his friend to give the policeman the gun. None of this appears to have bothered Albert too much, and he said that "when I come home, I forget all about it" (Pollen, 2018). He was by all accounts a good-humored man, who liked to sing and combined his hangman's job with also being a publican at a pub called *Help the Poor Struggler*. When he was a schoolboy, his teacher asked the class to write about what they would like to do after leaving school. Albert's dreams were not, like those of many other boys, to become a train driver or a surgeon. Instead, as he said, "The first thought that came into my head was that I would like to be an executioner" (Pollen, 2018). When he fulfilled this ambition, he followed in a family tradition, as both his father and uncle were also hangmen. His father did not cope with the job anything like as well as Albert seems to have done in that he developed a drinking problem and, after arriving drunk for a hanging and punching his assistant, he was dismissed, although not before the unlucky prisoner had been hanged. Incidentally, a family tradition of being an executioner is not all that uncommon. Pawan, an Indian hangman, followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and, like Albert, said that "Since childhood I always wanted to become a hangman. I wanted to take my father's legacy forwards" (101 India, 2016). Similarly, France's last guillotine executioner, who chopped off 200 heads, started off as an assistant to his father and undertook his first execution at the age of 14 (Journeyman Pictures, 2007).

To return to Albert, he eventually resigned from his job, ostensibly because he felt insulted by a refusal to pay his expenses for travel to an execution which had been canceled. He later said that he no longer believed in the effectiveness of the death penalty, writing that:

> I have come to the conclusion that executions solve nothing, and are only an antiquated relic of a primitive desire for revenge which takes the easy way and hands over responsibility for the revenge to other people … It is said to be a deterrent. I cannot agree.
>
> (Pierrepoint, 1974, p. 207).

It seems that it would have taken a much greater invalidation than mere nonpayment of his expenses to trigger such a drastic change in his construing, akin to what Kelly (1955) termed "slot-rattling." After all, he was a man who had been so passionate about his work that even when he was on holiday, if there was an execution nearby, he would go and watch it. One explanation that has been suggested for his change of heart was that he had found himself in the unenviable position of having to hang a friend of his, a regular customer in his pub with whom he used to sing and who called him Tosh while Albert called his friend Tish. Tish was convicted of murdering his mistress, and Albert wrote that:

> I thought if any man had a deterrent to murder poised before him, it was this troubadour whom I called Tish. He was not only aware of the rope, he had the man who handles it beside him singing a duet. The deterrent did not work. (Pierrepoint, 1974, p. 165).

Albert also wrote of taking his friend to the gallows (Pierrepoint, 1974, p. 164): "'Hallo, Tosh', he said, not very confidently. 'Hallo Tish', I said. 'How are you?' I was not effusive, just gave the casual warmth of my nightly greeting from behind the bar." With a further "Come on Tish, old chap," Albert led him to his death.

I am not entirely convinced that it was this episode that triggered Albert's change of heart because he did not resign for another six years. I suspect that of greater relevance, although Albert denied this (Pierrepoint, 1974), was that seven months before his resignation he executed Ruth Ellis, a nightclub hostess who had shot her abusive lover, and who was the last woman to be hanged in the UK. Some time after the execution, Albert did something which I find extraordinary in that he wrote to Ruth's sister and asked if he could visit her. They went together to Ruth's grave, where Albert asked if he could be left alone for a while, and also if he could be photographed kneeling by the grave. Such behavior must surely have been very out of character for the usually extremely professional Albert, and to have acted in this way would imply that he had been profoundly affected by Ruth's execution. Writing about the execution in one of his letters to Ruth's sister, he said that "she just puckered her lips as if she wanted to smile. I painfully accepted her smile" (Pollen, 2018). Did her puckering of her lips lead him to feel some human, even sexual, response to her before he placed the hood on her head and the noose round her neck?

We shall never know, but it does seem clear that Albert came to feel increasingly dislodged from his core role, developed in childhood, of someone who impersonally carried out his deadly duty in the service of deterring murder. It was likely to have been the resulting guilt and threat, defined by Kelly (1955) respectively as dislodgement from one's core role and awareness of a comprehensive imminent change in core structures, that led to him leaving his job.

Guilt, threat, and shame—considered by McCoy (1977) to involve dislodgement from another's construction of one's core role—are much more apparent in the case of another executioner who, like Albert, almost certainly killed at least one innocent person. This was Don Cabana, who in 1987 executed Edward Earl Johnson for the murder of a policeman and rape of a woman that occurred at a time when Johnson had the alibi that he was with another woman in a pool hall. The woman he was with tried to report this to the courthouse but was told by a police officer to go away and mind her own business. It may be of no great surprise that the woman, like

Edward, was Black and the police officer was White. Before executing Edward, Don said to him "the only thing that's important is that you let your maker, your God, know the truth and that you be at peace with him" (Midpen Media Center, 2011). His response was "warden, I'm at peace with my God. How are you going to be with yours?" Subsequently Cabana expressed the

> hope that he was guilty because the idea that… I carried out an execution on an innocent kid is something that I would not want to have to deal with. For me the moral implications from my personal religious background weighed heavily.

He also described how

> Every time the warden executes a prisoner a piece of him dies too. It's a very personal thing, it leaves you feeling very frustrated, it leaves you feeling dirty… I went back to my house in the middle of the night, climbed in the shower and scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed but you can't make yourself feel clean…. I was troubled as I stood there watching these guys die in the gas chamber thinking what do my children deep down inside think of their father, what does my wife think of me and ultimately what is my God going to ask of me when my time comes to be judged and I think that more than anything else weighed very heavily on me. You get to know these people and you never forget what they did but you get to see other sides too. (Midpen Media Center, 2011)

Albert Pierrepoint and Don Cabana[1] seem to exemplify contrasting poles of a construct concerning, on the one hand, doing one's job efficiently and mechanistically and, on the other, approaching those whom one is tasked to kill with what Kelly termed sociality and commonality, not only construing their view of the world but acknowledging that some aspects of it might not be entirely different from one's own.

Other perpetrators of harm

The issues raised by the stories of these two individuals are not, of course, specific to executioners but are relevant to people engaged in any activity that might involve killing or harming other beings (MacNair, 2002; Winter, 2003)—including animals—and even practitioners of apparently more benign activities such as psychotherapy. I shall now consider three other groups of such individuals, drawing upon examples from my research and clinical practice, in order to further illustrate contrasting patterns of Kellian guilt and shame before discussing the role of another of Kelly's constructs of transition, hostility.

Genocidaires

An extreme variant of what might be regarded as executioners are perpetrators of genocide. Accounts given by some of these provide further illustrations of a pride, like that of Albert Pierrepoint for most of his working life, in doing one's work with maximum efficiency and a view of this work as consistent with a core role of doing their duty. Thus, both Rudolf Hoess, the Commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp, and Comrade Duch, the Commandant of the Khmer Rouge interrogation center S21, expressed guilt not for the deaths for which they were responsible (millions in the case of Hoess and thousands in the case of Duch) but for

acknowledging that the institutions that they commanded did not always operate according to the prescribed rules (Reed et al., 2014; Winter, 2016a). The positions taken by these two individuals do not, of course, indicate that those who undertake genocidal killings in a more hands-on manner do not suffer psychological consequences, perhaps related to guilt. Indeed, such adverse effects of their murderous work have been documented in the Einsatzgruppen, responsible for the direct killing of Jews during the Holocaust (Browning, 1992; Hilberg, 1961), and are likely to have been one factor in the introduction of what was described as a more "humane" method of killing, the gas chamber, in which the whole procedure was much more impersonal.

I recently visited memorial sites of another genocide, of between half a million and a million Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda in the space of only about 100 days. Standing in rooms full of the remains of victims, I struggled to understand how people could so rapidly and cruelly butcher others, some of whom had been their neighbors, friends, or family members. A degree of light is thrown on this by testimonies of some of the perpetrators, who tended to blame their actions on the government. For example, one perpetrator stated that "we involuntarily took part in genocide because authorities took advantage of extreme poverty we were in and manipulated us" (Sibomana & Mafeza, 2020, p. 24). Another explained that "the ideology of hatred that was spread out played a great role in genocide.... This ideology of hatred was instilled in Hutus and taken as granted. This made Hutus lose humanism" (Sibomana & Mafeza, 2020, p. 24). These perpetrators' views are consistent with perspectives such as violentization theory (Athens, 1992), although this theory does leave room for some personal responsibility in acknowledging that there is individual variation in the extent of violent acts carried out by those whose genocidal behavior has been encouraged by authorities (Winton, 2011).

Some perpetrators justified their involvement in the killings as a way of deflecting attention from Tutsis, including family members, whom they were hiding. However, a closer examination of their transcripts suggests that occasionally they protected some Tutsis for reasons that were more selfish than altruistic. As one Hutu put it:

> The fact of not killing my own wife [who was a Tutsi] did not depend on the love I had toward her, but I was afraid that a Hutu wife that I would marry after the death of the former one would not accept to raise six small children that I had. (Sibomana & Mafeza, 2020, p. 25)

This interviewee contrasted his situation with that of a colleague whose wife was more expendable: "My colleague ... who had a Tutsi wife accepted to put her in the hands of killers to remain with only 2 Hutu wives as he had three wives ... Then after, her body was thrown in the latrine" (Sibomana & Mafeza, 2020, p. 25).

For other perpetrators, the activities in which they had engaged seemed to have caused them as little distress as those of Albert Pierrepoint caused him for most of his career. As one of them said: "First I cracked an old mama's skull with a club ... I went home that evening without even thinking about it" (Hatzfeld, 2003, p. 21). This genocide perpetrator's actions were presumably consistent with his core role. By contrast, the narratives of many others have been regarded as indicating an attempt at moral reconstruction (Bigabo & Jansen, 2020) in which they both acknowledged what

they did (which itself was a way of ensuring that their prison sentences would be reduced) and found a way of denying responsibility for it. For example:

> For me genocidaire has two meanings. In the first meaning I can see that I am a genocidaire, because the killing happened and I was there. This makes me a genocidaire, but for my second understanding of the term I can say that at a conscious level and towards God, God knows it was a kind of accident that happened when I was meeting with the killers. (Bigabo & Jansen, 2020)

Armed forces

Individuals who engage in the government-sanctioned violence of warfare are also often faced with experiences that can be described as "moral injury," resulting from events that involve "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 700). While perpetrating or failing to prevent such acts may be expected to lead to guilt as defined by Kelly, and may result in "perpetration-induced traumatic stress" (Grossman, 1995; MacNair, 2002), bearing witness to or learning about them may be more likely to be associated with contempt, defined by McCoy (1977, p. 121) as "awareness that the core role of another is comprehensively different from one's own and/or does not meet the norms of social expectation." Like the Rwandan participants in genocide, members of the armed forces, even if they have been involved in morally reprehensible acts, may avoid taking responsibility for these by taking the position that they were only obeying orders. This appeared to be the case in former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, many of whom had committed brutal atrocities but whose repertory grids indicated that they construed themselves even more favorably following the civil war in which they had fought than they construed their pre-war selves (Goins et al, 2012; Winter, 2016b; Winter et al., 2016). This was by contrast with their construing of their commanding officers, who essentially were viewed as the *real* villains, truly responsible for the child soldiers' actions.

Members of the armed forces can, of course, also avoid guilt concerning the acts in which they have participated by not construing these acts as inconsistent with their own moral codes in the first place or by considering warfare to be beyond the range of convenience of their moral constructs. This was presumably the case with Alexey Savichev, a Russian fighting for the Wagner mercenary group in Ukraine, who admitted torturing and killing prisoners of war but said "It is war and I do not regret a single thing I did there. If I could, I would go back" (Sauer, 2023). Consider also those who caused the greatest loss of civilian life in a single act that we have ever known, the two pilots of the plane that dropped the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. As one, General Paul Tibbets, said,

> I have never lost a night's sleep on the deal.... I made up my mind then that the morality of dropping that bomb was not my business. I was instructed to perform a military mission to drop the bomb. That was the thing that I was going to do to the best of my ability. Morality, there is no such thing in warfare. I don't care whether you are dropping atom bombs, or 100-pound bombs, or shooting a rifle. You have got to leave the moral issue out of it. (Atomic Heritage Foundation, 1989)

The copilot, Captain Robert Lewis, could only construe the enormity of what he had done by drawing on his construct subsystem concerning science-fiction heroes:

"It was the actual sight that we saw that caused the crew to feel they were part of Buck Rodgers 25th century warriors" (Tahir, 2018). As they flew back from their deadly mission, the pilots and their crew tucked into their lunch of ham sandwiches.

The stance of such military personnel is aided by dehumanizing the enemy and using euphemisms such as construing of civilian casualties as inevitable "collateral damage." It is also facilitated by distancing the combatants from the results of their actions, as in the delivery of death by long-range weapons, including drones (Winter, 2022). This might be regarded as an example of what Kelly (1955) termed constriction, the drawing in of the perceptual field to avoid incompatibilities in construing, because in remote warfare fatalities and destruction are beyond the perceptual fields of those who press the deadly buttons. As Kelly (1969) remarked, "The military aviator probably tries not to think of what is going on down on the ground in the target area in the wake of his bomb" (p. 278). It is small wonder, therefore, that the military makes considerable use of strategies aimed at depersonalizing warfare. To quote Korać (2018, p. 51), "empathy for military planners is a disturbance factor to the efficiency of a military operation."

A degree of empathy is perhaps apparent in a reply that U.S. President Harry S. Truman sent on August 9, 1945 to a fellow Democrat (and segregationist) who was arguing that Japan should be shown no leniency:

> I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation in warfare but I can't bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should act in the same manner…. My object is to save as many American lives as possible but I also have a humane feeling for the women and children in Japan. (Barkann, 2022)

Truman's humane feeling did not seem to extend to the men of Japan. Also noteworthy is that, despite his apparent commonality and sociality with the country's women and children, this letter was written on the day that, sanctioned by Truman, an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, following the one dropped on Hiroshima three days before. The letter contrasts with the triumphalist tone of Truman's speech about these bombings:

> The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development…. It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East. (Truman, 1945)

This quote indicates deflection of ultimate responsibility for the decimation of two Japanese cities to the Japanese themselves, who essentially "had it coming." At the very least, Truman's two pronouncements seem to demonstrate fragmentation in construing.

Violent offenders

Turning to violence toward others that has not been sanctioned by a government, a distinction has been made between reactive offenses, such as responses to construed provocation, and instrumental, or goal-directed, offenses (Berkowitz, 1993). The former

can be viewed as impulsive acts that involve foreshortening of what Kelly (1955) termed the Circumspection-Preemption-Control Cycle and that dislodge the individual from their core role (Winter, 2007). For example, one of the participants in a study of filicide (Sedumedi & Winter, 2022) recounted how he impulsively shot his wife and two children, killing one child, when he felt emasculated by his wife and that she "was slipping through my fingers" (p. 8). As he said, "It happened in a short period. IT ATTACKED ME FAST" (p. 12). This description indicates that he considered what he did as alien to his core role, and he still struggled to make sense of it: "but what did I do? Why did I do such a thing?" (p. 13). He also described how "I feel—disappointed in myself. I feel ashamed. It means I was not responsible … . it means that I could not handle my problems" (p. 12). A reactive killing of a family member, in this case his father, was also carried out as a boy by one of my clients, who sought help many years later because of nightmares about what he called the "big event," which, in his words, he had "encapsulated" and "put on a shelf," thereby avoiding guilt and threat by the strategy that Kelly termed suspension. Therapy involved taking the big event down from the shelf and elaborating his construing of it (Winter & Gould, 2001).

By contrast, instrumental offenses are consistent with the perpetrator's core role and therefore occasion no guilt. This was the case with the serial killer Ian Brady (Winter et al., 2007), who—with his partner—killed five children and young people, and who wrote that "every intelligent individual, whether predominantly good or evil, possesses a mostly idiosyncratic moral gyroscope which reminds him whether he is in conflict with his *own* moral and ethical convictions or merely those of others" (Brady, 2001, p. 37). Serial killing was consistent with Brady's philosophical and moral convictions, and indeed he told me that what he had done was

> relatively trivial compared to the scale of American gangsters – not the Mafia but the Bush gang of ex-oil executives and their recent successful armed robbery in Iraq, the body count of innocent bystanders murdered or dismembered apparently not of sufficient public interest to be disclosed. Blair, a minor henchman and late-developed psychopath, who has bombed five countries in six years, is to receive American honours as a reward.
>
> (Winter, 2006, p. 165)

Another instrumental offender, in this case a mass murderer, is Anders Breivik, the Norwegian right-wing terrorist who in one day killed 77 people, mostly at a Labor Party youth camp. Despite his actions, he said that "As all my friends can attest to I wouldn't be willing to hurt a fly and I have never used violence against others" (Berwick, 2011, p. 1395). As described by Winter and Tschudi (2015), his justification of what he had done included that:

> There are situations in which cruelty is necessary, and refusing to apply necessary cruelty is a betrayal of the people whom you wish to protect … it is better to kill too many than not enough, or you risk reducing the desired ideological impact of the strike. (Berwick, 2011, p. 846)

As he also said, "I tried not to take the youngest … . I took those who were older. There are moral boundaries, aren't there? … It sucks to take human life … . But it sucks even more not to act" (Seierstad, 2013, p. 367).

However, even the instrumental offender may, perhaps like Albert Pierrepoint, encounter an episode that causes acknowledgement of the humanity of the victim and leads to guilt or shame. For example, consider the case of a hardened assassin, who had apparently not been troubled by his previous, efficiently conducted, violent acts but then found himself in a situation in which the victim:

> was crying, begging, talking about his children…. I was becoming more agitated listening to him, then I looked straight into his face and shot him in the head…blood spurted on my suit, he fell, I had to step over him and slipped in the blood and fell on top of him, I panicked and ran. (Pollock, 2000, p. 179)

Hostility

Kelly (1955, p. 910) wrote that "If a person feels guilty for what he has done, and yet considers no alternatives, we can expect him to become hostile." Hostility, in Kelly's sense of the term, involves extorting evidence for a social prediction that appears to be a failure. It may perhaps be manifested in some of the soldiers or perpetrators of genocide described above who, faced with the horror of the acts in which they had engaged and the invalidation that this posed to their view of themselves as good people, may have assiduously sought out and promulgated evidence of the immorality of those who ultimately directed these acts.

The latter individuals, the orchestrators of killing, may employ hostility themselves at various levels, as is evident in in the war between Russia and Ukraine. As Vladimir Putin's state of the nation address in February, 2023 illustrates (similarly to the previous quotes by Harry S. Truman), they may construe their enemies in a conflict as the *real* culprits for the violence that has been perpetrated. To quote Kelly (1969, p. 276), "In the language of nations—we all know how clearly everything the enemy does expresses 'his cruel and vicious nature.'" Thus, in his address, Putin stated, referring to "Western elites," that "it was they who unleashed the war, and we used force and use it to stop it." He elaborated, explaining that "Responsibility for inciting the Ukrainian conflict, for the escalation, for the increase in the number of its victims lies entirely with the Western elites and, of course, with the current Kiev regime" (President of Russia, 2023). Arguably, Putin's invasion of Ukraine can be regarded as a hostile maneuver to allow him to validate his construction of Russia as a victim of the "West" because it has resulted in Western vilification of the Russian regime, sanctions, military action, and more neighboring countries wishing to join NATO. The ridiculing of Putin's speech, with statements such as "Putin publicly demonstrated his irrelevance and confusion" (Front News Ukraine, 2023), can be viewed as a similar hostile ploy by those who oppose him to dismiss all of its content and thereby avoid giving serious attention to, and considering whether there might be any justification for, views about the West that may be uncomfortable and potentially invalidating. For instance, Putin remarked that "over the long centuries of colonialism, diktat, hegemony, they got used to being allowed everything, got used to spitting on the whole world" (President of Russia, 2023). He continued:

> None of them consider human casualties and tragedies, because, of course, trillions and trillions of dollars are at stake; the ability to continue to rob everyone; under the guise of

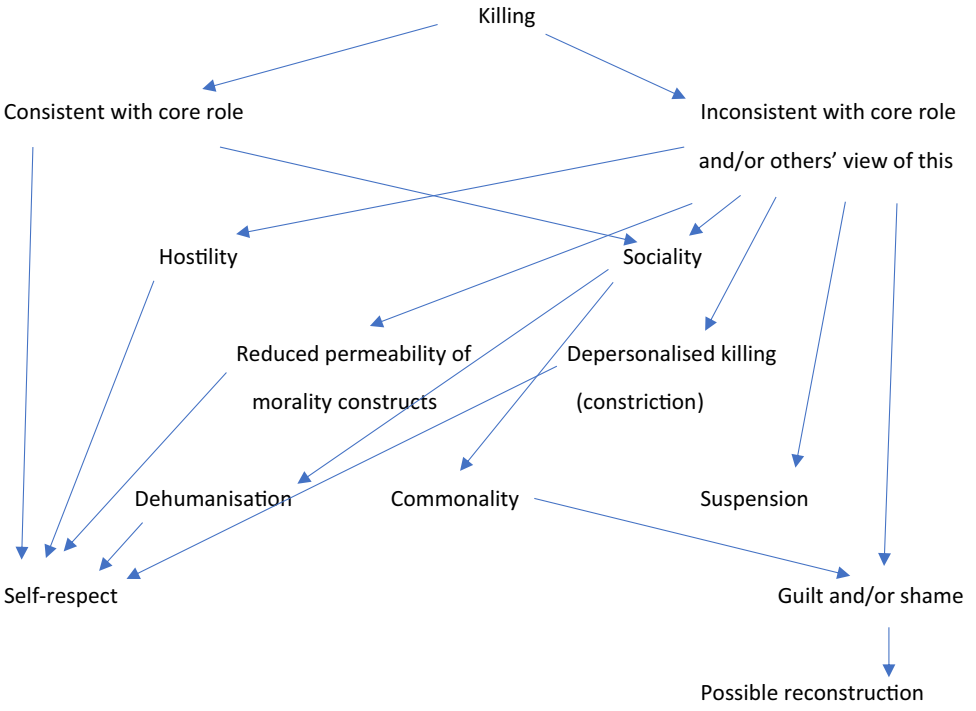

Figure 1. Pathways of construing after killing.

> words about democracy and freedoms, to spread neoliberal and inherently totalitarian values; hang labels on entire countries and peoples, publicly insult their leaders; suppress dissent in their own countries; creating the image of an enemy, diverting people's attention from corruption scandals. (President of Russia, 2023)

A further manifestation of hostility is that, if a construction of oneself as powerful is invalidated by the resistance of another party, evidence may be extorted for this construction by applying even greater force. Such a pattern may be evident in situations of domestic violence (Doster, 1985), as has been demonstrated in some of the cases of filicide described by Sedumedi and Winter (2022). On a much larger scale, in Ukraine the invalidation of Vladimir Putin's initial anticipation of a swift capitulation following his "special military operation" led to the deployment of much more military personnel and weaponry, and destruction of Ukraine's infrastructure, in order to validate his construction of Russian superiority. Conversely, the validation of Volodymyr Zelensky's stated anticipation that "Ukraine is winning" has required military aid from those Western leaders who have echoed this construction, such as Joe Biden with his statement that "Ukraine will never be a victory for Russia. Never" (Garamone, 2023). Thus, a spiral of Kellian hostility leads to escalation of bloodshed.

Conclusion: Pathways toward and away from reconstruction

To summarize, as indicated in Figure 1, people who commit harm to others will be likely to feel little or no guilt or shame for their actions if these actions are consistent with their core roles or others' constructions of these, or if they use one or more of

a variety of strategies of construing, or as Bandura et al. (1996) might term them, "mechanisms of moral disengagement." These include the hostile extortion of evidence that their actions are the responsibility of another; the reduction of permeability of moral constructs so that they are not applied to these actions; the depersonalization of killing; and the dehumanization of victims[2]. In these cases, the killer can preserve a state of awareness of the goodness of fit of the self in their core role structure, which was McCoy's (1977) definition of self-confidence, but which might better be viewed as indicating self-respect. Guilt, shame, and possible reconstruction will be more likely if both commonality and sociality are shown with the victims of the actions concerned, perhaps, as possibly occurred in Albert Pierrepoint's case, because of an unanticipated encounter with the humanity of the victim. As I have argued elsewhere (Winter, 2022), sociality is not sufficient in this regard; it is necessary not only to attempt to construe the victim's construction processes but to see the victim as essentially similar to oneself rather than as a dehumanized animal or object.

Although this paper has focused on responses after the event of killing, an understanding of the processes that have been outlined is of particular importance because they are equally relevant to individuals' willingness to engage in the act of killing in the first place and to the possible reevaluation of this willingness. Thus, interventions which foster the discovery of common ground with the other (e.g., Mascolo, 2022), rather than the hostile clinging to a dehumanized view of them, may have the potential to counter polarization in opposing groups' constructions of each other and its often tragically violent consequences.

Notes

1. These individuals are representative of several further examples of executioners who have reported contrasting reactions to their work (e.g., Atholl, 1956; MacNair, 2002).
2. Since the congress at which this paper was presented, dehumanization of opponents has clearly been demonstrated in the statement of the Israeli Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, that 'I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly' (Karanth, 2023). Acting accordingly has led to the deaths of some 40,000 people in Gaza, with countless more missing, injured, traumatized, or living in disease-ridden conditions, and the destruction of homes, hospitals, schools, and universities. A contrast between a dehumanized and vilified 'enemy' and one's own group, coupled with mechanisms such as Kellian hostility, is also evident in the responses of Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, to criticisms of the actions of the Israeli Defense Force: for example, 'Those who dare to accuse our soldiers of war crimes … do not have a single drop of morality. The army is the most moral army in the world' (Netanyahu, 2023).

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