Chapter 3 on The Self covers a lot of ground, self concept, self esteem, social comparison, etc. Pick out 2 or 3 ideas from the Social Psychology of the Self, and apply them to ISIL: the terrorist group that presents itself on the internet as beheading people and burning people alive. How might 2 or 3 of the ideas in Chapter 3 help us understand their mindset? How are they defining their selves in a way that justifies such brutality?

The Islamic State of Iraq and Levent (ISIL) is a jihadist rebel group, that controls territory in Iraq and Syria. It was closely linked to Al-Qaeda, until there was about a year long power struggle between the two, and Al-Qaeda cut all ties with ISIL. ISIL’s main goal is the foundation of an Islamic state, which is what they have been attempting to do through the creation of Caliphate. A Caliphate is an Islamic state that is lead by a religious leader, who is thought to be the successor of Muhammed. By justifying violence with religion, ISIL has created a strong social identity, which gives individuals a sense of self that is based on membership to a social group. When people are part of a group they feel a sense of belonging and purpose. ISIL has created a place for people, who have similar beliefs feel welcome and like they are part of something important, which is same tactic that countless gangs and other terrorists groups use to increase membership.

Another part of ISIL that must be discussed is the use of extreme public violence. ISIL is famously known for their use of beheadings to intimidate local populations and has released a series of propaganda videos aimed at Western countries. They also engage in public and mass executions, sometimes forcing prisoners to dig their own graves before shooting lines of prisoners and pushing them in. Analysts have said that it is the "juxtaposition of medieval violence and modern media savvy that draws attention to the twisted propaganda of the so-called Islamic State - with this latest now dubbed a 'Hollywood style execution'". From a social psychology perspective it could be said that members of ISIL are focusing on their public self-consciousness. They are able to commit these horrendous crimes against humanity, because they are maintaining their image of being an extremist group that will go to any length to fulfill their ultimate goal of an Islamic state.

Another aspect of ISIL that is interesting is the amount of criticism that they receive not only from other countries and international organizations, but other Muslims. They have been at the receiving end of severe criticism from other Muslims, but yet they continue on with their quest for the creation of an Islamic state. British Foreign Minister William Hague said "Anyone glorifying, supporting or joining ISIL should understand that they would be assisting a group responsible for kidnapping, torture, executions, rape and many other hideous crimes". Although, Hague does point out what may seem to be the obvious for those of us not involved in ISIL. This is not so obvious when one’s identity has been stolen from them, which is exactly what ISIL has done to its members. By deindividuation, ISIL has been able to create a strong group of people who have complete and total faith in the leadership. They have in essence created an army of robots, that rely heavily upon the collective identity of the group, which justifies the heinous crimes that they commit.

Julie Badaracco

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Although a terrorist organization, we can still understand ISIL as a social entity and therefore understand that individuals are able to create their social identity through the group. In addition, when in ISIL, individuals may be participating in deindividuation. Though there is a fair amount of media publication about ISIL because of the violence that surrounds them, we don’t know much about their operations or who is involved. This fact by itself allows individuals involved an ability to be completely anonymous while involved with the organization and therefore have the ability to lose all individual responsibility/accountability. More recent research on social groups has found that, when in social groups, and there is a potential for something like deindividuation to occur, the social group may reinforce social/group norms and encourage participants to take on a group
identity. This group identity could also be the case with ISIL participants. For example, when a member joins the group and for example, has radical ideas but no intention of following through on any actions and may not be as radical as some, the group identity could encourage the individual to be more radical or to carry out their radical thoughts with violence.

Many believe that individuals who commit large acts of violence do it in a desperate search for attention and to display themselves as powerful. The self-affirmation theory suggests that individuals reduce threats to their self-concept (in any realm) by affirming their worth in another domain unrelated to the issue they have trouble with regard to their self-concept. This could be true of some individuals involved with ISIL: they may be involved with the acts of violence that ISIL commits because they are attempting to deal with a different threat to their self-concept.

When ISIL commits these acts of violence, the acts are well publicized through the media. This would allow the members of the organization in many senses, especially when you look particularly at the idea of the looking-glass self. The looking-glass self explains that how we see ourselves comes from our perception of how others see us. If the media portrays ISIL as powerful and something to be feared, that will perpetuate ISIL individuals self-concepts’ as powerful. Due to a reliance on the feeling of power that the acts of violence create in the individuals committing them feel, we look at the self-evaluation theory which suggests that if those individuals feel that the violent acts are central to their self-concept, they will work hard to not be outperformed.

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