

# Ariadne Beck's reconfiguration of the scapegoating phenomenon: Can we as a species immunize against malignant scapegoating and eradicate it from the human repertoire?

De leider (en ook de therapeut) moeten agressie jegens de zondebok direct en onmiddellijk adresseren, om zo niet alleen de zondebok maar ook de groep als geheel te beschermen, bepleit Bill Roller. Dit verhaal over het groepsfenomeen 'zondebokken' en vooral de rol die de Task Leader daarin zou moeten spelen, is door Bill Roller uitgesproken op 29 augustus 2025 op de Universiteit van Peking. Het relaas is toegespitst op wat er fout gaat en is gegaan in de Verenigde Staten. Ook een andere kijk op de leiding in het Stanford Prison Experiment komt aan bod.

Door Bill Roller

There is a psychological and sociological phenomenon that is rife in our political and social context today. Scapegoating is a process of social exclusion that begins with the projection of negative attributes and traits onto one person or class of persons with the intent of rejecting their right of membership in the group. Such projection arouses fears of rejection and annihilation in those who are scapegoated. It must be emphasized that scapegoating is always a group phenomenon.

The term scapegoat also has a specific meaning in the context of small group behavior, as defined by Ariadne P. Beck of the Chicago Study Group. Beck defines the Scapegoat as a Leadership Role in group process, an enduring figure always present in a group who helps define the boundaries. This is a normative process. However, when the scapegoat comes under aggressive attack, the therapist or Task Leader must address the issue directly, stopping the aggression to prevent damage to both the scapegoat and to the group as a whole. The phase of group development when scapegoating appears is often a time of group conflict. Many clinicians choose to avoid group therapy entirely rather than face the intensity

of group conflict that can emerge at this time. The leader of task groups faces this phenomenon as well. Before I precede to the relevance of this fact to the celebrated Stanford Prison Experiment, I want to emphasize the ethical obligation that a clinician leading groups must accept. Clinicians must not wait until they formulate a coherent theory to support an intervention to prevent harm. They must confront aggressive scapegoating directly and immediately. Unchallenged, aggressive scapegoating will eventually cause the dissolution of a group – owing to a lack of trust in the leader and each other, leading to Melanie Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position where members are guarded and look at each other with suspicion.

As I noted earlier, Ariadne Beck has extensively researched the phenomena of Leadership Roles in her study of group process and group therapy. She has identified and defined the characteristics of Task Leader and Scapegoat Leader. The Task Leader acts as guide to the task of the group and influences the development of group norms. The Scapegoat Leader helps clarify the group norms and helps define issues of inclusion and exclusion in the group. The Scapegoat Leader is often the recipient of the negative projections of other group members. The role of Task Leader, or Leaders, in group therapy is usually occupied by the therapist or co-therapists. Serving in that role, the Task Leaders must defend the Scapegoat Leader against aggressive attacks. This is an ethical obligation to prevent harm to the Scapegoat Leader and the group as a whole.

### **The Stanford Prison Experiment**

The obligation to protect extends beyond clinical practice to the realm of the social

scientists. Philip Zimbardo failed to meet this obligation as warden or Task Leader (Principal Investigator) in the Stanford Prison Experiment. In that experiment, students were assigned to roles of either prisoners or guards and placed in a simulated environment of a jail. When guards began abusing prisoners, Zimbardo did not intervene to protect them, contrary to what we reported in our recent *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* article entitled *The Berkeley Civic Courage and Heroism Experiment: the group dynamics of individuals acting in concert to advance ethical goals in the public interest* published in Volume 67, number 3, July, 2017.

New evidence shows that the Stanford Prison Experiment investigators did verbally coach subjects serving in the role of guards to scapegoat subjects in the role of prisoners, contrary to the claims made by those same investigators. [For those wanting to investigate further, see Resnick, B.] The abuse of prisoners did not emerge spontaneously as a result of the guards’ identity with and conformity to abusive roles in an oppressive system. The guards were instructed to do so.

In short, the situational context of the subjects was not as stated by those in charge of the experiment. The guards were never free of being influenced by the Task Leader. That influence was both explicit and *implicit*. In 2014, Philip Zimbardo and I collaborated in a social psychology experiment with a group of volunteer participants whose group process we recorded in a video called *Group dynamics and the New Heroism: The ethical alternative to the Stanford Prison Experiment*. In the video, Zimbardo speaks of his participation in the Stanford Prison Experiment

and openly admits that 'In my role as warden, I implicitly encouraged the process of scapegoating by not stopping abuses by guards who humiliated selected prisoners openly and often.'

[See the video *The Berkeley Civic Courage and Heroism Experiment: the group dynamics of individuals acting in concert to advance ethical goals in the public interest*, now part of the Ariadne P. Beck Archive at Peking University]

### **Implicit and nonverbal**

From the perspective of group dynamics and group process research, the implicit and nonverbal communication to participants by the leader of the experiment is a powerful means of influencing behavior – in some ways no less potent than expressive and verbal communication. The phenomenon of the Task Leader implicitly and non-verbally giving instructions to group members is a common and effective way to control group

## *Communication between clinical group process practitioners and social psychologists rarely if ever occur on a regular basis*

behavior. This was never considered as a factor by the principal investigators of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Neither group process theory nor systems theory was ever applied by those who interpreted the outcome of the experiment. This is not surprising when one realizes that communication

between clinical group process practitioners and social psychologists rarely if ever occur on a regular basis. The collaboration of Philip Zimbardo and myself was an extraordinary event in this regard.

Why are implicit and non-verbal messages by Task Leaders so effective in controlling the behavior of task group members? First, they are open-ended and allow the participants to imagine they are acting on the basis of their own free will. Second, the effects can be 'plausibly denied' as the U. S. Central Intelligence Agency avows and states in their motto. If Task Leaders are later called to account for the destructive outcome which their leadership produced, they can deny they did so. Inuendo and direct communication can be extremely adroit in managing group behavior – while at the same time allowing Task Leaders to avoid responsibility of their leadership. We shall see later on in my talk how this functions in favor of military commanders who deny atrocities committed by soldiers under their command. The soldiers under their command, by contrast, know they committed atrocities and suffer despair and what is called 'moral injury' as a consequence. Those soldiers in effect are scapegoated by their military commanders. I'll speak more of that later. As the Stanford Prison Experiment comes under wider scrutiny – those who do the retrospective research must assess how the social psychology community and the community of group therapy clinicians could have missed for so long Zimbardo's key role as warden influencing the guards. In light of these revelations, researchers must now revise how the Stanford Prison Experiment has been interpreted and taught since 1971. I hope there may be students and professors

in my audience today who will choose to pursue that research.

### **Task Leader**

Most interpretations by social psychologists miss the significance of how much the Task Leader influences the norms of behavior in a group. To repeat: it was not the situational context of the prison nor the role assignments that determined the behavior of the guards. It was the influence of the Task Leader. Of course, as Kurt Levine stated, the social context is always a factor in shaping human behavior. In the case of the Stanford Prison Experiment, the task leadership – also a part of the social context – became the determining factor in its outcome. The Task Leader's impact is crucial in setting and reinforcing the norms in group behavior. This was demonstrated in the 2014 Berkeley Civic Courage and Heroism Experiment cited above. In that experiment, as Task Leader, I implicitly and explicitly advocated norms to resist aggressive scapegoating by all participants in the experimental group. However, the desire to attack the Scapegoat Leader was still present, especially in one participant, named Craig, who felt it most intently. Nevertheless, all participants adhered to the agreed upon norms reinforced by the Task Leader. However, when the group ended, Craig expressed how stifled he felt in not being permitted to express animosity toward the Scapegoat Leader. He said, 'I felt nauseated as I held back my anger. I want nothing more to do with the group.' Good to his word, he did not return with the others to see the edited copy of the film that recorded our group. I thought later that Craig might embody another leadership role that remains undefined, a member who felt sickened for want

of scapegoating another member. And that question remains open.

The Stanford Prison Experiment is still relevant to group clinicians as an object lesson in how fame and notoriety have come to eclipse intellectual rigor and expertise in our time.

## *The Task Leader in the White House has become the Scapegoater-in-chief*

The Stanford Prison Experiment was never peer reviewed nor closely examined by group clinicians and the group process research committee. The investigators went straight to *The New York Times* and national broadcast television. In this way, an ill-conceived and aborted social experiment became a celebrated news item. Along the way, our scientific community gradually relinquished its ethical obligation to pursue the truth behind the extravagant claims. No critique of the Stanford Prison Experiment ever appeared in the *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* until 2008. This was my review of the film *Quiet rage*, a Hollywood style biopic that celebrated the experiment.

This was both an intellectual and ethical failure of our scientific community. It was left to the public relations people and the media to inflate its reputation. Why did it take almost fifty years to uncover the errors and deceptions of this grandly celebrated experiment?

### **Scapegoater-in-chief**

In the current political climate of the United States, the politics of fear and gratuitous, aggressive scapegoating have become the

norm. The Task Leader in the White House has become the Scapegoater-in-chief. This deeply affects the norms of behavior for the country at large, but also affects the patients we work with in our clinical practice. The fantasies of exclusion and annihilation are awakened in our patients. As clinicians, we can be alert to the emergence of these phenomena in our treatment room – or we can deny their importance and reinforce our patients' fantasies and fears. I believe the ethical choice is to confront aggressive scapegoating whenever we see it.

Institutions in a democratic society such as the United States are also vulnerable and susceptible to aggressive scapegoating. We see this currently in every department of the executive branch of the United States government. Once again, the Task Leader, as president, sets the norm – either inflaming the scapegoating and exclusion process or striving for inclusion and social acceptance as cardinal principles of good government. Those political leaders who explicitly call for exclusionary policies are destructive and dangerous to the body politic.

### **In the shadow of the Vietnam genocide**

For two years the government in the United States has failed to stop Israel's assault on Gaza, Palestine. The American tax payer pays for the weapons that fuel this war without a declaration of war by the peoples' representatives in Congress. This is in violation of the war powers act in the U.S. Constitution. Why does the President allow this to happen? The reason is unspoken, but it is in plain sight of those who know the recent history of the United States. The

President of the United States cannot condemn Israel's genocide, the indiscriminate killing of civilians, women, children and elders in Gaza and the West Bank without in turn condemning our own mass atrocities committed against the population of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the years 1965 to 1973. Robert McNamara, the U.S. secretary of defense and architect of the war, estimated that three million Vietnamese died as a result, mostly civilians. He said this in an interview with *The New York Times* which was published in an article entitled *McNamara's War*, April 12, 1995. The world knows what we did – just as Israel can point to us as an example of how to get away with mass murder. But did we, the people of the United States, truly avoid the consequences?

I think not. The moral injury the people of the nation experience when their leaders have planned and sanctioned mass murder is quite severe and everlasting. No matter how the atrocities are euphemized, the people of the U.S. cannot help but feel the horrors and disgust of living with the knowledge that they have collectively committed war crimes. I believe this is true for the citizens of both Russia and Israel whose soldiers are currently engaged in murderous wars. Let me be clear. The moral injury suffered by those soldiers ordered to kill by their commanders – who later either deny the atrocities ever occurred or blame the soldiers – is devastating. The soldiers are acting out the murderous intentions of their commanders. We must acknowledge that the falsehoods that governments tell their own soldiers will produce the kind of 'moral injury' that soldiers must bear alone. But as a consequence of our failure to remember, let alone reckon with our past of Vietnam, we as a people

suffer permanent injury to our moral sensibility and the severe loss of our capacity to empathize with the suffering of others, a minimum standard for those wanting to live in a democracy. The failure to have empathy for the sufferings of an enemy will in time decay the empathy our citizens must feel for each other, leading to a widespread distrust of each other.

The following two emotions could help us find a way out of this ethical morass and prevent a collapse of our democracy. They are pity and compassion for those whom we would make victims of our malignant scapegoating. We must turn to the ancient Greek playwright and tragedian, Euripides, born in 484 before the Common Era. In his play, *The Trojan Women*, he confronted his

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fellow Athenians with the suffering of the enslaved women of Troy after the Greek's destruction of their city and the annihilation of their men and children. In this stark drama Euripides clearly illustrates how the moral injury of America undermines our democracy. He said the following: 'Pity... is a democratic passion. What it rebels against is the hubris of reveling in the agonies of others because we think that we ourselves are immune to suffering.'

We can feel for others because we can imagine what it is like to be them and to feel empathy – an ability that is as crucial to democracy as it is to theatre. Euripides tried

to warn his fellow citizens, the Athenians, that their democracy would not survive if it became pitiless. They did not heed his words and continued to pursue building their empire, invading Sicily at great cost to their navy. Their democracy collapsed in the chaos of defeat.

(We must also consider the Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu, born in 571 Before the Common Era, an ally of Euripides and his moral teaching of compassion. Lao Tsu spoke of paradoxical truths. An example is: 'To lead people, you must walk behind them.')

Forgetting the homeless children living in the streets of America or erasing the lives of children in Palestine shows pitiless regard for the other, the stranger, those whom we choose to throw away as ever so many victims of malignant scapegoating.

It's telling how social psychologists often fail to see the tragic consequences for nations who try to rid themselves of those designated Scapegoat Leaders, who in Ariadne Beck's perspective can and will contribute so much to the same societies, if permitted just to live among those who are encouraged to hate them. Instead, they tend to focus on the universality of the phenomenon of scapegoating or the negative consequences for those excluded from full participation in the society. They neglect to identify the scapegoats as potential leaders serving in Scapegoat Leadership roles. Therefore, they cannot conceive the benefits that Beck's conception of Scapegoat Leaders brings to the entire community: a different perspective being an outsider, the courage they demonstrate by differentiating themselves from the others, and the loyalty they express by wanting to belong, despite being hated or

mistreated. All these qualities are contained in Ariadne Beck's theories which allow Scapegoat Leaders to serve an exceptional role in the founding of societies and nations.

### **In the military context**

The interaction of the Task Leaders and the Scapegoat Leaders in the military follow a predictable pattern in most nations. Task Leaders – who are the commanders of soldiers who must follow their orders – are eager to accept rewards for military success and loath to accept blame. In such a context, the soldiers they lead are highly susceptible to being scapegoated.

This is how it happens. Battles are being lost and military commanders want more and more aggressive action out of their soldiers. And soldiers respond by using more and more violent means to destroy the enemy. And those violent means include the destruction of schools and hospitals, the killing of women and children, and the murder of the old and the infirm. The soldiers who carry out these crimes feel shame and guilt – which is only intensified if the commanders deny that their orders meant the

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degradation of crimes committed by the soldiers. Whenever the crimes committed come into the light of world awareness, the commanders either deny that the crimes

ever happened, or if they can't deny, insist that the soldiers acted 'on their own' to kill and maim so heedlessly.

The following is a clear definition of what constitutes moral injury. Either the commanders refuse to accept that the crimes committed ever happened, or alternatively, they insist that the violence used by the soldiers was not ordered by the commanders, but initiated by the bad 'rogue' soldiers, meaning they acted on their own. In either case, the scapegoated soldiers suffer what is called 'moral injury.'

### **Torture**

At this point, I want to briefly address the most extreme and horrific and malignant form of scapegoating – torture.

Torture not only denies human rights to its victims, but it rejects them outright as a member of the human species, the human family. Following the United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, John Yoo, a member of George Bush's Office of Legal Counsel wrote a memo in August of 2002, giving 'legal' permission for U.S. soldiers at the Guantanamo prison to torture prisoners captured in Afghanistan. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the same legal memo gave permission for U.S. soldiers to torture prisoners held at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. The failure of the U.S. government to hold accountable those at the highest levels of the CIA, the Pentagon, and the U.S. military who have practiced and condoned torture has established a new norm and sent a clear message to other governments and nations worldwide. 'If you commit torture, we will not hold you accountable. You will have a free hand and we will not sanc-

tion you even when committing the most egregious atrocities.'

The torture and murder of the American journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in 2018, without his Saudi killers being held accountable or the Saudi Arabian kingdom being sanctioned appears now to be a prodrome or forerunner of crimes to come. Gina Haspel, formerly in charge of the CIA torture program in Thailand, was appointed the director of the CIA and could not be expected to curb torture by proxy in nations allied to the U.S.

As U.S. citizens we must be cognizant of the cautionary words of the Yale psychiatrist, Robert J. Lifton, when he described how the good German citizens of the Third Reich were 'gradually socialized' to torture, assassinations, and mass murder over time.

This must not be our fate. Applying principles of small group process to the larger society is always a huge stretch. Yet, applying the concept of isomorphy, we see that beneath the diverse content of apparently different processes, there lies a similar structure. This is a basic principle of systems thinking embraced so well by Ariadne Beck.

### **The present situation**

When a president of a nation seizes the exceptional power to impose his will outside the established law or national constitution – as does the current commander-in-chief of the United States – it creates a process of selective malignant scapegoating. The Task Leader of such a state becomes a tyrant. The nation succumbs to a tyranny of the majority, where the law is applied selectively and certainly not equally to all members of the nation. This nation is not a democracy

but a 'constitutional dictatorship' and the people live in the perilous condition of malignant scapegoating.

The American journalist, Mark Danner, believes the present degradation of democracy in the United States had its roots in the torture and extraordinary rendition regime of the early years of this century which I described in my section on torture above. 'Bush's imposition of 'constitutional dictatorship', while it had echoes in other wartime moments in American history, surely laid the groundwork for the peacetime constitutional dictatorship we are seeing now.'

## *It is clear that U.S. citizens must not be silent in the presence of malignant scapegoating*

And I am pained to say it is the condition of my country, the United States, today. I love my country, the United States of America, but I am ashamed of our behavior in the world and the suffering we bring to our own people.

It is clear that U.S. citizens, like members of a small group, must voice their dissent and not be silent in the presence of malignant scapegoating. If the Task Leaders of our country will not act responsibly and reject wholesale scapegoating of large segments of the population, then we, the people, must not be silent. We must take that responsibility into our own hands and act in the name of our democratic and humanitarian values.

Finally, I'm pleased to say the Ariadne P. Beck Archive for Group Process Research and Peace Studies at Peking University will include a video of my interview with Daniel Ellsberg in 2018, focusing on his book, *The doomsday machine: Confessions of a nuclear war planner*. The book addresses some of the issues I want to emphasize in my closing statement.

First, all nations, including the Peoples' Republic of China and the United States must not pursue strategies for thermonuclear war because it will lead all human beings on earth to a Kingdom of Death. We must not allow this absolute form of malignant scapegoating to annihilate all life on earth. We must consider the words of the French philosopher, Albert Camus. Camus says we must not think of ourselves as gods but as little beings, given for a time a brief mor-

tality and yet possessing a vision of eternity. Can we use the power of empathy and compassion, as Euripides and Lao Tsu instruct, to efface the pathogen of malignant scapegoating? I'll leave you with that question. Thanks for listening.

*This talk was dedicated to the men and women in the Veterans for Peace, a global organization of military veterans and allies whose collective efforts are to build a culture of peace, by informing the public of the true causes of war and the enormous costs of wars, and with an obligation to heal the wounds of war, including moral injury.*

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**Bill Roller** is a psychotherapist, relationship and family therapist and group analyst, working in his own practice in Berkeley, California, where he lives with his wife and co-therapist and co-author Vivian Nelson. In 1991 they published their first book, *The art of co-therapy*. Bill Roller is the author and co-author of more than fifty publications and has been involved as principal investigator in two important studies on group therapy and group processes. In 1997, with Vivian Nelson, he produced *The promise of group therapy: A live to tape demonstration of a time-limited group*. The video presents a concise and compelling way of conceptualizing small group process. The same year he wrote *The promise of group therapy, parts of which are included in the present article*. In 2014, he produced *Group dynamics and the new heroism: The ethical alternative to the Stanford Prison Experiment, a 6 hour spontaneous, unscripted video series that tracks the Berkeley Civic Courage and Heroism Experiment as it investigates the group dynamics which bring out the best in human beings and allow them to act together in alignment with their moral beliefs, even at possible risk to themselves*. Instructive commentaries are supplied by Philip Zimbardo and Bill Roller, co-creators of the experiment. In 2017, they published the article *The Berkeley civic courage and heroism experiment: The group dynamics of individuals acting in concert to advance ethical goals in the public interest*. In 2024, Roller and Nelson established a permanent home for the Ariadne P. Beck archive for group process research and peace studies at the department of Medical Psychology and Humanism at Peking University in Beijing, Peoples' Republic of China. It was there that this document was first delivered to faculty and students at the university.

## Refereren aan:

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