ESSAY

"Thugs" in Context:
Why Dividing People into "Good" and "Bad" is a Bad Idea

Matthew S. Vos, Covenant College

The killing of African American George Floyd by White police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 brought racial tensions to America's front stage with explosive force. Collective behavior ranging from protests and teargassing to looting, "riots," and Bible-waving quickly ensued. Previously unheard stories of racial violence perpetrated against Black people flooded the news media. Phrases like "defund the police" entered public discourse. All this social unrest—more intense because it occurred amidst the uncertainty and strain of the Covid-19 pandemic—quickly resolved into opposing forces. One side strained at the existing social order; the other sought to fortify it. "We" versus "they."

I'm interested in the ways in which groups, as emergent entities, transcend the individuals that comprise them. While many think that individuals combine to form groups, some sociologists reason that groups produce individuals. In a first-year college course I teach, I ask a couple of students to introduce themselves without referring to any group to which they belong. The simple question "Who are you?" becomes impossibly difficult to answer, reducing students to such utterances as "I love pizza," which I delight to point out is a taste they acquired in the groups they inhabit. Alone, there's not much to us, and apart from our membership in groups, it's difficult to know ourselves. Our personal identities are formed by our ties to other people. With this in mind, I offer a group-level analysis of the national discourse framing the racial tensions, protests, and related social disequilibrium that marked the summer of 2020. I hope to communicate that trying to understand and address group-level phenomena through individual-level analysis not only fails to solve important problems, it frequently makes them worse.

I begin with the distinction some have made between the "good" peaceful protesters and the "bad thugs" who were looting and destroying property. "Good" and "bad"—a clean, simple, bifurcation that operates at an individual level of analysis, and locates the source of "deviant" (or normal) behavior *inside* the individual. He is bad. She is good. Dividing people into absolute and oppositional categories certainly simplifies things, but it can obscure the complexity of human life and lead us to underestimate the effects of the overlapping contexts that envelop us all. Social psychologists term this the "fundamental attribution error"—something that happens when we overestimate the extent to which a person's behavior is a product of something "inside" them, while ignoring or underestimating the effect of the

situation and context on a person's actions (Ross 1977). For example, I attribute *your* gossip to your spiteful nature, but *my* gossip to the genuine concern, peer pressure, or full disclosure that explain and legitimate it.

In the Western world, we prize individualism and evaluate our successes and failures by our culture's provincial logic. We like to think we stand alone with our grade point averages, gold medals, and other marks of distinction. Contemporary commercials exploit this individualistic penchant for self. I recently came across an ad informing me about how I can acquire the *lactobacillus bulgaricus* (a healthy bacteria found in yogurt) I deserve. I deserve yogurt? Who knew?! Similarly, and not surprisingly, in efforts to understand disruptive phenomena like riots or protests, we tend to focus our analysis at the individual level. An individual focus supports our *a priori* belief that a "looter" is simply a "bad person," and a bunch of looters are simply a group of "bad people." This summation, typically, leads to further labeling.

Reacting to the violence and unrest that erupted in Minneapolis after Floyd's death, President Trump tweeted "These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen." Whether intended or not, the insult he lobbed was rich with racial overtones and "we/they" bifurcations. The word "thug" has context. In an interview with NPR, John McWhorter, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, explains that today the word "thug" is a "nominally polite way of using the N-word"(McWhorter 2015). Originating in India, the Hindi word "thuggee" referred to cheats or swindlers. The British, who ruled India throughout the 19th and into the mid-20th century, picked up the term and brought it into the English language, and eventually it caught on in the U.S. Until fairly recently, thug meant something like "ruffian," and held little racial meaning.

However, the word thug evolved in the Black community, coming to mean "ruffian with a tinge of affection" for the person so labeled. "A thug in Black people's speech is somebody who is a ruffian, but in being a ruffian is displaying a healthy sort of countercultural initiative, displaying a kind of resilience in the face of racism"(McWhorter 2015). McWhorter observes that the meaning of "thug" can vary considerably with the social location of the one using it, like how the N-word projects radically different meaning when voiced by Whites than by Blacks. This is why President Obama's use of the word "thugs" in relation to the violent protests in Baltimore following Freddie Gray's death in 2015 had different meaning from President Trump's use of the term in 2020. Context matters.

Of course, using the term "thugs" to describe the opportunistic "bad people" who reacted to racial unrest in non-peaceable ways is an example of the stereotyping and oversimplification many of us engage in to make sense of things. Dividing the world into "bad" and "good" is just easier. But do pejorative labels help us understand the complex interplay of inter-group relations in the world we share? I wonder if it might be more helpful to think of troubling behaviors like looting as a reflection/expression of latent tensions and feelings of

deprivation that are bubbling up in the culture. If we're just dealing with "bad" people, the solution to something like looting is simply to restrain "them" with bold pronouncements of "Law and Order" and with violence, both physical and symbolic. Criminologists refer to "lock 'em up" methods of controlling deviancy as "exceptionalist" approaches (i.e., arrest that bad person and incarcerate him/her), and most find such measures woefully inadequate. Exceptionalist solutions are rooted in the fundamental attribution error. If we just name-call, label, and lock up the so-called bad people, we will not have made much progress toward understanding and alleviating the pressures that led to the social disequilibrium in the first place. This is why the Bush-era "war on drugs," and Clinton-era "three strikes" laws have been colossal failures. Both ignore context.

Consider an example of how framing deviance as collective behavior, and thereby avoiding the fundamental attribution error, can increase understanding. On the college campus where I work, "we" the faculty, staff, and administration see first year students staying up way too late and sometimes pulling destructive pranks that damage college property, harm others, and so on. Are "they" bad people? Maybe, but I don't think so. Generally speaking, they turn out to be fine human beings who years later look back on their behaviors as something atypical and a bit embarrassing. But what was going on in their lives at the time they engaged in those dubious behaviors? For one, they had just left home for the first time. Many of the social constraints that had held them in place or restrained them had dissolved almost overnight. Parental oversight and accountability, which likely structured their lives for their first 18 years, was suddenly absent. Additionally, most college pranks take place in groups—they're examples of collective behavior where the group operates as an entity, somewhat independent of the individuals that comprise it. This is why first year students frequently have no idea why they do some of the crazier things that they do!

One explanation for behaviors like pranking is that abrupt shifts in social equilibrium (a sudden change in norms) can overwhelm an individual. I, personally, am quite unlikely to participate in a harmful or destructive prank at my college, or anywhere else. Why not? After all, it might be fun, in the same way road rage is fun! But my behaviors are mostly held in check (they stay pro-social, which of course is a term that defines "pro/good" behavior as that approved by the dominant group) because I'm conformed to and constrained by the various structures that form the web of my life, and do not want to risk compromising or losing them. I'm happily married, I have children, I feel respected in my current employment, I care what people in my church think about me, and so on. At other levels, I'm White, have a graduate degree, have a lot of students under my authority, and most of the people in authority over me look a lot like me... White, male, middle class, educated, and financially secure with an employer-matched retirement account in hand.

My point is that I'm well-adjusted within the social structures (think groups) surrounding me, and they mostly function to help and support me. If, for some reason, these things

dissolve—my wife leaves me, I lose my job, my church is embarrassed about some of my behaviors, my children think I'm weird and don't respect me (this could happen!)—it's conceivable that I would begin acting in disruptive ways. Aren't most of us capable of "acting out," sometimes in destructive ways that minimize or ignore the needs of others? Notice that I did not say that looting, pillaging, and breaking things are fine and good. They're not. But when well-positioned leaders from the majority group disseminate information suggesting that the disruptive behaviors of members of subordinated groups observed during times of incredible cultural strain are the inevitable fruit of "bad people," they commit the fundamental attribution error. Minimizing or ignoring the ways that negative behaviors reflect structural strain and the cultural tension that accompanies it, and failing to inquire into root causes, will simply exacerbate society's problems.

While the fundamental attribution error is generally used to explain individual-level behavior, the "ultimate attribution error" developed by Thomas Pettigrew (1979) employs a similar logic to explain group-level behavior. When we try to understand the behavior of others, we do so as group members, not just as individuals. Consequently, when an in-group member observes an out-group member acting negatively (say, a Black person breaking a white-owned store window during a racially charged protest), the in-group member will negate the importance of situation or context, and instead see the negative behavior as resulting from something "inside" the person. Conversely, if an out-group member exhibits pro-social and positive behavior (say, a Black person sacrificially rushing into a burning building to save a White baby), the in-group member will make an external attribution, concluding that the positive behavior was the result of situational factors or context. To a White, a Black person acting heroically might just represent an exception to the rule – something that would rarely happen under normal circumstances. In this way, in-groups perceive the actions of out-group members through the filter of in-group membership and group loyalty. Regardless of whether they judge the out-group member's behavior as "good" or "bad," the stereotype guiding their perception remains intact. Accordingly, Whites are more likely to refer to Blacks engaged in destructive acts as "thugs," than to members of their own group committing similar acts. We versus they; good citizens pitted against thugs.

In *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, social psychologist Ken Gergen (2009) uses the concept of "dialogic tension" to explain why some people commit acts that others see as immoral. Like what has already been said, he notes how the various relationships in our lives (the social) hold us in tension, preventing us from doing some things, and compelling us to do other things. This idea is a bit frightening because it suggests that "my" morality isn't just a function of "me," but exists in a complex constellation of relationships, social structures, cultural ideals, and various constraints. Gergen notes that in situations where "our" soldiers have committed "atrocities" in situations of conflict, extreme stress, and far away from their "normal" (societal) lives, it's not that those soldiers are degenerates who are deeply flawed as

individuals. Far from it. They've been placed in all but impossible situations where the dialogic tension that holds all of us in check is severely weakened or completely absent. Does such a situation make an otherwise inhumane action "good?" No. But to understand and address what is going on, we must look beyond the individual as a bounded entity. A person like me can scarcely imagine the pressures that the soldiers in my example face "outside" of the constraints of social give and take in the communities they're from. It's easy for me to see my own allegedly "pro-social" morality as a function of personal resolve, rationality, and inner goodness. In the unrest of the summer of 2020, referring to people as thugs overlooks the way that social structures enable and constrain us all, yet in ways that vary considerably by race, gender, and social class. Such labeling feeds into "Law & Order" exceptionalist solutions that stagnate our ability to think about social problems at a level of complexity that might lead to long-term betterment.

I conclude with an observation about violence. People in my social location likely view the summer of 2020 as a time of greater than normal violence that will hopefully dissipate and fade into memory, allowing "us" to return to normal. However, I'm guessing that racial minorities see violence not as an aberration from the normal, but as a constant presence that will not simply disappear if the riots and protests are dispersed. For many people, living amidst violence is a significant feature of everyday life. I'm certain that African Americans and other social minorities are conscious of violence, latent and realized, in ways I can scarcely imagine. During a summer like this one, people like me probably just notice it more because it alters formerly protected spaces where "we" were able to block it out or ignore it. The truth is, it's good for me to be confronted with a disturbing reality that my minority brothers and sisters must attend to day in and day out. When social "unrest" boils over into violence that brushes up against dominant groups in uncomfortable ways, the leaders of those groups typically rush in and suppress it in the name of Law and Order. But in the end, if violence is suppressed but no substantial structural change takes place, then it never really went away – it just shifted back to the formal (legitimated) controls exerted by the dominant group. And the cycle continues.

What can be done to prevent perpetuating the cycle? First, avoid dividing the world into "we" and "they." Second, learn to recognize the fundamental attribution error, and labor to understand the greater complexity that surrounds deviant behavior, and all behavior. Third, abandon pejorative name-calling and employ the respectful language of neighbor, friend, brother, and sister, as we work to connect with, understand, and seek the good of others, especially those very different from us. Finally, dispense with violence in its many forms—in speech, symbols, threats, actions, and in the various social arenas to which you lend your support.

Or… we can keep dividing the world into thugs and good people. We and they. But in the end, that approach, to which the summer of 2020 stands in damning testimony, will destroy us all.

References

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Direct correspondence to Matthew S. Vos at matt.vos@covenant.edu