Chapter Seven

Conformism, Group Behaviour and Collective Identities

1. Introduction

International crimes are, by definition, manifestations of collective violence and are therefore social events. From criminological research we already know that ordinary and common crime is predominantly a social event (Warr 2002) but this is particularly true for forms of collective violence. In chapters 2–5 we discussed the social context in which these crimes are usually committed. In this chapter we will focus on the effect of groups upon individuals and will – as we have done in the previous chapter – draw lessons from social-psychological research which can help us explain why people engage in mass atrocities. Let us however start by saying that obviously not all groups have a negative effect on the individual nor do all groups engage in violence. Nevertheless, some groups do and because group dynamics are sometimes difficult to control, groups might end up showing behaviour which was not foreseen or intended.1 This can be true for small groups like for example a group of youngsters transformed into a violent street gang but it can be equally true for masses committing international crimes. International crimes are group events by definition and therefore we need to study the effect of groups on individuals and the situations in which groups start to discriminate and commit crimes against another group. According to Gupta (2001) who studied political pathology and – what he called the path to collective madness – we need to take both the individual and the collective identity into account when studying mass violence. Gupta defines collective identity as ‘a psychological state where people submerge their identities and assume a group identity; they choose actions that will benefit the group even to the detriment of their individual selves’ (Gupta 2001, xi). Gupta concluded that collective violence is a form of collective ‘madness’ which in turn ‘is a special case of collective identity gone berserk’ (Gupta 2001, xi).

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1 See also Williams’s powerful novel Lord of the Flies (1954).
In the following sections we will first discuss the experiments by Asch (1955) (section 2.1) then we will look more closely into the formation and influence of groups and the social identity theory (section 2.2). We will deal with questions such as: Why are people often so eager to be an accepted member of a group? What is the effect of this desire and to what extent does the group influence the behaviour of an individual? Why do groups often define themselves in juxtaposition to others? In section 2.3 we will describe how groups tend to construct their own social reality and how attribution errors can play a role in such a construction process. In section 2.4 we will see how certain psychological phenomena lead to escalating commitments and ultimately to extreme group behaviour (section 2.5). In section 3 we will discuss the nature of mass movements as these are examples of extreme conformity and group behaviour. In section 3.1 we will describe what happened at a high school in Palo Alto in 1967 when a history teacher tried to make his students experience the attractiveness of mass movements (see The Wave by Rhue 1981). In the sections which follow we will focus on several characteristics of a mass movement: the followers (3.2), the need for an enemy (3.3) and the role of a leader (3.4).

2. The Effect of Others and Especially Groups on Human Behaviour

Within social-psychology it is beyond dispute that man is a social being and that groups are a ‘key element in human experience’ (Baron & Kerr 2003, xii) and ‘play a crucial role in human affairs’ (Baron & Kerr 2003, 1). There are several theories which explain why groups are so important. The conditioning perspective argues that ‘from infancy we learn to depend on others’, see the benefits of joining together and aim for social approval. According to Festinger’s social comparison theory we ‘feel very strong pressure to have accurate views, both about our environment and our abilities. One way to verify our views is to compare our opinions and ability-related performances to those of others. In other words, if physical reality is ambiguous, we create a social reality’ (Baron & Kerr 2003, 2). The social identity theory and self-categorization theory argue that our identity, self-esteem and self-image are dependent on the group to which we belong. According to the social identity view ‘we affiliate with groups in part as a means of feeling good about ourselves’ (Baron & Kerr 2003, 3). The social categorization theory holds that ‘the group categories we belong to can affect our sense of identity’ (Baron & Kerr 2003, 3). According to the exchange theory ‘people gain certain advantages through group membership and, therefore, individuals will try to join those