

Getting the Best and Reducing the Worst in How Humans Act

Myth Busting & Momentum Building *CRU Conference, February, 2007*

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Tacitus¹ writes that after the destruction of Rome, Nero hosted the largest party in the history of the Roman Empire. The writers, playwrights, men of letters, senators, artists, the *crème de la crème* of Roman society were there. As darkness fell on this extravaganza, Nero ordered that the Christian captives be brought in and set alight to provide illumination for the proceedings.

We know Nero was crazy, but what about his guests? You wonder, what kind of mindset would allow you to reach for another canapé and sip from your goblet of wine as another prisoner bursts into flame?

There is a common myth that bad things can only be done by people who are born bad and take sadistic pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering on others. It was thought that the innate evil qualities of Nazi war criminals would be indicated across the various psychological tests given them around the Nuremberg trials. To everyone's surprise, no particular orientation emerged. Indeed the tests showed that they were reasonably well-balanced and very intelligent, not the psycho-pathological monsters everyone was expecting. (Browning, Baumeister)

That evil rests within just a few nasty individuals with twisted and warped minds is but one of the common myths about evil. Because few of us think of ourselves as capable of performing evil we tend to assume that we couldn't knowingly inflict harm on other people. Oh no, our conscience is clear; it's only people like the Nazis or members of Jemaah Islamiyah or Hannibal Lecter who are capable of that.

The evidence however is alarmingly quite different.

Using such works as Christopher Browning's startling investigation² into the actions of a Police Battalion in Poland during WW2 who were responsible either directly or indirectly for the deaths of 37,000 Jewish civilians, we develop another perspective of the possibilities of human nature. Police Battalion 101 was made up of 500 men, mostly composed of retired German policeman and civil servants (rather than specially trained SS) brought in to bring

¹ Book 15 of *The Annals*

² [Ordinary Men: the History of Police Battalion 101.](#)

civil order to captured territories. They found themselves directed to arrest and shoot large numbers of woman and children at point blank range. The Battalion commandant provided an opportunity for each man to decline involvement in the action. Only five stepped forward and were given administrative duties. The rest, being “strong” (and not “weak” like the five), carried out their duties, though often drunk before, during and after. They stuck by each other in carrying out their orders rather than let their comrades down.

How could they live with themselves? Like the guests at Nero’s party how could they be *willingly ignorant* of the suffering of other people and remain unresponsive?

Baumeister (1999)³ speaks of a so great a difference in *perception* between the victim and the perpetrator that he refers to it as a Gap of Magnitude. Perpetrators almost never feel the pain of their victim — witness Mr Ruddock when questioned about his responsibility in the Mrs Alvarez Solon case. No pain is greater than to experience the guilt for what one has done to another. Thus a perpetrator needs to have an already-assembled array of justifications and rationalisations to avoid the pain of guilt. This is why in one study by Kathleen McGraw⁴, it was found that guilt is greatest amongst people who had unintentionally inflicted harm, because they had not the time to amass their rationalisations and reduce their own blame.

The basis for such rationalisations is often tenuous at best and seems to be largely based on fragments of information that can be exaggerated so as to appear plausible to the perpetrator. One member of the Police Battalion took on the role of killing the children because he saw this as saving them from a life of misery without their parents. He was thus releasing them from this pain, much like a saviour. The German word he used to describe his efforts is also used as the word for resurrection.

Of course, the closer one is to a person the more difficult it is to justify harm. No wonder then that harm and violence are often accompanied by efforts to distance the victim. Close identification would typically prohibit acts of harm, but if the person is regarded as an enemy, a threat, or a challenge to one’s way of life, then one is freer to take action against them. Much like the executioners of old who wore black hoods to protect their identity from their intended victim, we can put on a psychological hood that permits us to do things to people we would never tolerate for ourselves or *people like us*. This constitutes the social death of the victim, to become the ‘other’, and opens the door to inhuman treatment.

³ Baumeister, Roy F., *Evil: Inside human violence and cruelty*, Henry Holt, NY 1999.

⁴ McGraw, K.M. (1987). “Guilt following transgression: An attribution of responsibility approach”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 247–256.

Albert Bandura said that “The joys and suffering of those with whom one identifies are more vicariously arousing than are those of strangers or of individuals who have been divested of human qualities.”

Indeed, as a perpetrator one could even claim to be a victim oneself (always a handy ploy), compelled to fight for freedom against the ‘other’ who are the *real* perpetrators — reportedly a common attitude amongst terrorist groups and many governments.

If it is this easy as an individual to rationalize doing harm, then how much easier is it when part of a group? Groups (and who isn’t part of a group) are well known for their potential ability to make members think and do things that they would never contemplate as individuals — either good or bad. There are specific processes that operate from within a group identity to increase the chances harm-doing.(Baumeister 1997, Waller 2002, Volken 2004) Baumeister (1997) identifies four processes:

1. Diffusion of Responsibility

The larger a group, the less responsibility each member feels towards any situation or task. “Diffusion of responsibility” was first coined by Darley and Latane in 1968 as they described the murder of Kitty Genovese who in 1963 was beaten and stabbed for almost an hour in earshot of nearly 40 people. No-one came to her aid. The one caller who did finally call the police, did so only after ringing a lawyer friend to ensure he wouldn’t be held responsible. This was much like the attempted rape of a woman on Spencer Street Station in Melbourne several years ago where over 300 people stood by. Why? Someone *else* will do something about it. (Much like the Manning Theory; Barker & Gump 1964, and Wicker 1973). This suggests that people will be less likely to speak up and say an action is wrong if no one else does. Their judgement is a mirror of that of the group.

2. Deindividuation

Deindividuation refers to the process where people lose awareness of themselves and obtain the identity of the group. They therefore stop considered evaluation of their own part in their actions. Such self evaluation is a necessary feature of self control and restraint. Once self evaluation weakens, so does the capacity to question and restrain one’s own actions, leaving one more open to any externally applied demand. Loyalty to the external entity weakens this further still. Goffman (1961) wrote how the total institution was designed to reduce the identity of its inmates. But here it is group membership that produces a deindividualised identity. In a similar fashion, groups have their own way of forcing conformity and reducing individual distinctions. When potential perpetrators are deindividualised they are freer to (and less guilty of) perform needed group-demanded harmful acts (e.g. some soccer crowds). It was recently estimated that the 720 gangs in Los Angeles with a membership of 39,000 were responsible for 56% of the city’s 478 murders. in 2006. (SMH 3-4 Feb 2007).

3. Division of labour

The death or bad treatment of a person can be the result of dozens of actions of individual people — none of whom needs to feel connected to the final result and therefore responsible for what finally happens. The Australian Department of Immigration is probably a good contemporary example, as is the manner in which American executions are carried out. Adolph Eichmann saw himself as a technician, a faithful administrator, carrying out procedures in as efficient a way as possible. This is why Hannah Arendt who documented the Eichmann trial coined the much quoted phrase of the “banality of evil” because of evil’s almost common and everyday nature; yet it is barely discernable to most. Arendt also discovered that only the “thinnest patina” (about as thick as the glaze on pottery) separates our civil selves from our capacity to inflict harm.

4. Separation of decision makers from those who carry out the decisions

This is a very affective way of dispersing responsibility across both the decision-maker and the executor of the act. Each can say that the other is responsible and therefore retain a clear conscience. The Spanish Inquisition formalised this split so the Church could determine who would die, and then hand the party over to the secular authorities for execution — much like the state determining who should go into detention, with correctional contracting firms carrying out the sentence.

All four of these conditions can be present in an organisation we work for. Yet we are often surprised and shocked to learn that abuse continues in our service. We often think it’s because there is a “bad egg” there, rather than recognising a set of circumstances that “permit” a person to act without restraint.

We have a great many ways to ward off responsibility and hence guilt. We can say *they* are to blame for their predicament, or that what we have in store will be beneficial to *them*. We use many rationalizing and fast-acting tricks that distort how we see the person; it is *never* like the way we see ourselves.

There is a common fallacy, even within academia, that low self-esteem is the root of evil. Build people up and they won’t need to be quite so nasty.

Strange how the opposite can often be true.

For instance, our culture applauds individualism and lack of restraint, yet these very things are the hallmarks of violence (Baumeister 1997). If there is *any* inherited trait that is related to an increased potential for violence, it is *disposition* (Staub 2003). It appears that

individuals with a highly inflated view of themselves (as research on abusive partners indicates) are more prone to commit personal violence.

It is another common myth that violence is perpetrated by people who have “low self-esteem”, when the opposite is more the case (Baumeister 1997). Rather than a culture of more individualism and less restraint, we need a society where self control and personal restraint are encouraged along with a realistic perspective of what we are personally capable of.

Rather than violence and evil belonging to a select group of “nasties,” it is *ordinary* people who, when given the right conditions, do the most widespread harm to others —especially so from a group identity – and for the most part are *not be worried by it*.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*, “If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

What might be done?

Quite clearly, the actions (including statements and comments) of bystanders have one of the most significant impacts in reducing the potential for harm doing. The passive presence of bystanders (such as people who see something and say nothing) is insufficient — and may even reinforce, propel and collude with harm-doing activities.

Contexts where regular acts of giving occur tend to reinforce qualities of empathy and identification with others that can escalate and deepen. If performed on a regular basis, such acts insure against the potential for decreased consciousness about the welfare of other parties — especially if those parties are also devalued by a wider community. (Staub 2003) Helpful actions act as an antidote to harm-doing and neglect, and increase the potential for people to take effective action as bystanders.

Thus, if people have become *passive* bystanders to harm, their own conscience becomes profoundly affected.

Remaining passive bystanders in the face of others’ suffering can create callousness. It is nearly impossible to see great suffering, to do nothing, and continue to feel caring and empathy. To protect themselves from guilt and empathic suffering, individuals and groups that remain passive need to distance themselves from victims. As a result, their passivity may reduce the likelihood of later action by them. (Staub 2003 p367)

To be most effective, one must have decided to take feasible and constructive action *before* any incident has occurred. Acting frequently brings wisdom and foresight, which itself increases the likelihood of later action, even if such action might entail elements of risk, danger or damage to one's own reputation. Clearly, for many people such actions will be easier if they are in a (organizational) context where unilateral constructive action by them as a bystander to any abuse and neglect is expected and rewarded. Yet, if people are allowed to be punished by peers and supervisors for speaking and acting to protect the welfare of service recipients, then most potentially active bystanders will be rendered passive and therefore ineffective. This is why advocacy efforts to protect people must be independent of a service entity if it is to be effective, because associations, connections and loyalties to other parties break down the willingness and capacity to take effective action. The great majority of Police Battalion 101 acted as they did out of a misguided loyalty *to each other!*

There are many role options available for active bystanders; commentator, reminder of ideals, model of good practice, refuser to participate, intervener. The whistleblower is often the least effective role for an active bystander. However, bystander action is based on doing what is right, not so much on what is expected to work.

One of the most significant safeguards for people's welfare is to craft and support valued social roles for service recipients that address not only the low status service recipients had formerly been given, but that also provide beneficial reciprocal roles for staff to occupy that facilitate caring and a growth orientation rather than empty and passive roles that can enable distance, disdain and much potential for harm-doing.

Related to valued social roles is the dramatic contribution of a freely given relationship by at least one valued person to the ultimate welfare and treatment of another person. Such commitments when made afford the protection that is available only from this type of relationship; there can be no substitute. While the actions of paid staff as active bystanders can have great effect, in some destructive contexts the staff can also be dispensed with easily by being threatened, transferred, sacked and/or bullied. The independence of a friend who does not acquiesce even if threatened, has greater intrinsic capacity to endure because their potential action is not distorted by organisational allegiances. It's alarming (though not surprising) that we still witness too many organisations failing to recognise, honour and especially facilitate these relationships, in spite of much rhetoric to the contrary.

Disability-related abuse literature (e.g. Sherry, Sobsey) recommends that persons be empowered to "advocate for themselves" or just "say no!" when facing the potential for abuse. This is sometimes suggested as *the* major means of protection. Genocide studies tend not to bear this out. Individual resistance is most often put down with brutal force, though collective action if it can be mustered and organized has sometimes been effective,

even though it is likely some or many will be killed in the process. The issue may be more about the *fear* that generally immobilizes a victim. Notice how passively the vast majority of Jews went to their deaths. A small number of organized uprisings have saved only a few lives (Warsaw, Sobibor etc). Again, it's the potency of external forces that ultimately makes a difference. Notice the escalation of killing in Rwanda in the face of western passivity. (However, some believe (Waller 2002) that victim fear and passivity may reinforce some perpetrators into thinking that victims also recognise the appropriateness and need for their own eradication or harm.)

A related feature of abuse and neglect is that it is frequently accompanied by deception. It is often disguised as being beneficial, for one's own good, according to standard policies, in one's best interest, and otherwise necessary for the common good or the "way things are done here". It is not surprising then that victims and their allies have to navigate the corridors of deceptive procedures, denials, claims of misunderstandings and powerful rhetoric to the contrary. To generally expect victims — many with an intellectual disability — to be the vanguard of resistance is, in the mind of this writer, to pacify potentially active bystanders, thereby condemning victims to their fate.

Other people have to *act*. It has always been the case.

From this perspective we can recognise the need to become personally vigilant to the forces that shape our actions and strive to maintain what Wolfensberger calls "Personal Moral Responsibility." Rather than adhering slavishly to protocols, policies, procedures and regulations that might fuel rather than reduce harm-doing, we must develop an attuned conscience driven by a perspective that says *every* person, irrespective of ability, living conditions, age, appearance, gender or degree of suffering they cause to others, has the same worth as all other people — and that we must resist anything that causes them harm.

Our actions can have enormous effect, and as we support the people we know, they are hoping we are putting the head and heart together in such a way that we can take personal responsibility for our actions and respond to a well-exercised conscience in order to protect people. It is either that or becoming "willingly ignorant" and given the right circumstances, capable of almost anything.

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