

Why do 'good' people do bad things? by Jane Ritchie

Thanks to the national campaigns such as the Dignity Champions and Dementia Friends, care workers and the public are starting to think about how we can build on the work of Thomas Kitwood who gave us the true philosophy of person centered care. The work of the Care Quality Commission seems to now be really focusing on malignant abusive care and under the new KLOEs (Key Lines of Enquiry) it is obvious that 'Dignity' is at the forefront of every inspection they undertake.

As a Care Home Manager I have a vested interest into understanding why good people forget about dignity. The abusive events of Winterbourne and Mid Staffordshire NHS are a real possibility in my line of work with me as the manager having the ultimate responsibility for people I employ. Every time a whole organization is put under the spotlight as being abusive, we, the public, conjure up character villains for the staff members working in these environments. We think to ourselves they must have had bad upbringings or have some kind of cruel sickness.

In my experience nothing could be further from the truth. Two experiments that have proven this is the Milgrams experiment (1961) and the Stanford Prison experiment (1971). Although both these experiments are considered unethical in today's codes of conduct, what we have learnt from them cannot be ignored.

The Milgram experiment wanted to look at why the Nazis committed the terrible crimes in WW2. How could a whole country invest in the murder of thousands of people? Every Nazi 'tried' after the war gave the same story in their defense. 'I was told to do it'. Milgram re-enacted the same power divide by having people sign up to an experiment which they thought was to test memory. The signed up person was asked to act as a 'teacher' and was supervised by a man in a white coat who oversaw the experiment. In a room that could not be seen by the 'teacher', a test subject (who was actually an actor) was asked complicated questions. If they got the questions wrong they had to be 'electrically shocked' by the teacher. For every question answered incorrectly, a higher volt of electricity would be administered to the subjects. The buttons were clearly marked after 300V as being dangerous and fatal at 450V. The results of this experiment were consistent every time they did it and with masses of people from different cultures, age and backgrounds. 100% of 'teachers' gave a dangerous volt of electricity to the subjects when told to do so by the man in the white coat. 65% (two thirds) of 'teachers' thought they had killed the subject after being told to administer 450V. Each teacher was not happy to hurt the subjects but when told to do so they did. Each 'teacher' felt they were not accountable for their actions.

The Stanford University Prison experiment saw a group of volunteers split into two groups. The experiment was to see the behavior and dynamic of prison life. One group would be the prison wardens the other group would be the prisoners. A pretend prison was made in the basement of the university and the two groups were told to go about daily life in their roles. It's important to note that all participants in this study were healthy middle class males that signed up for a small fee. A strict criterion was in place to ensure no candidates had any mental health issues. On the first day the prisoners were stripped and deloused as many prisons did in the 1970s and the prison wardens were given uniforms. By the second day the prisoners revolted trying to assert their independence, the response by the guards was to meet this revolt with force. Abuse acts of setting the fire extinguisher on the

prisoners, beating the prisoners with clubs, withholding food, setting the prisoners against each other and withholding toilet privileges all occurred. The effect of this control on the prisoners was surprising. They soon backed down, became submissive, depressed and dependent on the guards. Even when the prisoners were better behaved the prison wardens continued their abuse in stance of showing control. This experiment became so out of control that it was stopped after five days. Following the experiment even the 'good' guards reported that they felt helpless to intervene when the prisoners were being abused.

So why is it important to keep 'Dignity' in mind at all times? Unfortunately it appears to be human nature to be abusive to others in certain situations, this nature is subliminal and it happens to 'good' people. These people are generally not villains that get portrayed on soap operas but are people like you and me. When put in places of power over vulnerable people we naturally revert to use controlling tactics either because were told to or feel we have to. If you as care givers or members of the public are not conscious of your ability to be an abusive person, you will become one of them. The moment a person 'dehumanizes' another person as not being of equal value the brain will give permission subconsciously to abuse that other person as a means to gain control. The only way to avoid repeats of these experiments in real life is to not be naive to this fact. Becoming a Dignity Champion keeps the idea alive of 'how' to avoid these behaviors.

In the future, more needs to be done in implementing the 'Dignity Dos' into the psyche of everyone in contact with vulnerable people. Good people can forget 'Dignity' principles unless they are asked to think about them regularly by assessing their own practice, being helped to reflect with supervisors and being honest with their colleagues. Only then can we move forward into the principles of care we strive for.

Further reading and research

- Milgram, Stanley (1974). Obedience to Authority; An Experimental View. Harpercollins. ISBN 0-06-131983-X
- "How Violent Are You?". Horizon. Series 45. Episode 18. BBC. BBC Two. Retrieved 8 May 2013.
- "The Heist" Derren Brown <http://derrenbrown.co.uk/on-tv/2006-2004/#the-heist>
- The Stanford Prison Experiment – A Simulation Study of the Psychology of Imprisonment Conducted at Stanford University <http://www.prisonexp.org/conclusion>
- 'John Wayne' (name withheld) Interview: 'The Science of Evil'. Primetime: Basic Instincts (KATU). January 3, 2007.
- Dignity Dos http://www.dignityincare.org.uk/About/The_10_Point_Dignity_Challenge/

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