

"I am a torturer....."

One of the distinctive features of the Quaker Concern for the Abolition of Torture (Q-CAT) is that we include our concern for the effect torture has not only on the victims but also on the perpetrators, those who make the decisions, and the wider society which condones torture. In this Briefing we will look at these aspects of torture, which are often overlooked.

In their study "The Effects and Effectiveness of Using Torture as an Interrogation Device: Using Research to Inform the Policy Debate" (2009) Mark Constanzo and Ellen Gerrity pointed out the relative rarity of research on the effects of torture on the perpetrators.¹ Research has, however, been carried out on specific experiences of victims who have been forced into a perpetrator role (including, for example, child soldiers). The case of child soldiers is an extreme example of the impact of torture on the perpetrators. According to Human Rights Watch (2008) and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2004), tens of thousands of children under 18 are taking part in military conflicts world-wide. Often vulnerable children are abducted and forced to commit murder and other atrocities. In a study of former child soldiers (Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007), children reported being violently recruited at an average of 12 and having been involved as soldiers for an average of three years, with exposure to high levels of potentially traumatic events. This study, and other work (Kohrt et al., 2008), reveal severe mental health problems amongst these children, including depression and PTSD, and ongoing challenges and problems in resuming a more "normal" life.

A study by Robert Jay Lifton in 1986 found that Nazi doctors who had participated in human experimentation and killings seemed to be "normal professionals" who offered medical justifications for their actions. Lifton concluded that the effect of such an "atrocities-producing" environment could make a perpetrator believe that their behaviour is normal, even valued. Only later, outside that specific environment, the torturer might question their behaviour and begin to experience psychological damage, the resulting symptoms being very similar to those of victims, including anxiety, intrusive traumatic memories, and impaired cognitive and social functioning.

Doctors and other health providers are sometimes involved in military interrogation. This is often linked with assigning a role of authority and power, and the health professionals may avoid conflict with their core loyalties by convincing themselves that their actions are legitimate, for example, as part of the ongoing "war on terror". They thus abandon their professional oaths and beliefs and take on the values of the institution or the group which is promoting the torture. This is reinforced by the granting of immunity so that the perpetrators are not prosecuted for their actions.

The first set of guidelines for the documentation of torture and its consequences is the **Manual on Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**, commonly known as the **Istanbul Protocol**. It became an official United Nations Document in 1999.²

Physicians for Human Rights, in their Toolkit on the Istanbul Protocol, identify different groups who might find themselves in the position of inflicting torture or other inhumane and degrading treatment.³ They list those who might act on behalf of the state, such as *police, military, state intelligence agents, paramilitary forces or other armed groups acting in connection with official forces, state-controlled counter-insurgency forces, prison officers, private contractors carrying out*

1 <http://bit.ly/1zRC9D1>

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istanbul_Protocol

3 <http://bit.ly/24NFLH9>

any of the above activities and co-detainees or other members of the general population acting with the acquiescence of or on the orders of public officials. In this category of “state actors” they include health professionals who might provide medical monitoring or certify someone fit for interrogation. In some cases they might even use their medical knowledge to design or refine methods of torture or other ill-treatment or issue misleading medical reports.

The handbook also acknowledges that torture often occurs in the context of armed conflicts, especially such as involve forces which are in opposition to the official authorities but which exercise effective power.

There are thus many different situations where people can be drawn into becoming perpetrators of torture. Thousands of people are involved, but only a few are brave enough to tell their story.

In an article in the Washington Post following the U.S. Senate's 2014 report on CIA interrogation methods, it was pointed out that “85 percent of [the rank and file] were contractors, few had actual interrogation experience, and that “numerous” agents had “serious documented personal and professional problems” that “should have called into question” their continued employment by the CIA and access to classified information. We also know that they used some of the most disturbing interrogation techniques in American history.”⁴ This raises questions about legal responsibility, state security, and the upholding of the law. The question also arises of what they were torturing for – to punish, bully and break people, rather than to seek information?

The same article cites the research Professor Darius Rejali, author of “Torture and Democracy” and many articles on different aspects of this subject. According to his analysis, people do not start out as torturers; they are chosen because they are patriotic, and they can keep secrets. Ever since the famous Milgram experiments of 1963, we have known that most individuals are prepared to inflict pain on others under certain circumstances.⁵ Rejali's research has shown that those who are expected to torture over a period of time start competing with each other over who will be first to break the person being interrogated. But interrogation is hard work, and the U.S. army needs to train large numbers – 1200 in 2006 alone. The interrogators suffer from burn-out while taking part in the torture, and also frequently from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for a long time afterwards.

Those who are at the top, making the decisions, are bolstered by the approval of their peers; those at the bottom, who carry out the orders, are often more alone. Only a few of the perpetrators are prepared to speak about what they have done, and their self-enforced secrecy only magnifies the shame and guilt, something which they find that they cannot live with afterwards. In his book “*None of us were like that before: American soldiers and torture*”, Joshua Phillips relates the stories of soldiers who had abused Iraqi detainees. On their return home, three in Phillips' unit committed suicide, and one said that he would have had no reintegration problems if he had not taken part in activities such as dragging prisoners through concertina wire on the floor.⁶ The soldiers had belonged to a tank battalion, trained for conventional combat, but were instructed to switch their focus to guerrilla war and prisoner detention. One review described it the book as “a journey into the heart of American darkness... the misbehaviour of some of our best soldiers....came about because of a failure of military leadership and because political leaders lacked the courage to admit the word 'torture'”.

What makes people agree to become torturers?

Ever since the Milgram experiments, we have known that people will inflict pain on others at the request of someone whom they regard as an authority figure. Jerrold Post, director of the political

4 <http://wapo.st/21Yurpj>

5 <https://explorable.com/stanley-milgram-experiment>

6 <http://noneofuswerelikethisbefore.com/book/>

psychology programme at George Washington University in the USA, spent 21 years with the CIA, where he founded and directed the Center for the Analysis of Personality and Political Behaviour. Although he does not discuss his former work, he has cited three conditions which allow people to become torturers: authorisation, routinisation, and dehumanisation.⁷ Euphemisms such as “enhanced interrogation techniques” help the perpetrators to believe that torture is an accepted practice. While “dehumanisation” is the term used for the way in which the perpetrators are encouraged to see the victims as evil, and less than human, it could also be used to describe the process whereby the qualities of humanity and empathy are gradually peeled away from the perpetrators.

A vivid account of what it feels like to have been a torturer is given on the website *The Good Democrat*: *I was to deprive the detainee of sleep during my 12-hour shift by opening his cell every hour, forcing him to stand in a corner and stripping him of his clothes. Three years later the tables have turned. It is rare that I sleep through the night without a visit from this man. His memory harasses me as I once harassed him..... Despite my best efforts, I cannot ignore the mistakes I made at the interrogation facility in Fallujah. I failed to disobey a meritless order, I failed to protect a prisoner in my custody, and I failed to uphold the standards of human decency. Instead, I intimidated, degraded and humiliated a man who could not defend himself. I compromised my values. I will never forgive myself.*⁸

More graphic descriptions of the effect on the perpetrator are provided in the Washington Post as long ago as 2007.⁹ The article “The Tortured Lives of Interrogators” describes how the trainee torturers were encouraged to admire “tough” methods while at the same time being reminded of the Geneva Conventions. Putting these methods into practice has left the perpetrators with guilt, fear, and physical symptoms which can last a lifetime.

This is what soldiers are being asked to do. Whatever our view of the armed forces in general, if young men and women sign up to take part in conventional combat, we must not accept that they will be degraded to such an extent that they will become dehumanised themselves and will have to live with the consequences for the rest of their lives. Whether or not we are talking about face-to-face interrogation, or the less obvious difficulties experienced by those who operate drones thousands of miles away from their victims, it is incumbent upon us to address the issues raised both for the individuals and for any society which colludes and condones with torture.

What can we do?

Torture is a secret activity, and the negative effects on the perpetrators are probably the most secret aspect. One UK group which speaks out about this is **Veterans for Peace**, which has members who as well as being ex-military are also now members of the Society of Friends. They welcome requests to speak to groups, especially in schools – so please contact them if you think you could make use of their expertise.

A recent report in the Independent revealed that the UK government is suppressing documents which provide information about British involvement in rendition and torture. Read the article, and contact your MP to ask for further information. Use this link for further information:

<http://ind.pn/1RulgV1>

And finally: Do not give up.

Continued.....

7 <http://wapo.st/1QDBxf1>

8 <http://bit.ly/21iGonz>

9 <http://wapo.st/1Q15Z4d>

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The next Newsletter is planned for early June
The next Briefing is planned for mid July

Two further items which need publicising before the next Newsletter:

Call by Amnesty International UK for an independent judge-led inquiry into UK complicity in torture

A.I. writes:

“ It is more than five years since the Prime Minister promised to establish an independent inquiry into allegations of UK involvement in torture and other human rights violations in the context of counter-terrorism operations. The government has not ruled out the possibility of an independent judge-led inquiry, pending the findings of the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), which has been tasked with investigating these allegations. Amnesty is concerned that the ISC does not have the power or the independence from government to meet the UK’s human rights obligations, and is therefore not participating in its investigations. We and all our key partner NGOs believe a proper judge-led inquiry is essential and should be ordered now. We want to keep the pressure up until the ISC reports, so that the government knows that this issue has not gone away. The release from Guantanamo Bay of Shaker Aamer, and his allegations that a UK agent was in the room when he was abused, has brought the subject of UK involvement in torture back into the media spotlight, but we need to show that this is also an area of concern for the UK public.”

Q-CAT very much supports this call for an inquiry and encouraged you to sign the online petition at www.amnesty.org.uk/tortureinquiry .

Will you be at Britain Yearly Meeting? We hope you can make time for this

To be premiered on Saturday 28th May at 5.30 – 6.30 in Drayton House (entrance at the opposite end of Friends House from the Garden Entrance):

‘Feeding the Darkness’ – Shining a light on State-Sanctioned Torture Through Story, Poem and Song

Q-CAT Trustees have commissioned this performance from Journeymen Theatre. It uses both verbatim and lightly fictionalised (faction) material to portray and explore the impact of this dark trade on victims, their families, colluding bodies and perpetrators – and indeed on the unwitting support our ignorance and avoidance can give to those who sanction the use of torture, including ways in which we can work towards ‘shining a light’ into these dark corners.

After BYM Journeymen Theatre will tour with this production to Quaker or wider groups, on request. www.journeymentheatre.com info@journeymentheatre.com