

Stanford Prison Experiment

The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil. Philip Zimbardo.



In the summer of 1971, a young social psychologist named Philip Zimbardo set up a mock prison in the basement of Stanford University's psychology building. The 24 subjects he had selected for the two-week experiment he was planning were mostly middle-class, educated, college-age men who happened to be in Palo Alto for the summer. At the outset all were deemed to be "normal" on the basis of personality tests and their conduct in clinical interviews. They were to be paid \$15 a day for their participation.

Zimbardo assigned each subject to be a prisoner or guard by flipping a coin. There were no measurable personality differences between the two groups when the experiment began. Zimbardo played the role of warden himself. The researchers were initially concerned that subjects wouldn't take the experiment seriously enough.

They needn't have been. To everyone's astonishment, the two groups quickly came to act like their real-life counterparts. The prisoners became despondent; some broke down. In less than 36 hours, one had to be released because of extreme depression, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying and fits of rage. Over the next three days, three more prisoners were let go because they exhibited similar symptoms of anxiety. A fifth prisoner was discharged when he developed a psychosomatic rash over his entire body, an apparent reaction to the rejection of his parole appeal by the mock parole board.

The guards' behavior was even more disturbing. All flexed their power to one degree or another. They made the prisoners obey trivial, often inconsistent rules and forced them to perform tedious, pointless work, such as moving cartons from one closet to another or continuously picking thorns out of blankets (an unpleasant task the guards created by dragging the blankets through thorny bushes). The inmates were made to sing songs or laugh or stop smiling on command; to curse and malign one another publicly; to clean out toilets with their bare hands. They were required to sound off their numbers repeatedly and to do endless push-ups, occasionally with a guard's foot or that of another prisoner on their backs.

The inmates became so engulfed in the situation that, during the mock parole board hearing, a majority of them said they would forfeit the money they were owed in exchange for release. Had they forgotten they were in an experiment in the psychology building at Stanford University, not a real prison, and were owed their daily salary whether they quit or not? Even Zimbardo became myopically trapped in his role as warden. He began worrying more about malingering prisoners and the prevention of prison breaks than about the wave of insanity his experiment had set in motion. When a woman Zimbardo was involved with who had recently received her doctorate and was helping out with the project finally made him realize how far out of hand things had gotten, the study was aborted. It had lasted just six days and nights.

The Stanford Prison Experiment has become a cornerstone of social psychology. Along with Stanley Milgram's studies of obedience to authority—the "shock experiments"—Zimbardo's investigation is considered one of the most important pieces of research demonstrating the field's core tenet: that situations may be more powerful determinants of behavior than the personality traits of the people involved. What happened at Stanford makes it clear that insane situations can create insane behavior even in normal people.

Zimbardo's remarkable experiment is at the center of his equally remarkable book, *The Lucifer Effect*. Why a new book about a 35-year-old study? Zimbardo presents the research in greater detail and texture than ever before. He provides a wealth of new interpretations and new material— anecdotes, entries from the diaries of prisoners and guards, updates on the lives of the participants, and documentation of the consequences his findings have had for real-world prison policy.

Perhaps more important, the passage of time offers him a larger canvas—disturbingly large—on which to apply the lessons of the experiment. In the second half of the book, he delves into a profusion of contemporary small- and large-scale evils. He investigates, for example, the fraudulence of executives at Enron and WorldCom, the sexual abuse of parishioners by Catholic priests, the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, systematic programs of police and military torture in a number of countries, the mass suicides at Jonestown, and the genocides in Rwanda and elsewhere. Zimbardo convincingly explains how each of these evils mirrors the lessons of the Stanford Prison Experiment and might to some extent have been avoided had those lessons been learned more successfully.

The book chronicles one disaster after another in which typically good people succumbed to the psychological forces of the situation, with the worst possible results; and how, in each case, those in power invariably drew the mistaken conclusion that the pathologies were the result of a few bad apples—when in fact the bigger problem was the nature of the barrel they were placed in. This type of misperception doesn't surprise social psychologists. Indeed, it is so common that it is known in the discipline as the "fundamental attribution error": the tendency when explaining the behavior of others—especially behavior that leads to no good—to overestimate the importance of personality traits and underestimate the power of situational forces.

Most notably, Zimbardo analyzes the infamous sadistic acts carried out by U.S. military personnel in Abu Ghraib prison. This section alone is worth the price of the book. Not only is it extraordinarily detailed, both psychologically and otherwise, it also offers the chilling perspective of an insider, Staff Sergeant Chip Frederick, a supervisor on the night shift at Abu Ghraib and one of the primary villains in the abuse scandal. Zimbardo was an expert witness at Frederick's court-martial and came to know the defendant and his family well. By the time Zimbardo has finished describing Frederick's transformation from idealistic soldier to abuser, Abu Ghraib feels eerily indistinguishable from the Stanford Prison Experiment. It is as if the Iraqi prison had been designed by twisted social psychologists who wanted to replicate Zimbardo's experiment using real guards and prisoners.



Zimbardo has a well-earned reputation for tackling large and complex problems. In this book, he takes on nothing less than the psychology of evil itself. More specifically, he focuses on the social forces that elicit evil actions. Zimbardo doesn't deny that some truly evil people exist in the world. However, most of the damage humans have caused one another could not have occurred without the active participation of large numbers of everyday individuals. Hitler could not have carried out his killing program without the participation of hundreds of thousands of ordinary German citizens. Most of the approximately 900,000 Tutsis who were slaughtered in a three-month period in 1994 in Rwanda were attacked by machete-wielding death squads composed of their neighbors, the Hutus. These evils can't be explained away as the work of a few psychopaths.

It is the commonplace, ordinary potential for acting badly that Zimbardo targets. He uses the term "Lucifer effect" to describe the transformation of good into evil, as epitomized by the story of the metamorphosis of Lucifer, God's favorite angel, into Satan. Certainly individuals differ in how great a tendency they have to act badly. But a half-century of research in social psychology has conclusively demonstrated that even subtle features of a situation often bring out the worst in people. It is typical for human beings to behave badly in certain circumstances. This is what Hannah Arendt, at Adolf Eichmann's trial, famously labeled "the banality of evil."

What, Zimbardo asks, leads ordinary people to do bad things, things they never would have imagined doing? Most evil-doing, it becomes depressingly clear, is driven by rather ordinary social-psychological reactions. Zimbardo offers an extensive list and discussion of the toxic situational forces and normal psychological reactions to them that tend to activate the Lucifer effect. He provides a detailed, intelligent and workable program for resisting unwanted social influence, highlighting dangers and offering tangible prescriptions for neutralizing negative effects. There are, for example, mini-tutorials on how to distinguish between just and unjust authorities, on being careful not to sacrifice one's freedom for the illusion of security, and on learning to recognize when, where and how to stand up to unjust systems.

The book is packed with the findings of social psychologists working both inside and outside the laboratory. But it is much more than a textbook of applied social psychology. Throughout, Zimbardo argues with passion and acumen that the general public and our political and cultural leaders must learn to overcome the knee-jerk psychological reactions that lead us to make the same errors over and over again. He assigns blame where it is due (including to himself, for having crossed ethical lines in the Stanford Prison Experiment) and takes strong political stances. This important book should be required reading not only for social scientists, but also for politicians, decision makers, educators and just about anyone else disturbed by the self-destructive directions in which the United States and the rest of the world seem to be moving.