

"What makes good people do bad things?"

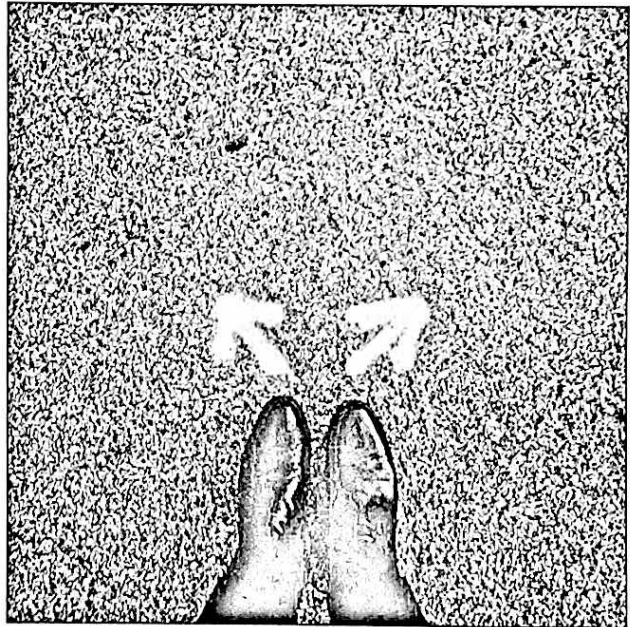
By Melissa Dittman

2004

In 1971, Phillip Zimbardo, a psychology professor at Stanford University, oversaw an infamous experiment called the Stanford Prison Experiment. In this article, Zimbardo discusses his conclusions regarding human nature.

- [1] As the story goes, Dr. Jekyll uses a chemical to turn into his evil alter ego, Mr. Hyde.¹ In real life, however, no chemical may be needed. Instead, just the right dose of certain social situations can transform ordinarily good people into evildoers. This was the case with Iraqi prisoner abusers at Abu Ghraib,² argued former APA president Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD, in a presidential-track program during APA's 2004 Annual Convention in Honolulu.

Indeed, Zimbardo — an emeritus³ psychology professor at Stanford University — highlighted how this Mr. Hyde transformation occurred among U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib by presenting classic psychology research on situational effects on human behavior. Zimbardo, who will be an expert witness for several of the U.S. soldiers on trial, argued that situations pull people to act in ways they never thought imaginable.



"Untitled" by Jon Tyson is licensed under CC0.

"That line between good and evil is permeable,"⁴ Zimbardo said. "Any of us can move across it... I argue that we all have the capacity for love and evil — to be Mother Theresa, to be Hitler or Saddam Hussein. It's the situation that brings that out."

1. The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886) is a book by Robert Louis Stevenson about a good man, Dr. Jekyll, who experiments and transforms into the evil Mr. Hyde.
2. Members of the U.S. Army and CIA committed a series of human rights violations against Iraqi prisoners of the Abu Ghraib prison. News of torture and other crimes became public in 2003.
3. having retired but allowed to retain their title as an honor
4. **Permeable** (*adjective*) fluid; able to be passed-through

Seduced into evil

In fact, the classic electric shock experiment by social psychologist Stanley Milgram, PhD, showed that when given an order by someone in authority, people would deliver what they believed to be extreme levels of electrical shock to other study participants who answered questions incorrectly.

[5] Zimbardo said the experiment provides several lessons about how situations can foster evil:

1. Provide people with an **ideology** to justify beliefs for actions.
2. Make people take a small first step toward a harmful act with a minor, trivial action and then gradually increase those small actions.
3. Make those in charge seem like a "just authority."
4. Transform a once compassionate leader into a dictatorial figure.
5. Provide people with vague and ever-changing rules.
6. Relabel the situation's actors and their actions to **legitimize the ideology**.
7. Provide people with social models of **compliance**.
8. Allow dissent,⁵ but only if people continue to **comply** with orders.
9. Make exiting the situation difficult.

Particularly notable, Zimbardo said, is that people are seduced⁶ into evil by dehumanizing⁷ and labeling others.

"They semantically⁸ change their perception of victims, of the evil act, and change the relationship of the aggressor to their aggression — so 'killing' or 'hurting' becomes the same as 'helping,'" he said.

For example, in a 1975 experiment by psychologist Albert Bandura, PhD, college students were told they'd work with students from another school on a group task. In one condition, they overheard an assistant calling the other students "animals" and in another condition, "nice." Bandura found students were more apt to deliver what they believed were increased levels of electrical shock to the other students if they had heard them called "animals."

People's aggression can also increase when they feel anonymous — for example if they wear a uniform, hood or mask, Zimbardo said.

[10] "You minimize social responsibility," he explained. "Nobody knows who you are, so therefore you are not individually **liable**. There's also a group effect when all of you are masked. It provides a fear in other people because they can't see you, and you lose your humanity."

5. **Dissent** (*noun*) disagreement with an accepted opinion or belief; opposition to a decision
6. **Seduce** (*verb*) to persuade someone to do something by making it seem attractive, tempting, and interesting
7. **Dehumanize** (*verb*) to treat people as though they are not human; without dignity or respect
8. referring to word choice and the meaning of words

For example, an experiment in 1974 by Harvard anthropologist John Watson evaluated 23 cultures to determine whether warriors who changed their appearance — such as with war paint or masks — treated their victims differently. As it turned out, 80 percent of warriors in these cultures were found to be more destructive — for example, killing, torturing or mutilating their victims — than unpainted or unmasked warriors.

What's more, a person's anonymity can be induced by acting in an anonymity-conferring environment that adds to the pleasure of destruction, vandalism and the power of being in control, Zimbardo noted.

"It's not just seeing people hurt, it's doing things that you have a sense that you are controlling behavior of other people in ways that you typically don't," Zimbardo said.

Zimbardo noticed that in his own simulated jail experiment in 1971 — the Stanford Prison Experiment — in which college students played the roles of prisoners or guards, and the guards became brutal and abusive toward prisoners after just six days, leading Zimbardo to prematurely end the experiment. The experiment showed that institutional forces and peer pressure led normal student volunteer guards to disregard the potential harm of their actions on the other student prisoners.

- [15] "You don't need a motive," Zimbardo said. "All you really need is a situation that facilitates moving across that line of good and evil."

Prison abuses

The same social psychological processes — deindividuation, anonymity of place, dehumanization, role-playing and social modeling, moral disengagement, and group conformity — that acted in the Stanford Prison Experiment were at play at Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo argued.

So is it a few bad apples that spoil a barrel? "That's what we want to believe — that we could never be a bad apple," Zimbardo said. "We're the good ones in the barrel." But people can be influenced, regardless of their intention to resist, he said.

As such, the Abu Ghraib soldiers' mental state — such as stress, fear, boredom and heat exhaustion, coupled with no supervision, no training, and no accountability — may have further contributed to their "evil" actions, he noted.

"I argue situational forces dominate most of us at various times in our lives," Zimbardo said, "even though we'd all like to believe we're each that singular hero who can resist those powerful external pressures, like Joe Darby, the whistle-blowing hero of the Abu Ghraib prison."

"What makes good people do bad things?" from Monitor on Psychology, Vol 35, No. 9, © 2004, Melissa Dittmann. Reprinted with permission, all rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license