Finding Hope in Knowing the Universal Capacity for Evil

By CLAUDIA DREIFUS

SAN FRANCISCO — At Philip G. Zimbardo’s town house here, the walls are covered with masks from Indonesia, Africa and the Pacific Northwest.

Dr. Zimbardo, a social psychologist and the past president of the American Psychological Association, has made his reputation studying how people disguise the good and bad in themselves and under what conditions either is expressed.

His Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971, known as the S.P.E. in social science textbooks, showed how anonymity, conformity and boredom can be used to induce sadistic behavior in otherwise wholesome students. More recently, Dr. Zimbardo, 74, has been studying how policy decisions and individual choices led to abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The road that took him from Stanford to Abu Ghraib is described in his new book, “The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil” (Random House).

“I’ve always been curious about the psychology of the person behind the mask,” Dr. Zimbardo said as he displayed his collection. “When someone is anonymous, it opens the door to all kinds of antisocial behavior, as seen by the Ku Klux Klan.”

Q. For those who never studied it in their freshman psychology class, can you describe the Stanford Prison Experiment?

A. In the summer of 1971, we set up a mock prison on the Stanford University campus. We took 23 volunteers and randomly divided them into two groups. These were normal young men, students. We asked them to act as “prisoners” and “guards” might in a prison environment. The experiment was to run for two weeks.

By the end of the first day, nothing much was happening. But on the second day, there was a prisoner rebellion. The guards came to me: “What do we do?”
“It’s your prison,” I said, warning them against physical violence. The guards then quickly moved to psychological punishment, though there was physical abuse, too.

In the ensuing days, the guards became ever more sadistic, denying the prisoners food, water and sleep, shooting them with fire-extinguisher spray, throwing their blankets into dirt, stripping them naked and dragging rebels across the yard.

How bad did it get? The guards ordered the prisoners to simulate sodomy. Why? Because the guards were bored. Boredom is a powerful motive for evil. I have no idea how much worse things might have gotten.

Q. Why did you pull the plug on the experiment?

A. On the fifth night, my former graduate student Christina Maslach came by. She witnessed the guards putting bags over the prisoners’ heads, chain their legs and march them around. Chris ran out in tears. “I’m not sure I want to have anything more to do with you, if this is the sort of person you are,” she said. “It’s terrible what you’re doing to those boys.” I thought, “Oh my God, she’s right.”

Q. What’s the difference between your study and the ones performed at Yale in 1961? There, social psychologist Stanley Milgram ordered his subjects to give what they thought were painful and possibly lethal shocks to complete strangers. Most complied.

A. In a lot of ways, the studies are bookends in our understanding of evil. Milgram quantified the small steps that people take when they do evil. He showed that an authority can command people to do things they believe they’d never do. I wanted to take that further. Milgram’s study only looked at one aspect of behavior, obedience to authority, in short 50-minute takes. The S.P.E., because it was slated to go for two weeks, was almost like a forerunner of reality television. You could see behavior unfolding hour by hour, day by day.

Here’s something that’s sort of funny. The first time I spoke publicly about the S.P.E., Stanley Milgram told me: “Your study is going to take all the ethical heat off of my back. People are now going to say yours is the most unethical study ever, and not mine.”

Q. From your book, I sense you feel some lingering guilt about organizing “the most unethical study” ever. Do you?

A. When I look back on it, I think, “Why didn’t you stop the cruelty earlier?” To stand back was contrary to my upbringing and nature.
When I stood back as a noninterfering experimental scientist, I was, in a sense, as drawn into the power of the situation as any prisoners and guards.

Q. What was your reaction when you first saw those photographs from Abu Ghraib?

A. I was shocked. But not surprised. I immediately flashed on similar pictures from the S.P.E. What particularly bothered me was that the Pentagon blamed the whole thing on a “few bad apples.” I knew from our experiment, if you put good apples into a bad situation, you’ll get bad apples.

That was why I was willing to be an expert witness for Sgt. Chip Frederick, who was ultimately sentenced to eight years for his role at Abu Ghraib. Frederick was the Army reservist who was put in charge of the night shift at Tier 1A, where detainees were abused. Frederick said, up front, “What I did was wrong, and I don’t understand why I did it.”

Q. Do you understand?

A. Yeah. The situation totally corrupted him. When his reserve unit was first assigned to guard Abu Ghraib, Frederick was exactly like one of our nice young men in the S.P.E. Three months later, he was exactly like one of our worst guards.

Q. Aren’t you absolving Sergeant Frederick of personal responsibility for his actions?

A. You had the C.I.A., civilian interrogators, military intelligence saying to the Army reservists, “Soften these detainees up for interrogation.”

Those kinds of vague orders were the equivalent of my saying to the S.P.E. guards, “It’s your prison.” At Abu Ghraib, you didn’t have higher-ups saying, “You must do these terrible things.” The authorities, I believe, created an environment that gave guards permission to become abusive — plus one that gave them plausible deniability.

Chip worked 40 days without a single break, 12-hour shifts. The place was overcrowded, filthy, dangerous, under constant bombardment. All of that will distort judgment, moral reasoning. The bottom line: If you’re going to have a secret interrogation center in the middle of a war zone, this is going to happen.

Q. You keep using this phrase “the situation” to describe the underlying cause of wrongdoing. What do you mean?

A. That human behavior is more influenced by things outside of us than inside. The “situation”
is the external environment. The inner environment is genes, moral history, religious training. There are times when external circumstances can overwhelm us, and we do things we never thought. If you’re not aware that this can happen, you can be seduced by evil. We need inoculations against our own potential for evil. We have to acknowledge it. Then we can change it.

Q. So you disagree with Anne Frank, who wrote in her diary, “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart?”

A. That’s not true. Some people can be made into monsters. And the people who abused, and killed her, were.
The Lucifer Effect raises a fundamental question about the nature of human nature: How is it possible for ordinary, average, even good people to become perpetrators of evil? In trying to understand unusual, or aberrant behavior, we often err in focusing exclusively on the inner determinants of genes, personality, and character, as we also tend to ignore what may be the critical catalyst for behavior change in the external Situation or in the System that creates and maintains such situations. I challenge readers to reflect on how well they really know themselves, and how much confidence they have in what they would or would not ever do when put into new behavioral settings.

This book is unique in many ways. It provides for the first time a detailed chronology of the transformations in human character that took place during the experiment I created that randomly assigned healthy, normal intelligent college students to play the roles of prison or guard in a projected 2 week-long study. I was forced to terminate the study after only 6 days because it went out of control, pacifists were becoming sadistic guards, and normal kids were breaking down emotionally. By telling that story in a new way, as my personal, first-person observation in the present tense, it is presented almost as a screen play filled with ever more amazing twists and turns as the situational forces are pitted against individual will to resist and the collective will to rebel against oppressive authority. In a sense, this study and how I am reporting its narrative, is a forerunner of reality TV, as we see ordinary people up close and personal day in and night out, becoming transformed into something truly disturbing.

The book develops this tale of agony and transformation in a crucible of human nature, doing so slowly and richly (based on typescripts of my archival videos). This extended narrative follows the opening chapter that explains the Lucifer Effect in terms of the cosmic transformation of God’s favorite angel, Lucifer, into Satan as he challenges God’s authority. We shall here be considering less dramatic transformations on a human scale that potentially can engage any of us. I lay the groundwork for the rest of the book by vivid descriptions of torture in the Inquisition, in the massacre in Rwanda, the rape of Nanking, and other venues.
where human nature has run amok. I also provide the initial scaffolding for how the Stanford Prison Experiment may help us make sense of corporate malfeasance, of "administrative evil," and most particularly, the abuse and torture of prisoners by American Military Police in Iraq’s infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

After telling the story of my experiment, done with minimal psychologizing, I outline the lessons and messages from our Stanford study, along with considering its ethics and extensions. Next, we consider the conceptual contributions and research findings from many domains that validate the assertion that situational power is stronger than we appreciate, and may come to dominate individual dispositions. I review classic and current research on: conformity, obedience to authority, role-playing, dehumanization, deindividuation and moral disengagement. I also introduce the "evil of inaction" as a new form of evil that supports those who are the perpetrators of evil, by knowing but not acting to challenge them.

Two chapters are inserted between my telling the tale of 'the little shop of horrors' that I created in the basement of Stanford's psychology department and these twin chapters (12 & 13) on the social science foundations for understanding how powerful but subtle situational forces can seduce people into evil. In chapters 10 and 11, we want to know more about the broader meaning of the Stanford Prison Experiment, (SPE): What evidence was collected besides the observations the reader has looked in on? What does it mean, what are the take-home messages from this research?

A Google search for the word "experiment" uncovers a remarkable phenomenon; out of roughly 300 million results, the Stanford Prison Experiment web site ranks first! For the word "prison," the SPE web site ranks number two out of more than 150 million results worldwide -- second only to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons. That notoriety of this study is traced to examine extensions and replications of the SPE in research, the media, and recently as an art form, with critical analyses of the good and the bad directions that have been taken.

A major contribution of this book resides in its systematic application of the lessons learned from the SPE and social science research to a new understanding of the abuses at Abu Ghraib (chapter 14). I do this by integrating my psychological expertise with the special expertise I gained by being an expert witness for one of the accused Military Policemen involved in the abuses, Sgt Ivan "Chip" Frederick. I have gotten to know him well and, therefore I switched my role into that of investigative reporter as I tracked down his performance evaluations as prison guard in the States, the basis of his 9 medals and awards, corresponding with his family members and engaging psychologists to provide personality and pathology assessments of him. I have also been able to get special insight into the nature of that horrid prison from several personal contacts with military officers who have worked there. As an expert witness, I also had access to many of the independent investigations into these abuses and all of the digitally documented images of depravity that took place on Tier 1A Night Shift. So, in putting Chip Frederick on trial, I give a detailed depiction of what it was like to walk in his boots for 12-hour night shifts without a day off for 40 straight nights.
Chip got sentenced to 8 years of hard time in military prison, was dishonorably discharged, disgraced, and deprived of 22 years of retirement savings, was divorced by his wife and is now a nearly broken man. We see his transformation from good guard to bad guard to prisoner as one instance of the Lucifer Effect. However, in Chapter 15, it is my turn to shift roles again and become the prosecutor who puts the System on trial, the Military Command and the Bush Administration for their complicity in creating the System that established and maintained this and other torture-interrogation centers across many military prisons. Using the many official independent investigative reports as my sources, all of which I have read carefully, I document what they tell us about the seminal cause of the abuses in a leadership that was dysfunctional, irresponsible, conflicting or just absent.

After laying out the extent to which the abuses at Abu Ghraib pale in comparison to the more extremely violent torture and abuses in many other military sites, with testimonies of soldiers who actually took part in them, I decide that it is time for the reader to be juror and to decide whether what took place was merely the work of those 7 "bad apples," or that of a corrupt system, a "rotten barrel," that has sacrificed the basic human values of rule by law, honesty, and adherence to the Geneva Conventions in the cause of its obsession with the so-called "war on terror."

Admittedly, a lot of negative stuff has been coming down in our journey into the heart and mind of darkness! But optimism is around the corner. I end Chapter 15 with an encouraging story of how an Army Colonel, a military psychologist friend of mine, took the DVD of my prison study to Abu Ghraib as a training device to teach the new guards about the corrosive effects of the power in their hands in that remote place. He was sent there to develop new procedures to prevent the recurrence of such abuses—and has done so effectively.

In our final chapter 16, the sun shines again, and lights up the dungeons we've inhabited for the past 15 chapters. Although most people succumb to the power of situational forces, not all do. How do they resist social influence? What kinds of strategies might help the reader to become inoculated against unwanted attempts to get him or her to conform, comply, obey, and yield? I outline a 10-step generic program to build resistance to mind control strategies and tactics. Chapter 16 also presents a thought experiment to involve people in engaging in progressively greater degrees of altruistic deeds that promote civic virtue.

Given that the majority of people in my research and those of my colleagues are impacted by situational forces, it is the minority, the rare person, who resists. I consider them to be heroes. So, I end this long journey with a new understanding of what it means to be heroic. We celebrate heroes and heroism as part of new taxonomy that I have developed, which identifies 12 different types of heroes, with and criteria and exemplars. The first such exemplar takes us back to the SPE, when Christina Maslach, the young woman who forced me to terminate the experiment (and whom, I later married and is the mother of our two daughters). The second is Pvt. Joe Darby, the Abu Ghraib whistle blower who exposed the abuses and tortures taking place, thereby forcing their termination. No one has ever elaborated on the
nature of heroism as I have here. Finally, we end with a novel twist to our long tale. After considering "The banality of evil" as everyman and every woman's potential for engaging in evil deeds despite their generally moral upbringing and pro-social lifestyle, like Adolf Eichmann, I introduce the new concept of: "The Banality of Heroism."

Heroes come in two main casts; life-long heroes, like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and heroes of the moment, such as, whistle blowers, those who perform sudden acts of bravery on the battle field, or of spontaneous courage on the home front. Those heroes of the moment typically have never before done anything else that was memorable, but they responded to the call to service when they heard it. So any of us may come to act heroically by being ready to do the good thing, to help others in need when situational demands give us that rare opportunity. I end with that challenge: When the time comes for you to act the part of the hero, will you be ready for the casting call?

(As a consequence of writing this book and beginning to focus on the positive side of human nature— the heroic imagination— I have begun new research designed to understand the heroic decision at the time of taking a heroic stand against unjust authority; and also to develop a new web site devoted to celebrating heroes and heroism.)

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Book Reviews

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In August of 1971, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo performed an infamous experiment at Stanford University, one whose results still send a shudder down the spine because of what they reveal about the dark side of human nature. In The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil (Random House, $27.95), Zimbardo recalls the Stanford Prison Experiment in cinematic detail. We watch as nice, middle-class young men turn sadistic; the experiment is terminated prematurely due to its characterimploding power. These events shaped the rest of Zimbardo’s career, focusing him on the psychology of evil, including violence, torture, and terrorism. In 2004 he served as an expert witness for the defense in one of the Abu Ghraib court-marshal hearings. Zimbardo gives a detailed analysis of the events at Abu Ghraib in this new book, drawing on social psychology research, the military’s investigative reports, his own interviews, and hundreds of photos never released to the general public. Like Russian poet Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a former prisoner in Stalin’s gulag, he argues that “the line between good and evil is in the center of every human heart.”

Horrific Images of Abuse at Abu Ghraib

In May 2004, we all saw vivid images of young American men and women engaged in unimaginable forms of torture against civilians they were supposed to be guarding. The tormentors and the tormented were captured in an extensive display of digitally documented depravity that the soldiers themselves had made during their violent escapades. The images are of punching, slapping, and kicking detainees; jumping on their feet; forcibly arranging naked, hooded prisoners in piles and pyramids; forcing male prisoners to masturbate or simulate fellatio; dragging a prisoner around with a leash tied to his neck; and using unmuzzled attack dogs to frighten prisoners.

I was shocked, but I was not surprised. The media and the “person in the street” around the globe asked how such evil deeds could be perpetrated by these seven...
men and women, whom military leaders had labeled as "rogue soldiers" and "a few bad apples." Instead, I wondered what circumstances in that prison cellblock could have tipped the balance and led even good soldiers to do such bad things.

Parallel Universes in Abu
Ghraiib and Stanford’s Prison The reason that I was shocked but not surprised by the images and stories of prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraiib "little shop of horrors" was that, three decades earlier, I had witnessed eerily similar scenes as they unfolded in a project that I directed: naked, shackled prisoners with bags over their heads, guards stepping on prisoners' backs as they did push-ups, guards sexually humiliating prisoners, and prisoners suffering from extreme stress. Some images from my experiment are practically interchangeable with those from Iraq.

Not only had I seen such events, I had been responsible for creating the conditions that allowed such abuses to flourish. As the project's principal investigator, I designed the experiment that randomly assigned normal, healthy, intelligent college students to enact the roles of either guards or prisoners in a realistically simulated prison setting where they were to live and work for several weeks. My student research associates and I wanted to understand the dynamics operating in the psychology of imprisonment.

How do ordinary people adapt to such an institutional setting? How do the power differentials between guards and prisoners play out in their daily interactions? If you put good people in a bad place, do the people triumph or does the place corrupt them? Would the violence that is endemic to most real prisons be absent in a prison filled with good middle-class boys?

Anonymity and Deindividuation The enduring interest in the Stanford Prison Experiment over many decades comes, I think, from the experiment's startling revelation of "transformation of character"—of good people suddenly becoming perpetrators of evil as guards or pathologically passive as prisoners in response to situational forces acting on them.

Situational forces mount in power with the introduction of uniforms, costumes, and masks, all disguises of one's usual appearance that promote anonymity and reduce personal accountability. When people feel anonymous in a situation, as if no one is aware of their true identity (and thus that no one probably cares), they can more easily be induced to behave in antisocial ways.

When all members of a group are in a deindividuated state, their mental functioning changes: they live in an expanded-present moment that makes past and future distant and irrelevant. Feelings dominate reason, and action dominates reflection. The usual cognitive and motivational processes that steer behavior in socially desirable paths no longer guide people. It becomes as easy to make war as to make love, without considering the consequences.

At Abu Ghraiib, MP Chip Frederick recalls, "It was clear that there was no
accountability.” It became the norm for guards to stop wearing their full military uniforms while on duty. All around them, most visitors and the civilian interrogators came and went unnamed. No one in charge was readily identifiable, and the seemingly endless mass of prisoners, wearing orange jumpsuits or totally naked, were also indistinguishable from one another. It was as extreme a setting for creating deindividuation as I can imagine.

Dehumanization of prisoners occurred by virtue of their sheer numbers, enforced nakedness, and uniform appearance, as well as by the guards' inability to understand their language. One night shift MP, Ken Davis, later reported how dehumanization had been bred into their thinking: "As soon as we'd have prisoners come in, sandbags instantly on their head. They would flexicuff 'em; throw 'em down to the ground; some would be stripped. It was told to all of us, they're nothing but dogs. . . . You start looking at these people as less than human, and you start doing things to 'em that you would never dream of."

The Stanford Prison Experiment relied on deindividuating silver reflecting sunglasses for the guards along with standard military-style uniforms. The power the guards assumed each time they donned these uniforms was matched by the powerlessness the prisoners felt in their wrinkled smocks. Obviously, Abu Ghraib Prison was a far more lethal environment than our relatively benign prison at Stanford. However, in both cases, the worst abuses occurred during the night shift, when guards felt that the authorities noticed them least. It is reminiscent of Golding's Lord of the Flies, where supervising grown-ups were absent as the masked marauders created havoc.

**Why Situations Matter**

We want to believe in the essential, unchanging goodness of people, in their power to resist external pressures. The Stanford Prison Experiment is a clarion call to abandon simplistic notions of the Good Self dominating Bad Situations. We are best able to avoid, challenge, and change negative situational forces only by recognizing their potential to "infect us" as they have others who were similarly situated. This lesson should have been taught repeatedly by the behavioral transformation of Nazi concentration camp guards, and by the genocide and atrocities committed in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Sudan's Darfur region. Any deed that any human being has ever committed, however horrible, is possible for any of us—under the right circumstances. That knowledge does not excuse evil; it democratizes it, sharing its blame among ordinary actors rather than declaring it the province of deviants and despots—of Them but not Us. The primary lesson of the Stanford Prison Experiment is that situations can lead us to behave in ways we would not, could not, predict possible in advance.

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Book Reviews

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Revisiting the Stanford Prison Experiment: a Lesson in the Power of Situation

By the 1970s, psychologists had done a series of studies establishing the social power of groups. They showed, for example, that groups of strangers could persuade people to believe statements that were obviously false. Psychologists had also found that research participants were often willing to obey authority figures even when doing so violated their personal beliefs. The Yale studies by Stanley Milgram in 1963 demonstrated that a majority of ordinary citizens would continually shock an innocent man, even up to near-lethal levels, if commanded to do so by someone acting as an authority. The "authority" figure in this case was merely a high-school biology teacher who wore a lab coat and acted in an official manner. The majority of people shocked their victims over and over again despite increasingly desperate pleas to stop.

In my own work, I wanted to explore the fictional notion from William Golding's Lord of the Flies about the power of anonymity to unleash violent behavior. In one experiment from 1969, female students who were made to feel anonymous and given permission for aggression became significantly more hostile than students with their identities intact. Those and a host of other social psychological studies were showing that human nature was more pliable than previously imagined and more responsive to situational pressures than we cared to acknowledge. In sum, these studies challenged the sacrosanct view that inner determinants of behavior — personality traits, morality, and religious upbringing — directed good people down righteous paths.

Missing from the body of social-science research at the time was the direct confrontation of good versus evil, of good people pitted against the forces inherent in bad situations. It was evident from everyday life that smart people made dumb
decisions when they were engaged in mindless groupthink, as in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion by the smart guys in President John F. Kennedy’s cabinet. It was also clear that smart people surrounding President Richard M. Nixon, like Henry A. Kissinger and Robert S. McNamara, escalated the Vietnam War when they knew, and later admitted, it was not winnable. They were caught up in the mental constraints of cognitive dissonance — the discomfort from holding two conflicting thoughts — and were unable to cut bait even though it was the only rational strategy to save lives and face. Those examples, however, with their different personalities, political agendas, and motives, complicated any simple conceptual attempt to understand what went wrong in these situations.

I decided that what was needed was to create a situation in a controlled experimental setting in which we could array on one side a host of variables, such as role-playing, coercive rules, power differentials, anonymity, group dynamics, and dehumanization. On the other side, we lined up a collection of the "best and brightest" of young college men in collective opposition to the might of a dominant system. Thus in 1971 was born the Stanford prison experiment, more akin to Greek drama than to university psychology study. I wanted to know who wins — good people or an evil situation — when they were brought into direct confrontation.

First we established that all 24 participants were physically and mentally healthy, with no history of crime or violence, so as to be sure that initially they were all "good apples." They were paid $15 a day to participate. Each of the student volunteers was randomly assigned to play the role of prisoner or guard in a setting designed to convey a sense of the psychology of imprisonment (in actuality, a mock prison set up in the basement of the Stanford psychology department). Dramatic realism infused the study. Palo Alto police agreed to "arrest" the prisoners and book them, and once at the prison, they were given identity numbers, stripped naked, and deloused. The prisoners wore large smocks with no underclothes and lived in the prison 24/7 for a planned two weeks; three sets of guards each patrolled eight-hour shifts. Throughout the experiment, I served as the prison "superintendent," assisted by two graduate students.

Initially nothing much happened as the students awkwardly tried out their assigned roles in their new uniforms. However, all that changed suddenly on the morning of the second day following a rebellion, when the prisoners barricaded themselves inside the cells by putting their beds against the door. Suddenly the guards perceived the prisoners as "dangerous"; they had to be dealt with harshly to demonstrate who was boss and who was powerless. At first, guard abuses were retaliation for taunts and disobedience. Over time, the guards became ever more abusive, and some even delighted in sadistically tormenting their prisoners. Though physical punishment was restricted, the guards on each shift were free to make up their own rules, and they invented a variety of psychological tactics to demonstrate their dominance over their powerless charges.

Nakedness was a common punishment, as was placing prisoners' heads in nylon stocking caps (to simulate shaved heads); chaining their legs; repeatedly waking
them throughout the night for hourlong counts; and forcing them into humiliating "fun and games" activities. Let's go beyond those generalizations to review some of the actual behaviors that were enacted in the prison simulation. They are a lesson in "creative evil," in how certain social settings can transform intelligent young men into perpetrators of psychological abuse.

Prison Log, Night 5

The prisoners, who have not broken down emotionally under the incessant stress the guards have been subjecting them to since their aborted rebellion on Day 2, wearily line up against the wall to recite their ID numbers and to demonstrate that they remember all 17 prisoner rules of engagement. It is the 1 a.m. count, the last one of the night before the morning shift comes on at 2 a.m. No matter how well the prisoners do, one of them gets singled out for punishment. They are yelled at, cursed out, and made to say abusive things to each other. "Tell him he's a prick," yells one guard. And each prisoner says that to the next guy in line. Then the sexual harassment that had started to bubble up the night before resumes as the testosterone flows freely in every direction.

"See that hole in the ground? Now do 25 push-ups [expletive] that hole! You hear me!" One after another, the prisoners obey like automatons as the guard shoves them down. After a brief consultation, our toughest guard (nicknamed "John Wayne" by the prisoners) and his sidekick devise a new sexual game. "OK, now pay attention. You three are going to be female camels. Get over here and bend over, touching your hands to the floor." When they do, their naked butts are exposed because they have no underwear beneath their smocks. John Wayne continues with obvious glee, "Now you two, you're male camels. Stand behind the female camels and hump them."

The guards all giggle at this double-entendre. Although their bodies never touch, the helpless prisoners begin to simulate sodomy by making thrusting motions. They are then dismissed back to their cells to get an hour of sleep before the next shift comes on, and the abuse continues.

By Day 5, five of the student prisoners have to be released early because of extreme stress. (Recall that each of them was physically healthy and psychologically stable less than a week before.) Most of those who remain adopt a zombielike attitude and posture, totally obedient to escalating guard demands.

Terminating the Torment

I was forced to terminate the projected two-week-long study after only six days because it was running out of control. Dozens of people had come down to our "little shop of horrors," seen some of the abuse or its effects, and said nothing. A prison chaplain, parents, and friends had visited the prisoners, and psychologists and others on the parole board saw a realistic prison simulation, an experiment in action, but did not challenge me to stop it. The one exception erupted just before the time
of the prison-log notation on Night 5.

About halfway through the study, I had invited some psychologists who knew little about the experiment to interview the staff and participants, to get an outsiders' evaluation of how it was going. A former doctoral student of mine, Christina Masiach, a new assistant professor at the University of California at Berkeley, came down late Thursday night to have dinner with me. We had started dating recently and were becoming romantically involved. When she saw the prisoners lined up with bags over their heads, their legs chained, and guards shouting abuses at them while herding them to the toilet, she got upset and refused my suggestion to observe what was happening in this "crucible of human nature." Instead she ran out of the basement, and I followed, berating her for being overly sensitive and not realizing the important lessons taking place here.

"It is terrible what YOU are doing to those boys!" she yelled at me. Christina made evident in that one statement that human beings were suffering, not prisoners, not experimental subjects, not paid volunteers. And further, I was the one who was personally responsible for the horrors she had witnessed (and which she assumed were even worse when no outsider was looking). She also made clear that if this person I had become — the heartless superintendent of the Stanford prison — was the real me, not the caring, generous person she had come to like, she wanted nothing more to do with me.

That powerful jolt of reality snapped me back to my senses. I agreed that we had gone too far, that whatever was to be learned about situational power was already indelibly etched on our videos, data logs, and minds; there was no need to continue. I too had been transformed by my role in that situation to become a person that under any other circumstances I detest — an uncaring, authoritarian boss man. In retrospect, I believe that the main reason I did not end the study sooner resulted from the conflict created in me by my dual roles as principal investigator, and thus guardian of the research ethics of the experiment, and as the prison superintendent, eager to maintain the stability of my prison at all costs. I now realize that there should have been someone with authority above mine, someone in charge of oversight of the experiment, who surely would have blown the whistle earlier.

By the time Christina intervened, it was the middle of the night, so I had to make plans to terminate the next morning. The released prisoners and guards had to be called back and many logistics handled before I could say, "The Stanford prison experiment is officially closed." When I went back down to the basement, I witnessed the final scene of depravity, the "camel humping" episode. I was so glad that it would be the last such abuse I would see or be responsible for.

**Good Apples in Bad Barrels and Bad Barrel Makers**

The situational forces in that "bad barrel" had overwhelmed the goodness of most of those infected by their viral power. It is hard to imagine how a seeming game of "cops and robbers" played by college kids, with a few academics (our research team)
watching, could have descended into what became a hellhole for many in that basement. How could a mock prison, an experimental simulation, become "a prison run by psychologists, not by the state," in the words of one suffering prisoner? How is it possible for "good personalities" to be so dominated by a "bad situation"? You had to be there to believe that human character could be so swiftly transformed in a matter of days not only the traits of the students, but of me, a well-seasoned adult. Most of the visitors to our prison also fell under the spell. For example, individual sets of parents observing their son's haggard appearance after a few days of hard labor and long nights of disrupted sleep said they "did not want to make trouble" by taking their kid home or challenging the system. Instead they obeyed our authority and let some of their sons experience full-blown emotional meltdowns later on. We had created a dominating behavioral context whose power insidiously frayed the seemingly impervious values of compassion, fair play, and belief in a just world.

The situation won; humanity lost. Out the window went the moral upbringings of these young men, as well as their middle-class civility. Power ruled, and unrestrained power became an aphrodisiac. Power without surveillance by higher authorities was a poisoned chalice that transformed character in unpredictable directions. I believe that most of us tend to be fascinated with evil not because of its consequences but because evil is a demonstration of power and domination over others.

Current Relevance

Such research is now in an ethical time capsule, since institutional review boards will not allow social scientists to repeat it (although experiments like it have been replicated on several TV shows and in artistic renditions). Nevertheless, the Stanford prison experiment is now more popular than ever in its 36-year history. A Google search of "experiment" reveals it to be fourth among some 132 million hits, and sixth among some 127 million hits on "prison." Some of this recent interest comes from the apparent similarities of the experiment's abuses with the images of depravity in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison — of nakedness, bagged heads, and sexual humiliation.

Among the dozen investigations of the Abu Ghraib abuses, the one chaired by James R. Schlesinger, the former secretary of defense, boldly proclaims that the landmark Stanford study "provides a cautionary tale for all military detention operations." In contrasting the relatively benign environment of the Stanford prison experiment, the report makes evident that "in military detention operations, soldiers work under stressful combat conditions that are far from benign." The implication is that those combat conditions might be expected to generate even more extreme abuses of power than were observed in our mock prison experiment.

However, the Schlesinger report notes that military leaders did not heed that earlier warning in any way. They should have — a psychological perspective is essential to understanding the transformation of human character in response to special situational forces. "The potential for abusive treatment of detainees during the
Global War on Terrorism was entirely predictable based on a fundamental understanding of the principles of social psychology coupled with an awareness of numerous known environmental risk factors," the report says. "Findings from the field of social psychology suggest that the conditions of war and the dynamics of detainee operations carry inherent risks for human mistreatment, and therefore must be approached with great caution and careful planning and training." (Unfortunately this vital conclusion is buried in an appendix.)

The Stanford prison experiment is but one of a host of studies in psychology that reveal the extent to which our behavior can be transformed from its usual set point to deviate in unimaginable ways, even to readily accepting a dehumanized conception of others, as "animals," and to accepting spurious rationales for why pain will be good for them.

The implications of this research for law are considerable, as legal scholars are beginning to recognize. The criminal-justice system, for instance, focuses primarily on individual defendants and their "state of mind" and largely ignores situational forces. The Model Penal Code states: "A person is not guilty of an offense unless his liability is based on conduct that includes a voluntary act or the omission to perform an act of which he is physically capable." As my own experiment revealed, and as a great deal of social-psychological research before and since has confirmed, we humans exaggerate the extent to which our actions are voluntary and rationally chosen — or, put differently, we all understate the power of the situation. My claim is not that individuals are incapable of criminal culpability; rather, it is that, like the horrible behavior brought out by my experiment in good, normal young men, the situation and the system creating it also must share in the responsibility for illegal and immoral behavior.

If the goals of the criminal system are simply to blame and punish individual perpetrators — to get our pound of flesh — then focusing almost exclusively on the individual defendant makes sense. If, however, the goal is actually to reduce the behavior that we now call "criminal" (and its resultant suffering), and to assign punishments that correspond with culpability, then the criminal-justice system is obligated, much as I was in the Stanford prison experiment, to confront the situation and our role in creating and perpetuating it. It is clear to most reasonable observers that the social experiment of imprisoning society's criminals for long terms is a failure on virtually all levels. By recognizing the situational determinants of behavior, we can move to a more productive public-health model of prevention and intervention, and away from the individualistic medical and religious "sin" model that has never worked since its inception during the Inquisition.

The critical message then is to be sensitive about our vulnerability to subtle but powerful situational forces and, by such awareness, be more able to overcome those forces. Group pressures, authority symbols, dehumanization of others, imposed anonymity, dominant ideologies that enable spurious ends to justify immoral means, lack of surveillance, and other situational forces can work to transform even some of the best of us into Mr. Hyde monsters, without the benefit of Dr. Jekyll's chemical.

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elixir. We must be more aware of how situational variables can influence our behavior. Further, we must also be aware that veiled behind the power of the situation is the greater power of the system, which creates and maintains complicity at the highest military and governmental levels with evil-inducing situations, like those at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay prisons.

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