The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil
by Philip Zimbardo
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Reviewed by Charles Huckelbury and Susan Nagelsen

Philip Zimbardo is no stranger to students of criminal justice and professionals working in the field. His Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE), following Stanley Milgram's influential work on obedience to authority, remains the dirge that signalled the demise of the dispositional hypothesis of human behaviour. One might think that another book on the same subject would not be necessary, however, given the well publicized – and expediently explained – horrors at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, it is clear that the human capacity for evil requires more extensive treatment, in an accessible form, if we are to recognize and interrupt its progress, both within and outside the prison environment. Thus Zimbardo's new work, *The Lucifer Effect*, extends the conclusions of the SPE to describe the "banality of evil", in Arendt's memorable phrase, and to warn of its insidious potential, this time with even more graphic examples of otherwise decent men and women committing physical and sexual abuse with no more thought than they would give to swatting a fly.

Zimbardo opens with a three-part analysis of human behaviour, describing and explaining the "situated character transformations" that convert "ordinary, normal people into indifferent or even wanton perpetrators of evil" (p. xii). After a litany of horror (e.g., the Holocaust, Jonestown, Rwanda and Darfur) he demolishes the classic explanation for human depravity: a few bad apples giving everyone else a bad name. Authorities continue to invoke this fundamental attribution error to deflect criticism of institutionalized violence, whether on the battlefield or inside prisons. Indeed, as Zimbardo points out, the dispositional hypothesis continues to form the basis for modern psychology, thus facilitating the shifting of blame and the absolution of everyone above the operational level.

Zimbardo, however, will have none of it. He does not ignore the personalities that actors bring to a specific environment, but his primary criticism focuses on the situational and systemic forces that often prove irresistible, producing the dehumanization of a perceived enemy. This is a process that "clouds one's thinking and fosters the perception that other people are less than human [and] deserving of torment, torture, and annihilation (p. xii)". This sort of image manipulation produces a

"mindless conformity" that encourages men and women to abandon their humanity "for a mindless ideology, to follow and then exceed the orders of … authority to destroy anyone they label as The Enemy" (p. 15).

This is not the place to rework the arguments against the Iraq War. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001 however, specific actions of the government and its agents, all of which led to the incarceration, torture and murder of innocent people, are relevant for this discussion, if for no other reason than those, and similar actions find support and encouragement in domestic policies as well. For example, the government justified its push for domestic spying, indefinite incarceration and coercive interrogation techniques as necessary to destroy a perceived threat. As subsequent revelations have proved, those "explanations [were] intended for the official record but not for critical analysis of the damage to be or being done" (p. 11). In other words, in Zimbardo's dialectic, the system (government) creates situations (battlefields/prisons) in which individuals (soldiers/guards) commit acts of human depravity in response to top-down pressure exerted in the name of a greater good. Thus, identical forces were at work in Rwanda, Darfur and Abu Ghraib. More to the point, they are at work inside Western prisons built and operated on the American model.

From this stage setting, *The Lucifer Effect* then moves to a protracted discussion of the Stanford Prison Experiment. For those unfamiliar with the published work, Zimbardo, a professor at Stanford in 1971, designed an exercise in which he recruited students and other volunteers for what was intended to be a two-week experiment. He randomly assigned participants to one of two groups, prisoners or guards. "Arrests" resulted in the prisoners being transported to the basement of the building housing the psychology department, where the "prison" had been constructed.

The guards quickly became so abusive that Zimbardo was forced to terminate the experiment after only six days. "Good guards", as self-assessed and judged by their peers, were the most sadistic, while "bad guards" demonstrated the most compassion. The paradox at work in Zimbardo's prison was, of course, identical to the one operating at Abu Ghraib and in Western prisons more generally. The depravity demonstrated by the guards, sanctioned by the system and society, is identical to – and often surpasses – the criminal acts committed by those on the other side of the bars.

One of the most disturbing aspects of Zimbardo's experiment was that the young men who were seduced by the prospect of unlimited power and wielded it so brutally were well-educated with scores falling within

normal range of personality inventories completed prior to their selection for participation. They were individuals most people would expect to be immune to the pernicious influences created by the experimenters. And yet, even Zimbardo himself experienced the same type of transformation in his role as prison "superintendent", going so far as to talk of "recapturing" one of the students released early because of an emotional collapse. The role-playing overpowered both rationality and ethics. As Zimbardo put it, "[T]he SPE does not tell us anything about prisons that sociology, criminology, and the narratives of prisoners have not already revealed about the evils of prison life. Prisons can be brutalizing places that invoke what is worst in human nature" (p. 206).

A detailed discussion of ethics and social dynamics, complete with data sets, helps place the book on secure scientific footing, followed by a comprehensive look at Abu Ghraib and one of the primary participants, "Chip" Frederick. Zimbardo then places the "system" on trial before closing with a celebration of the "hero" who resists cooptation by the system and the situation.

Even with the uplifting later sections, this remains a frightening and disturbing book, primarily because Zimbardo is so adept at demonstrating how both guard and prisoner mentalities can be imposed on subjects irrespective of their backgrounds or education, especially when they are unprepared for the assault. Indeed, the SPE's findings and implications have been subsequently replicated in the laboratory and actually in prisons, both foreign and domestic, confirming Zimbardo's assertion that the situation in which men and women find themselves plays a more profound role than character in determining their subsequent behaviour.

The inescapable conclusion is that the system, as Zimbardo tells us, is defective and pathogenic. By creating a toxic environment and then placing men and women inside it, corruption and brutality become the norm – we should not be surprised by this. Thus, the obvious solution is to eliminate the kind of evil condoned and perpetuated in modern prisons. It is unreasonable to expect a sea change in the power structure that conceives and implements the constructions of prisons, but political pressure can and should be exerted to reduce the number of situations that inspire the horrors that Zimbardo describes. With such a definitive explication of modern prison and its inherent evils, abolitionists can find hope that our better natures will eventually prevail.

Judith Cohen, the director of the Holocaust Museum's photographic collection, recently underlined the SPE's conclusions by using Nazi Germany as the benchmark for institutionalized evil: "One has to be in some way in sync with one's environment to work. And if the environment

is evil the principal holds, even though the adaptation may be more difficult" (Wilkerson, 2008, p. 53). The terrifying part, of course, is that becoming "in sync" with the prison environment, both in Abu Ghraib and in America, has not been that difficult.

References

Wilkerson, A. (2008) "Picturing Auschwitz", *The New Yorker*: page 48 – March 17.

About the Reviewers

Charles Huckelbury was sentenced to life imprisonment (thirty-five year minimum) at the age of twenty-seven and has spent the last twenty-eight years in prison. Awarded second place in *Prison Life*'s fiction contest in 1995, he won the PEN first prize for fiction in 2001. A regular contributor to the *JPP* since 1997, Charles joined the Editorial Board in 2001 and is now an Associate Editor. He was one of four featured writers in Shawn Thompson's *Letters From Prison* (2001). His new book of poetry, *Tales From the Purple Penguin* (2008) has received rave reviews from students and academics.

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