

*"The Lucifer Effect will change forever the way you think about why we behave the way we do.
This is a disturbing book, but one that has never been more necessary."*

— MALCOLM GLADWELL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER


The LUCIFER EFFECT


Understanding How Good People Turn Evil

Philip Zimbardo

Includes exclusive firsthand narrative by the creator of the landmark
STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

WINNER
OF THE
WILLIAM JAMES
BOOK AWARD



	<p>THE LUCIFER EFFECT</p>
	<p><i>Understanding How Good People Turn Evil</i></p> <p>Philip Zimbardo</p>
	<p> RANDOM HOUSE New York</p>

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Preface](#)

[List of Illustrations](#)

[ONE](#)

[The Psychology of Evil: Situated Character Transformations](#)

[TWO](#)

[Sunday's Surprise Arrests](#)

[THREE](#)

[Let Sunday's Degradation Rituals Begin](#)

[FOUR](#)

[Monday's Prisoner Rebellion](#)

[FIVE](#)

[Tuesday's Double Trouble: Visitors and Rioters](#)

SIX

Wednesday Is Spiraling Out of Control

SEVEN

The Power to Parole

EIGHT

Thursday's Reality Confrontations

NINE

Friday's Fade to Black

TEN

The SPE's Meaning and Messages: The Alchemy of Character Transformations

ELEVEN

The SPE: Ethics and Extensions

TWELVE

Investigating Social Dynamics: Power, Conformity, and Obedience

THIRTEEN

Investigating Social Dynamics: Deindividuation, Dehumanization, and the Evil of Inaction

FOURTEEN

Abu Ghraib's Abuses and Tortures: Understanding and Personalizing Its Horrors

FIFTEEN

Putting the System on Trial: Command Complicity

SIXTEEN

Resisting Situational Influences and Celebrating Heroism

Notes

About the Author

Also by Philip Zimbardo

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*Dedicated to the serene heroine of my life,
Christina Maslach Zimbardo*

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without a great deal of help at every stage along the long journey from conception to its realization in this final form.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

It all began with the planning, execution, and analysis of the experiment we did at Stanford University back in August 1971. The immediate impetus for this research came out of an undergraduate class project on the psychology of imprisonment, headed by David Jaffe, who later became the warden in our Stanford Prison Experiment. In preparation for conducting this experiment, and to better understand the mentality of prisoners and correctional staff, as well as to explore what were the critical features in the psychological nature of any prison experience, I taught a summer school course at Stanford University covering these topics. My co-instructor was Andrew Carlo Prescott, who had recently been paroled from a series of long confinements in California prisons. Carlo came to serve as an invaluable consultant and dynamic head of our "Adult Authority Parole Board." Two graduate students, William Curtis Banks and Craig Haney, were fully engaged at every stage in the production of this unusual research project. Craig has used this experience as a springboard into a most successful career

in psychology and law, becoming a leading advocate for prisoner rights and authoring a number of articles and chapters with me on various topics related to the institution of prisons. I thank them each for their contribution to that study and its intellectual and practical aftermath. In addition, my appreciation goes to each of those college students who volunteered for an experience that, decades later, some of them still cannot forget. As I also say in the text, I apologize to them again for any suffering they endured during and following this research.

SECONDARY RESEARCH

The task of assembling the archival prison experiment videos into DVD formats from which transcripts could be prepared fell to Sean Bruich and Scott Thompson, two exceptional Stanford students. In addition to highlighting significant episodes in these materials, Sean and Scott also helped pull together a wide array of background materials that we had gathered on various aspects of the study.

Tanya Zimbardo and Marissa Allen assisted with the next task of helping to organize and assemble extensive background materials from media clippings, my notes, and assorted articles. A team of other Stanford students, notably Kieran O'Connor and Matt Estrada, expertly conducted reference checking. Matt also transferred my audiotaped interview with Sergeant Chip Frederick into an understandable typescript.

I value the feedback that I received on various chapters in first and second drafts from colleagues and students alike, among them Adam Breckenridge, Stephen Behnke, Tom Blass, Rose McDermott, and Jason Weaver. Anthony Pratkanis and Cindy Wang earn special thanks for their assistance with the section of the final chapter that deals with resisting unwanted influence, as

does Zeno Franco for his contributions to the new views on the psychology of heroism.

My understanding of the military situation at Abu Ghraib and other theaters of the war benefited from the wisdom of Warrant Officer Marci Drewry and of Colonel Larry James, also a military psychologist. Doug Bracewell has continually supplied me with useful online sources of information about a host of topics related to issues I deal with in the two chapters of the book on Abu Ghraib. Gary Myers, the legal counsel for Sergeant Frederick, not only served on this case for an extended period without remuneration but also provided me with all the source materials and information that I needed to make sense of that complex setting. Adam Zimbardo offered a perceptive analysis of the sexual nature of the “trophy photos” that emerged from the “fun and games” on Tier 1A’s night shift.

In partitioning my acknowledgments, a major share goes to Bob Johnson (my psychologist co-author buddy on our introductory psychology textbook, *Core Concepts*). Bob read the entire manuscript and offered endlessly valuable suggestions on ways to improve it, as did Sasha Lubomirsky, who helped to coordinate Bob’s input with that of Rose Zimbardo. Rose is a Distinguished Professor of English Literature who made sure that every sentence of this book functioned as it should to convey my message to general readers. Thanks to each of them for handling this chore with such grace and good sense.

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Finally, having written for a dozen or so hours on end, day in and night out, my aching body was prepped for the next round by my massage therapist, Gerry Huber, of Healing Winds Massage in San Francisco, and by Ann Hollingsworth of the Gualala Sea Spa, whenever I worked at my Sea Ranch hideout.

To each of these helpers, family, friends, colleagues, and students, who enabled me to transform thoughts into words into a manuscript and into this book, please accept my sincerest thanks.

Ciao,
Phil Zimbardo

Preface

I wish I could say that writing this book was a labor of love; it was not that for a single moment of the two years it took to complete. First of all, it was emotionally painful to review all of the videotapes from the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) and to read over and over the typescripts prepared from them. Time had dimmed my memory of the extent of creative evil in which many of the guards engaged, the extent of the suffering of many of the prisoners, and the extent of my passivity in allowing the abuses to continue for as long as I did—an evil of inaction.

I had also forgotten that the first part of this book was actually begun thirty years ago under contract from a different publisher. However, I quit shortly after beginning to write because I was not ready to relive the experience while I was still so close to it. I am glad that I did not hang in and force myself to continue writing then because this is the right time. Now I am wiser and able to bring a more mature perspective to this complex task. Further, the parallels between the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the events in the SPE have given our Stanford prison experience added validity, which in turn sheds light on the psychological dynamics that contributed to creating horrific abuses in that real prison.

A second emotionally draining obstacle to writing was becoming personally and intensely involved in fully researching the Abu Ghraib abuses

and tortures. As an expert witness for one of the MP prison guards, I became more like an investigative reporter than a social psychologist. I worked at uncovering everything I could about this young man, from intensive interviews with him and conversations and correspondence with his family members to checking on his background in corrections and in the military, as well as with other military personnel who had served in that dungeon. I came to feel what it was like to walk in his boots on the Tier 1A night shift from 4 P.M. to 4 A.M. every single night for forty nights without a break.

As an expert witness testifying at his trial to the situational forces that contributed to the specific abuses he had perpetrated, I was given access to all of the many hundreds of digitally documented images of depravity. That was an ugly and unwelcomed task. In addition, I was provided with all of the then-available reports from various military and civilian investigating committees. Because I was told that I would not be allowed to bring detailed notes to the trial, I had to memorize as many of their critical features and conclusions as I could. That cognitive challenge added to the terrific emotional strain that arose after Sergeant Ivan “Chip” Frederick was given a harsh sentence and I became an informal psychological counselor for him and his wife, Martha. Over time, I became, for them, “Uncle Phil.”

I was doubly frustrated and angry, first by the military’s unwillingness to accept any of the many mitigating circumstances I had detailed that had directly contributed to his abusive behavior and should have reduced his harsh prison sentence. The prosecutor and judge refused to consider any idea that situational forces could influence individual behavior. Theirs was the standard individualism conception that is shared by most people in our culture. It is the idea that the fault was entirely “dispositional,” the consequence of Sergeant Chip Frederick’s freely chosen rational decision to engage in evil. Added to my distress was the realization that many of the “independent” investigative reports clearly laid the blame for the abuses at

the feet of senior officers and on their dysfunctional or “absentee landlord” leadership. These reports, chaired by generals and former high-ranking government officials, made evident that the military and civilian chain of command had built a “bad barrel” in which a bunch of good soldiers became transformed into “bad apples.”

Had I written this book shortly after the end of the Stanford Prison Experiment, I would have been content to detail the ways in which situational forces are more powerful than we think, or that we acknowledge, in shaping our behavior in many contexts. However, I would have missed the big picture, the bigger power for creating evil out of good—that of the System, the complex of powerful forces that create the Situation. A large body of evidence in social psychology supports the concept that situational power triumphs over individual power in given contexts. I refer to that evidence in several chapters. However, most psychologists have been insensitive to the deeper sources of power that inhere in the political, economic, religious, historic, and cultural matrix that defines situations and gives them legitimate or illegitimate existence. A full understanding of the dynamics of human behavior requires that we recognize the extent and limits of personal power, situational power, and systemic power.

Changing or preventing undesirable behavior of individuals or groups requires an understanding of what strengths, virtues, and vulnerabilities they bring into a given situation. Then, we need to recognize more fully the complex of situational forces that are operative in given behavioral settings. Modifying them, or learning to avoid them, can have a greater impact on reducing undesirable individual reactions than remedial actions directed only at changing the people in the situation. That means adopting a public health approach in place of the standard medical model approach to curing individual ills and wrongs. However, unless we become sensitive to the real power of the System, which is invariably hidden behind a veil of secrecy, and fully understand its own set of rules and regulations, behavioral change will

be transient and situational change illusory. Throughout this book, I repeat the mantra that attempting to understand the situational and systemic contributions to any individual's behavior does not excuse the person or absolve him or her from responsibility in engaging in immoral, illegal, or evil deeds.

In reflecting on the reasons that I have spent much of my professional career studying the psychology of evil—of violence, anonymity, aggression, vandalism, torture, and terrorism—I must also consider the situational formative force acting upon me. Growing up in poverty in the South Bronx, New York City, ghetto shaped much of my outlook on life and my priorities. Urban ghetto life is all about surviving by developing useful “street-smart” strategies. That means figuring out who has power that can be used against you or to help you, whom to avoid, and with whom you should ingratiate yourself. It means deciphering subtle situational cues for when to bet and when to fold, creating reciprocal obligations, and determining what it takes to make the transition from follower to leader.

In those days, before heroin and cocaine hit the Bronx, ghetto life was about people without possessions, about kids whose most precious resource in the absence of toys and technologies was other kids to play with. Some of these kids became victims or perpetrators of violence; some kids I thought were good ended up doing some really bad things. Sometimes it was apparent what the catalyst was. For instance, consider Donny's father, who punished him for any perceived wrongdoing by stripping him naked and making him kneel on rice kernels in the bathtub. This “father as torturer” was at other times charming, especially around the ladies who lived in the tenement. As a young teenager, Donny, broken by that experience, ended up in prison. Another kid took out his frustrations by skinning cats alive. As part of the gang initiation process we all had to steal, fight against another kid, do some daring deeds, and intimidate girls and Jewish kids going to

synagogue. None of this was ever considered evil or even bad; it was merely obeying the group leader and conforming to the norms of the gang.

For us kids systemic power resided in the big bad janitors who kicked you off their stoops and the heartless landlords who could evict whole families by getting the authorities to cart their belongings onto the street for failure to pay the rent. I still feel for their public shame. But our worst enemy was the police, who would swoop down on us as we played stickball in the streets (with a broomstick bat and Spalding rubber ball). Without offering any reason, they would confiscate our stickball bats and force us to stop playing in the street. Since there was not a playground within a mile of where we lived, streets were all we had, and there was little danger posed to citizens by our pink rubber ball. I recall a time when we hid the bats as the police approached, but the cops singled me out to spill the beans as to their location. When I refused, one cop said he would arrest me and as he pushed me into his squad car my head smashed against the door. After that, I never trusted grown-ups in uniform until proven otherwise.

With such rearing, all in the absence of any parental oversight—because in those days kids and parents never mixed on the streets—it is obvious where my curiosity about human nature came from, especially its darker side. Thus, *The Lucifer Effect* has been incubating in me for many years, from my ghetto sandbox days through my formal training in psychological science, and has led me to ask big questions and answer them with empirical evidence.

The structure of this book is somewhat unusual. It starts off with an opening chapter that outlines the theme of the transformation of human character, of good people and angels turning to do bad things, even evil, devilish things. It raises the fundamental question of how well we really know ourselves, how confident we can be in predicting what we would or would not do in situations we have never before encountered. Could we, like

God's favorite angel, Lucifer, ever be led into the temptation to do the unthinkable to others?

The segment of chapters on the Stanford Prison Experiment unfolds in great detail as our extended case study of the transformation of individual college students as they play the randomly assigned roles of prisoner or guard in a mock prison—that became all too real. The chapter-by-chapter chronology is presented in a cinematic format, as a personal narrative told in the present tense with minimal psychological interpretation. Only after that study concludes—it had to be terminated prematurely—do we consider what we learned from it, describe and explain the evidence gathered from it, and elaborate upon the psychological processes that were involved in it.

One of the dominant conclusions of the Stanford Prison Experiment is that the pervasive yet subtle power of a host of situational variables can dominate an individual's will to resist. That conclusion is given greater depth in a series of chapters detailing this phenomenon across a body of social science research. We see how a range of research participants—other college student subjects and average citizen volunteers alike—have come to conform, comply, obey, and be readily seduced into doing things they could not imagine doing when they were outside those situational force fields. A set of dynamic psychological processes is outlined that can induce good people to do evil, among them deindividuation, obedience to authority, passivity in the face of threats, self-justification, and rationalization. Dehumanization is one of the central processes in the transformation of ordinary, normal people into indifferent or even wanton perpetrators of evil. Dehumanization is like a cortical cataract that clouds one's thinking and fosters the perception that other people are less than human. It makes some people come to see those others as enemies deserving of torment, torture, and annihilation.

With this set of analytical tools at our disposal, we turn to reflect upon the causes of the horrendous abuses and torture of prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib Prison by the U.S. Military Police guarding them. The allegation that these immoral deeds were the sadistic work of a few rogue soldiers, so-called bad apples, is challenged by examining the parallels that exist in the situational forces and psychological processes that operated in that prison with those in our Stanford prison. We examine in depth, the Place, the Person, and the Situation to draw conclusions about the causative forces involved in creating the abusive behaviors that are depicted in the revolting set of "trophy photos" taken by the soldiers in the process of tormenting their prisoners.

However, it is then time to go up the explanatory chain from person to situation to system. Relying on a half dozen of the investigative reports into these abuses and other evidence from a variety of human rights and legal sources, I adopt a prosecutorial stance to put the System on trial. Using the limits of our legal system, which demands that individuals and not situations or systems be tried for wrongdoing, I bring charges against a quartet of senior military officers and then extend the argument for command complicity to the civilian command structure within the Bush administration. The reader, as juror, will decide if the evidence supports the finding of guilty as charged for each of the accused.

This rather grim journey into the heart and mind of darkness is turned around in the final chapter. It is time for some good news about human nature, about what we as individuals can do to challenge situational and systemic power. In all the research cited and in our real-world examples, there were always some individuals who resisted, who did not yield to temptation. What delivered them from evil was not some inherent magical goodness but rather, more likely, an understanding, however intuitive, of mental and social tactics of resistance. I outline a set of such strategies and tactics to help anyone be more able to resist unwanted social influence. This

advice is based on a combination of my own experiences and the wisdom of my social psychological colleagues who are experts in the domains of influence and persuasion. (It is supplemented and expanded upon in a module available on the website for this book, www.lucifereffect.com).

Finally, when most give in and few rebel, the rebels can be considered heroes for resisting the powerful forces toward compliance, conformity, and obedience. We have come to think of our heroes as special, set apart from us ordinary mortals by their daring deeds or lifelong sacrifices. Here we recognize that such special individuals do exist, but that they are the exception among the ranks of heroes, the few who make such sacrifices. They are a special breed who organize their lives around a humanitarian cause, for example. By contrast, most others we recognize as heroes are heroes of the moment, of the situation, who act decisively when the call to service is sounded. So, *The Lucifer Effect* journey ends on a positive note by celebrating the ordinary hero who lives within each of us. In contrast to the “banality of evil,” which posits that ordinary people can be responsible for the most despicable acts of cruelty and degradation of their fellows, I posit the “banality of heroism,” which unfurls the banner of the heroic Everyman and Everywoman who heed the call to service to humanity when their time comes to act. When that bell rings, they will know that it rings for them. It sounds a call to uphold what is best in human nature that rises above the powerful pressures of Situation and System as the profound assertion of human dignity opposing evil.

List of Illustrations

- [1. M. C. Escher's illusion of angels and devils](#)
- [2. Police arresting student prisoner](#)
- [3. Stanford Prison Experiment \(SPE\) guard in uniform](#)
- [4. SPE prisoners lined up for their frequent counts](#)
- [5. SPE grievance committee meets with Superintendent Zimbardo](#)
- [6. SPE's Yard in action](#)
- [7. SPE prisoner suffers an emotional breakdown](#)
- [8. SPE hooded, chained prisoners await hearings with the Parole Board](#)
- [9. SPE naked prisoner in his cell #3](#)
- [10. SPE chart comparing behaviors of guards and prisoners \(from video records\)](#)