

The 'lucifer effect': how good people turn evil



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In Lucifer Effect Dr Zimbardo discusses his Stanford Prison Experiment conducted in 1971 in relevance to the prison abuses in Abu Ghraib in 2003. It is a shocking book presenting the transformation from an average good person into a bad brutal individual; the metamorphosis from Lucifer into Satan. At the same time Dr Zimbardo explains how this transformation is possible, how group dynamics and situational factors, maintained by the system influence human behaviour to create monsters even of normal good people. Moreover, Zimbardo discusses how to defend ourselves from becoming an evil. At the end he presents the victory of heroism and give a hope everyone is also able to do the most heroic acts.

Body:

What makes good people do bad things? This is a disturbing question which occupies our mind remembering the mass murders such as those of Cambodia, Darfur, Rwanda, Holocaust or May Lai. Would Holocaust occur again, Askenasy asks in his book "Are we all Nazis?" (in Blass, 1992). Milgram answers that "if a system of death camps were set up in the United States of the sort we had seen in Nazi Germany, one would be able to find sufficient personnel for those camps in any medium-sized American town" (CBS News, 1979, p. 7-8 cited in Blass, 1999, p. 956). Although most people would deny it claiming they could never be like them. (Blass, 2004, p. 35-36; Meyer, p. 71) surprisingly the examples from history and research studies have shown that everyone is capable of acting even in the most horrifying ways depending on the situational circumstances. People often underestimate the impact of the external factors because they cannot admit how easily they could be manipulated by situational forces, the concept

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known as fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris, 1967; Gilbert and Malone, 1995; Gilbert, 1998; Zimbardo, 1990). The studies on obedience (Baumrind, 1964; Burger, 2007; Burley & McGuiness, 1977; Glasser, 1971; Halberstam, 1965; Kaufmann, 1967; Kilham & Mann, 1974; Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1987; Mantell, 1971; Milgram, 1963; 1965; 1974, p. 195; Ring, Wallston, & Corey, 1970; Shanab & Yahya, 1977, 1978; Sullivan, 1963; Taylor, 1970;), institutional aggression (Johnson, 1986; 1998), mass killings and genocides (Browning, 1993, Katz, 2004; Staub 1989; Waller, 2002) have indicated that violence is not determined by dispositional factors but it is a product of a situation. “ What social psychology has given to an understanding of human nature is the discovery that forces larger than ourselves determine our mental life and our actions – chief among these forces is the power of the social situation” (Banaji, 2001, p. 15).

We don't have to look far to find an example of a blind authority follower. The Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann was an ordinary citizen who was charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Nuremberg Trial in 1961 while he “ was just doing his job” (Arendt, 1963, p. 135), “ only following orders” (Zimbardo 2007, p. 218). Hanna Arendt helps us to understand that the Holocaust was not executed by fanatics but by normal people who accepted the state rules and therefore perceived their actions as normal. (Waxman, 2009). Anyone can be seduced to act wrong (Zimbardo 2004, p. 25). The Eichmann was not an exception; the manpower of Nazis in Final Solution was supported even by average elderly German citizens (Browning, 1993, p. 16). The question what makes people act in the destructive ways has been long answered blaming the defective genes, the “ bad seeds”

responsible for pathological behaviour (Haney, Banks, Zimbardo, 1973b; Zimbardo, 2004, p. 21, 24). Starting from the landmark study, Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) (Haney et al., 1973; Zimbardo, 1989; Zimbardo, Maslach, & Haney, 2000) Lucifer Effect challenges this notion and argues that people act in the inhumane ways because they get “poisoned” by external factors, by a moment of a situation (Lewin, 1951) which is often supported by the bad system giving permission for a pathological behavior (Zimbardo, 2007).

Stanford Prison Study shows the power of institution to influence the individual. It describes the transformation of normal, average students into aggressive, sadistic guards or passive, helpless and emotionally devastated prisoners playing the roles in the mock prison created in the dungeon of Stanford University. The study predicted for two weeks had to be terminated just only in 6 days because of the emotional breakdown of 5 of the students (Zimbardo, 1971; Zimbardo et al., 2000; 2004, p. 40).

Dr Zimbardo saw the SPE as the parallel to the controversial abuses in Abu Ghraib (AG), which shaken the morality of the world in 2004 (p. 324; A Human Rights Watch Report [HRW], 2004; 2005; Stannard, 2004; Kersten & Sidky, 2005; Dorf 2010; Zimbardo). The unbelievable humiliations of Iraqi detainees by American soldiers, who abused them in a number of horrifying ways (p. 357; Schlesinger et al., 2004; Taguba, 2004; Fay, 2004, p. 4) was not a surprise for Dr Zimbardo who saw it in SPE where prisoners became numbers inducing their powerless and dependence, were dehumanized and involved in humiliating tasks (p. 219; Haney et al, 1973b; Zimbardo et al., 2009). President Bush described the AG events as the incidents of few “bad

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apples” (Landford, 2009; Associated Press, 2005; Childs, 2005; Fox News, 2004; HRW, 2004; 2005) who were punished in the names of justice (HRW, 2005). Zimbardo, an expert witness for one of the guards, argues that there were not “ rotten apples”, which should have been found guilty but it was the fault of the “ bad barrel” which corrupted everything inside it (Zimbardo, 2008). Like in SPE good people were put in a bad, psychologically unhealthy situation, which had a dramatic impact on their behaviour and produced deviant deeds. (Zimbardo et al., 2000, p. 17). The soldiers in Abu Ghraib were just US Military Police Army Reservists (p. 335; Schlesinger et al., p. 12; Taguba, 2004) without any preparation to run the prison (p. 346, 377; Hersh, 2004; Schlesinger et al., 2004, p. 16; Taguba, 2004), exactly like the students role- playing the guards in the prison-like stimulated environment or just like the elderly men who joined the crimes of the Nazis. When placed in a novel unfamiliar situation, their learnt reaction patterns stopped working and their morale disengaged (Zimbardo, 2008) leading to the immoral behaviour.

Soldiers, in the middle of the interrogation center, experienced a lot of pressure from Central Intelligence Agency to break the enemy (p. 336-37, 349, 382; Schlesinger et al., 2004, p. 8; CBS News... ,). Labelling the Iraqi the enemy (Allen & Priest, 2004; CNN, 2001; Landford, 2009), enouncing the war with terrorism (p. 377, 430; HRW, 2004; 2005; Miles, 2006),) and the recent change in country attitude toward torture after 9/11 maintained by worldwide media and American administration (Zimbardo, 2004, p. 35) “ gave the guards the permission to dehumanize the prisoners” (Strozier as

cited in Schwartz, 2004;) and treating them like “ dogs” (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 337, 414).

The powerful systemic forces created a fear across the country Zimbardo 2004, p. 35) and induced systematic propaganda under the cover of “ national security” exactly as described in the novel “ 1984” (George Orwell, 1981) or “ Fahrenheit 451” (Ray Bradbury, 2007), in which society’s enslavement to conformity was generated. It was enough to justify the horrific behaviour and made even killing acceptable and rationalized (p. 430; Zimbardo, 2004, p. 28, 35; Stratman, 2004).

Additionally, there was no discipline in the Abu Ghraib and the unit was understaffed (p. 336; Danner, 2004, p. 17; Gray & Zielinski, 2006; Schlesinger, 2004; Stannard, 2004; Taguba, 2004). The place was kept in a secret (HRW, 2005), constantly under attack (Fay, 2004; Schlesinger 2004, p. 11) without sufficient control (p. 348; Fay 2004, ... ; Schlesinger, 2004, p. 13; HRW, 2004; 2005) and strong leadership (Fay, 2004. ... ; Schlesinger, 2004, p. 16). The situation was far from normal. Additionally, no formal policies or procedures to follow (p. 347) and confusion regarding the Geneva Convention (HRW, 2004; 2005; Schlesinger, p. 6-7, 14, 29, 37-38) gave the guards permission to do unthinkable crimes and torture like the superintendent Zimbardo let the abuses happen in SPE. As Lt. Col. Thomas Kolditz argued when the power is given to people without oversight it is a pure formula for violence (Donn, 2004). Human Rights Watch Report agrees with Dr Zimbardo that not few individuals should have been blamed for brutality on site but the extraordinary pressures of the system which contributed to the abuses (Zimbardo, 2004, p. 47; HRW, 2004; 2005), the <https://assignbuster.com/the-lucifer-effect-how-good-people-turn-evil/>

architects of the policies were responsible for creating the situation where abuses became a part of normality (HRW, 2004; 2005).

The normality of the soldiers was the crime for us watching it from distance. If the guards had understood the mechanism of powerful situational forces maybe they could have been able to resist acting immorally. One of the factors contributing to the immoral deeds is deindividuation (Deiner, 1980; Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952; Zimbardo 1970)) which fosters anonymity and violence, shutting down rational thinking about the consequences (p. 219; Festinger et al., 1952; Zimbardo, 1969; 1970; 2004, p. 33). What is the most frightening is the fact that deindividuation can be achieved simply by changing external appearance (Golding, 1954, p. 58, 63; John Watson; Zimbardo, 2007, ch. 3, 10.

Another factor is moral disengagement from negative actions by justifying the conduct, diffusing responsibility for own actions (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Milgram, 1963, 1965, 1974, 1992), blaming the accountability on the role played (p. 218; Freedman, 1969; Haney, & Zimbardo, 1973c), while blindly following authority (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Darley & Latane, 1968), conforming to the group norms seeking acceptance (Moore, 1978, p. 36), discriminating those from different groups (Baumeister, 1997; Bernard, Ottenberg & Redl, 1968; Johnson, 1986, 1998; Staub, 1989;; Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971; Waller, 2002), ignoring the consequences of the action and blaming the victims for the outcome while dehumanizing them (Bandura, 1975; 1988; 1996; 1999; Bandura, Fromson, & Underwood, 1975; Bandura et al. 1996; Bandura, Osofsky, & Zimbardo, 1999; 2005; 1998, 2003, str 511; Darley & Latane, 1968). An individual has to be perceived as

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inhuman in order to make an unethical conduct comfortable for the perpetrator (p. 402; Kelman, 1973; Leyens et al., 2003). Dehumanization process includes putting people into the roles (Haney & Zimbardo, 1973) e. g. giving them the same uniforms and assigning numbers. As discrepancy between the immoral actions and personal beliefs occurs cognitive dissonance is created (p. 219; Aronson & Carlsmith, 1968 ; Festinger, 1957). The bigger the discrepancy between one's values and actions the more motivated the individual is to attain harmony (Janis and King, 1954; King and Janis, 1956; Culbertson, 1957; Zimbardo, 1965). What is more, when people cannot deny their actions they tend to rationalize them persuading themselves and others that they followed the rational guidelines when making the decision (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 220).

Grossman argues further that " with the proper conditioning and the proper circumstances, it appears that almost anyone can and will kill" (Grossman , 1995, p. 4). It supports the notion that systematisation in creating the enemy which threaten the safety of people play an important role in inducing antisocial behaviour (Zimbardo, 2004, p. 43-45). When a pathological behaviour is additionally supported by authorities such as state or an institution it opens the doors for serious abuses. As it is the responsibility of government is to establish and maintain ethical guidelines across a state, country or world Lucifer Effect offers an advice for the authorities to prevent situations which set up conditions for individuals to behave immorally.

Zimbardo emphasises that understanding the socio-psychological process of situational transformation is not an excuse for individual to commit crimes. It is just an explanation how people can be corrupted to do inhumane deeds

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and indeed it should be wisely used to resist the evil. (Wang and Zimbardo, 2006-2008). Dr Zimbardo also gives a hope that as much as people are capable of wrongdoing the creative mastermind of human beings can also generate terrific actions (p. 444, Zimbardo, 1996, p. 621, str. 504, Zimbardo, 2008). Eventually, Lucifer Effect teaches how to be “ a hero in waiting” (see p. 330-331, 457-458, 471, 474-475, Lankford, 2009; Zimbardo et al., 1999; Zimbardo, 2004, p. 40, Zimbardo, 2008

Conclusion:

The Lucifer Effect presents how good people turn evil. It involves understanding what powerful dynamic factors come into play during the human character metamorphosis within different circumstances. Lucifer Effect explains that personality variables contribute just a bit to produce certain behaviour, alleviating or escalating the impact of the situational forces, which are lying at the base of the psycho-sociological interactions (Banaji, 2001, p. 15; Mischel, 1968; Mischel, Shoda, Rodriguez, 1989; Mischel, Shoda, & Wright, 1993; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Mischel, 2004; Staub, 1898, p. 126, 127). The argument in the book is indeed a convincing demonstration that evil deeds are attributable to the power of the bad situation (Zimbardo, 1989; Asch, 1952; Sherif, 1966; Tajfel, 1978) which is often maintained by the bad system (Zimbardo, 2008). Nevertheless, Dr Zimbardo also emphasises that understanding evil is not excusing it and everyone should be responsible for their own actions because the individual can learn how to resist immoral actions (Zimbardo, 2008). The account Dr Zimbardo takes agrees with Hanna Arendt's (1977) statement that unless people are insane they have “ ability to tell right from wrong ... then we must

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be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be” (p. 13).