

The role of environment in our behavior

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Our surroundings have a much more profound impact on the ways in which we think and act than many of us realize. As well-known American psychologist Philip Zimbardo once said: "...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." In one environment, we may behave in one way, but in another, we may showcase a completely different, seemingly contradictory personality.

This is due to the fact that we have multi-dimensional personalities, and different characteristics emerge depending on the situations we are in. Zimbardo's distinguished Stanford prison experiment of 1971 provided evidence of this with its extreme results. During this experiment, participants were placed in a mock prison. Half were randomly selected to be guards, and half were randomly selected to be prisoners. Within a mere few days, the participants' demeanors had completely changed.

The guards, in their authoritative positions, became tyrannical and abusive, while prisoners became submissive and depressed. Even though all participants were of equal status and got along at the start of the experiment, the fake positions they were later given greatly impacted the attitudes they had, and their behavior towards one another. The effect of environment on human behavior is also exemplified by Jeanette Walls' *The Glass Castle*. The Walls family's values and attitude fluctuate as they travel from the deserts of the Southwest, to small town Welch, West Virginia, to frenetic New York City. While shuffling through small, desert mining towns in the Southwest, the family maintains a nomadic lifestyle. The family doesn't

stay put in one place for too long, or develop any strong bonds or relationships with others.

This results in them being relatively isolated and free from influence of any outsiders. Consequently, they adopt an unorthodox style of living, where the main concern they face on a daily basis is how to survive. They disregard conventional institutions, such as structured education, and so none of the kids attend school. Once the family arrives in small town Welch, West Virginia, much of their lifestyle changes. Welch is inhabited by many families, unlike the small mining towns in the Southwest, and so the family finds themselves engaging in substantially more communication with others than they had previously.

This proves to have a significant effect on them, as they become more influenced by outsiders and struggle to fit in. After being put down and embarrassed after buying a house in the oldest and poorest neighborhood in town, many members of the family develop aspirations and create plans, in order to become more conventionally successful in life. The children are enrolled in school, because the majority of the kids in town attend school. Although their time in Welch proves to be difficult and challenging, it is what motivates the family to live a more conventional, structured way of life. The Walls children's move to New York exposes a completely new side of their personalities.

After moving to “The Big Apple,” they fully adopt the conventional American way of life. They work to get a steady job, and a permanent home, where they will raise their families in the future. At this point, when they are living

in the epitome of American culture, they finally shed their old way of life, in exchange for a less spontaneous, more structured life. Our environment plays an undoubtedly huge role in how we think and behave. The outside influences and pressures we deal with from our environments withdraw certain characteristics from us, depending on the circumstances.

Whether from psychological experiments, or personal experiences, it is evident that humans act differently based on their surroundings. This knowledge can be highly beneficial, as we can develop a higher awareness of one another's behaviors, and therefore communicate more effectively. In addition, if we wish to develop certain characteristics of ourselves further, we can manipulate our surroundings to do so.