

The Lucifer effect: how good people turn evil, by Philip Zimbardo, Rider/Ebury Press, 2007, xxi + 551 pp, £18.99 (hardback), £8.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1844135776 (hardback), 978-1846041037 (paperback).

The Lucifer Effect won the William James Book Award in 2008. In 1971, an experiment took place in Stanford University Psychology department: a basement was converted into an experimental prison: carefully screened volunteers are assigned roles either as warders or prisoners. The two week programme would record the interactions between the two groups. Not all volunteers could keep going. The prisoners who did become increasingly compliant and institutionalised. The warders increased in control and aggression, unchallenged by their fellow warders. A prisoner revolt was met with savage reprisals. After six days the Stanford Prison Experiment had to be halted lest psychological damage ensue. Most of the volunteers assigned the roles of prisoners had become passive, resigned and institutionalised after a short time. Most of those assigned to be warders became sadistic, revelling in the power they had been given. The researchers had a no intervention policy, and the situation went out of control. In writing up the final form of this experiment three decades later, Zimbardo has the advantage of knowing that the most 'sadistic' warders in the role play had matured into normal good citizens so this was not a diagnostic tool for psychopaths. All contacted had reported long-term unexpected personal learning, and some had devoted their lives to prison reform or other abuses of power. Ordinary good people became evil when the culture they were placed in required it. Three quarters of people reacted like this. Some however resisted the culture against huge cultural pressure. These resisters are described as 'heroes' as the book overall argues that we should not be pessimistic about humankind, but encourage more people to be resisters through education and other cultural media.

Zimbardo links this analysis to two other major studies. The first, from the same era as the prison experiment, was Stanley Milgram's study of people's acceptance of authority. Milgram, a concentration camp survivor who had observed the depravity of ordinary people as guards, wished to determine experimentally how people respond to authority. In this study, volunteers were placed in two rooms, linked by loudspeaker. In the first, the volunteers were told that they had to give small electric shocks to the volunteers in the other room, on the researchers' orders and with the volunteers' permission. Although no shocks were given, the other volunteers were instructed to react as though it had been. The levels were increased gradually until lethal shocks were being administered. Around three quarters of people acquiesced to this, and a quarter resisted. The second study was his own evaluation of the circumstances at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, where the role-play was real rather than experimental. A lack of central control allowed the warders to escalate the controlling behaviour to the extent of humiliating the prisoners, photographing these humiliations, and even producing celebratory images of

prisoner deaths. The prisoners were “the other”, dehumanised, stripped of all rights.

Zimbardo contended that it was not the people who were inherently evil, but the system they were in, and the culture they were inducted into, had stimulated this acquiescent unethical behaviour. As he had been a counsellor of many individuals involved in Abu Ghraib, he categorised actions of resistance from the minority. The authorities should be responsible for establishing and appropriate culture, following ethical guidelines, and to ensure that this maintained and inspected. He argued that since this did not happen in Abu Ghraib, individuals should not be singled out as scapegoats.

On role playing, he argued that we play roles which are demanded by the needs of the moment. People can distance themselves from personal responsibility by claiming that this was the role we were given. In his experiment, roles were given, but developed corporately by the group. We all play roles and have to assert or accept authority. Zimbardo, as research director and as in role prison director, noted how he was easily able to dismiss parent protests by blaming the victim. Where this conflicts with our ideals and values, we encounter *dissonance*. Zimbardo noted that when necessary behaviour conflicted with values, the resolution tends to be to reduce ideals and encourage dishonesty by rationalisation. Rationalisation diminishes dissonance, so less rationalisation increases it. To do something harmful because we are well paid, or is politically expedient feels better than if we do it gratuitously. So rationalisation needs to be invented if the perpetrator is to feel OK. Religion can help: doing it ‘for God’ is a good rationalisation. The Nazis invented many rationalisations (through propaganda) and euphemisms such as ‘special treatment’ (= extermination).

Dehumanisation is a way of making unethical action comfortable. The victim must be regarded as unhuman, vermin, ‘a gook’, or other derogatory term. There are examples of perpetrators dressing up as media characters to emphasise that “It is not me doing this, I am in role”. Dehumanisation included personal humiliation, in words and actions, the use of uniform, using numbers and not names, the use of punishments such as solitary confinement for insignificant offences, and so on.

After the experiment, the book traces a range of applications. Prison riots and massacres by law enforcers brought Zimbardo to public attention shortly after the experiment ended. Shelters for abused women used the video material to illustrate the effects of (male) power and so reduce the guilt the abused women felt. A new prison used the materials to train staff – the staff replicated the experiment with half the staff becoming prisoners, and embedded the learning from feedback into their procedures. There is discussion about military training turning young people into killers, using methods that closely resemble the power play of the experimental prison guards. Another parallel was found in a mental institution, where a form of the experiment was replicated by staff. Those assigned as patients very

quickly acted like mentally unstable patients, even becoming violent or suicidal. This encouraged staff to change the regime as most symptoms were clearly a response to the system and not to the illness. Most of this work was aimed at improving the prison system. However, in the circles organising Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons, the results were studied to find how to soften up prisoners for interrogation without physical torture. In the later re-evaluation of this after press international interest, Zimbardo was called in as expert witness. The book contains many transcripts from the resulting inquiries.

This is a fascinating story and significant book. It is interesting how experimental method was used to secure a data collection stream and produce more secure results. As a counterfoil to the personal suffering of the volunteers, the researcher became social and political advocate to people caught up in real life situations which reflected his results. Its relevance for education is that the school, College or university is also a system with embedded power relationships, which can go sour. There will be bullies, power freaks, managing by sarcasm; the system needs to control such behaviour as unacceptable and to advocate positive and empowering management strategies. Pupils and students should be encouraged to be self-validating and contributing unique individuals (called *individuation* as opposed to the dehumanising *de-individuation* (p.242). They need to consider how to cope with peer and power pressure and be able to retain their inner individuality, their sense of meaning and worth, even in dehumanising systems and circumstances. This will be a challenging piece of curriculum development. The final chapter is a good starting-point – ‘Resisting Situational Influences and Celebrating Heroism’:

“Heroism supports the ideals of a community and serves as an extraordinary guide, and it provides an exemplary role model for prosocial behaviour. The banality of heroism means that we are all heroes in waiting. It is a choice we may all be called upon to make at some point in time.” (p.488).

This is heroism in everyday life, as a natural moral response to the unacceptable, not the unreachable elite heroes of fiction. I heartily recommend this book, and invite readers to visit the related websites, www.socialpsychology.org, www.prisonexp.org, www.lucifereffect.com and www.zimbardo.com and explore the downloads.

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