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Class: _____

What makes good people do bad things?

By Melissa Dittmann

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*In 1971, Phillip Zimbardo, a psychology professor at Stanford University, oversaw an infamous experiment called the Stanford Prison Experiment. In this article, Zimbardo discusses his conclusions regarding human nature. **Skill Focus:** In this lesson, you'll practice analyzing a text's structure and how it supports the author's argument. This means paying attention to whether the author organizes details in a clear and effective way. As you read, take note of Zimbardo's theory and how the author clarifies and supports it.*

[1] As the story goes, Dr. Jekyll uses a chemical to turn into his evil alter ego, Mr. Hyde.¹ In real life, however, no chemical may be needed. Instead, just the right dose of certain social situations can transform ordinarily good people into evildoers. This was the case with Iraqi prisoner abusers at Abu Ghraib,² argued former APA president Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD, in a presidential-track program during APA's 2004 Annual Convention in Honolulu.

Indeed, Zimbardo — an emeritus³ psychology professor at Stanford University — highlighted how this Mr. Hyde transformation occurred among U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib by presenting classic psychology research on situational effects on human behavior.

Zimbardo, who will be an expert witness for several of the U.S. soldiers on trial, argued that situations pull people to act in ways they never thought imaginable.



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1. The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886) is a book by Robert Louis Stevenson about a good man, Dr. Jekyll, who experiments and transforms into the evil Mr. Hyde.
2. Members of the U.S. Army and CIA committed a series of human rights violations against Iraqi prisoners of the Abu Ghraib prison. News of torture and other crimes became public in 2003.
3. having retired but allowed to retain their title as an honor

“That line between good and evil is permeable,”⁴ Zimbardo said. “Any of us can move across it... I argue that we all have the capacity for love and evil — to be Mother Theresa, to be Hitler or Saddam Hussein. It's the situation that brings that out.”

Seduced into evil

In fact, the classic electric shock experiment by social psychologist Stanley Milgram, PhD, showed that when given an order by someone in authority, people would deliver what they believed to be extreme levels of electrical shock to other study participants who answered questions incorrectly.

[5] Zimbardo said the experiment provides several lessons about how situations can foster evil:

- Provide people with an **ideology** to justify beliefs for actions.
- Make people take a small first step toward a harmful act with a minor, trivial action and then gradually increase those small actions.
- Make those in charge seem like a “just authority.”
- Transform a once compassionate leader into a dictatorial figure.
- Provide people with vague and ever-changing rules.
- Relabel the situation's actors and their actions to **legitimize** the **ideology**.
- Provide people with social models of **compliance**.
- Allow dissent,⁵ but only if people continue to **comply** with orders.
- Make exiting the situation difficult.

Particularly notable, Zimbardo said, is that people are seduced⁶ into evil by dehumanizing⁷ and labeling others.

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4. **Permeable** (*adjective*) fluid; able to be passed-through
 5. **Dissent** (*noun*) disagreement with an accepted opinion or belief; opposition to a decision
 6. **Seduce** (*verb*) to persuade someone to do something by making it seem attractive, tempting, and interesting
 7. **Dehumanize** (*verb*) to treat people as though they are not human; without dignity or respect

“They semantically⁸ change their perception of victims, of the evil act, and change the relationship of the aggressor to their aggression — so 'killing' or 'hurting' becomes the same as 'helping,’” he said.

For example, in a 1975 experiment by psychologist Albert Bandura, PhD, college students were told they'd work with students from another school on a group task. In one condition, they overheard an assistant calling the other students “animals” and in another condition, “nice.” Bandura found students were more apt to deliver what they believed were increased levels of electrical shock to the other students if they had heard them called “animals.”

People's aggression can also increase when they feel anonymous — for example if they wear a uniform, hood or mask, Zimbardo said.

- [10] “You minimize social responsibility,” he explained. “Nobody knows who you are, so therefore you are not individually **liable**. There's also a group effect when all of you are masked. It provides a fear in other people because they can't see you, and you lose your humanity.”

For example, an experiment in 1974 by Harvard anthropologist John Watson evaluated 23 cultures to determine whether warriors who changed their appearance — such as with war paint or masks — treated their victims differently. As it turned out, 80 percent of warriors in these cultures were found to be more destructive — for example, killing, torturing or mutilating their victims — than unpainted or unmasked warriors.

What's more, a person's anonymity can be induced by acting in an anonymity-conferring environment that adds to the pleasure of destruction, vandalism and the power of being in control, Zimbardo noted.

“It's not just seeing people hurt, it's doing things that you have a sense that you are controlling behavior of other people in ways that you typically don't,” Zimbardo said.

Zimbardo noticed that in his own simulated jail experiment in 1971 — the Stanford Prison Experiment — in which college students played the roles of prisoners or guards, and the guards became brutal and abusive toward prisoners after just six days, leading Zimbardo to prematurely end the experiment. The experiment showed that institutional forces and peer pressure led normal student volunteer guards to disregard the potential harm of their actions on the other student prisoners.

- [15] “You don't need a motive,” Zimbardo said. “All you really need is a situation that facilitates moving across that line of good and evil.”

8. referring to word choice and the meaning of words

Prison abuses

The same social psychological processes — deindividuation, anonymity of place, dehumanization, role-playing and social modeling, moral disengagement, and group conformity — that acted in the Stanford Prison Experiment were at play at Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo argued.

So is it a few bad apples that spoil a barrel? “That’s what we want to believe — that we could never be a bad apple,” Zimbardo said. “We’re the good ones in the barrel.” But people can be influenced, regardless of their intention to resist, he said.

As such, the Abu Ghraib soldiers’ mental state — such as stress, fear, boredom and heat exhaustion, coupled with no supervision, no training, and no accountability — may have further contributed to their “evil” actions, he noted.

“I argue situational forces dominate most of us at various times in our lives,” Zimbardo said, “even though we’d all like to believe we’re each that singular hero who can resist those powerful external pressures, like Joe Darby, the whistle-blowing hero of the Abu Ghraib prison.”

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Why does the author introduce the article with a reference to "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"?
 - A. to reveal that good and evil are only found in stories
 - B. to show that some people are more naturally good than evil
 - C. to make a comparison between Jekyll's transformation and real life
 - D. to provide an example of what happens when people are faced with the choice of good or evil

2. Which statement best summarizes Zimbardo's perspective on the average person's ability for evil?
 - A. People will continue to do bad things if they know they can blame it on their social surroundings.
 - B. A person's capacity for good or evil can change based on their social environment.
 - C. Social experiments are necessary to determine humanity's capacity for evil.
 - D. Evil actions are justified if a person is in a challenging social situation.

3. Which statement best supports Zimbardo's belief that people are not born "good" or "evil"?
 - A. "Any of us can move across it... I argue that we all have the capacity for love and evil — to be Mother Theresa, to be Hitler or Saddam Hussein." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "In one condition, they overheard an assistant calling the other students 'animals' and in another condition, 'nice.'" (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "The same social psychological processes... that acted in the Stanford Prison Experiment were at play at Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo argued." (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "As such, the Abu Ghraib soldiers' mental state... may have further contributed to their 'evil' actions, he noted." (Paragraph 18)

4. How do the results of Albert Bandura's experiment support Zimbardo's theories about immoral behavior? (Paragraphs 6-8)
- A. They illustrate the idea that people are more likely to hurt those they see as less than human.
 - B. They illustrate the idea that people can be persuaded into believing something is right if they trust their leader.
 - C. They illustrate the idea that people are more likely to do evil things if they see their peers taking part in the action.
 - D. They illustrate the idea that people can be manipulated by the allure of power and control over others.
5. Which piece of evidence best supports the idea that dehumanization increases immoral behavior?
- A. "When given an order by someone in authority, people would deliver what they believed to be extreme levels of electrical shock to other study participants who answered questions incorrectly." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "Bandura found students were more apt to deliver what they believed were increased levels of electrical shock to the other students if they had heard them called 'animals.'" (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "The experiment showed that institutional forces and peer pressure led normal student volunteer guards to disregard the potential harm of their actions on the other student prisoners." (Paragraph 14)
 - D. "'You don't need a motive,' Zimbardo said. 'All you really need is a situation that facilitates moving across that line of good and evil.'" (Paragraph 15)
6. In paragraphs 10-11, how does John Watson's experiment support Zimbardo's finding that "relabeling" people can affect their behavior?
- A. The masked warriors could not see their victims, so they believed they were not hurting people.
 - B. The masked warriors became so focused on survival that they treated even civilians as threats to their lives.
 - C. The masked warriors felt separated from their humanity, so they felt free to treat others inhumanely.
 - D. The masked warriors became so trusting of their leaders' orders that they ignored the consequences of their actions.
7. How does the placement of the section "Prison Abuses" support the author's argument?
- A. It reveals new information not observed in the experiments.
 - B. It reveals that people can avoid evil if they understand it.
 - C. It reveals that the motives for good and evil are difficult to find.
 - D. It reveals a real-world example of what was observed in experiments.

8. How does the structure of the article make the author's argument more effective?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Make an argument for or against this statement: "That line between good and evil is permeable," Zimbardo said. "Any of us can move across it... I argue that we all have the capacity for love and evil — to be Mother Theresa, to be Hitler or Saddam Hussein. It's the situation that brings that out."

2. Consider the characters from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Spunk." Based on Zimbardo's claim in "What makes good people do bad things?", how did the characters' different situations influence their behavior? Do you think the characters in these stories have the capacity for both good and evil? Why?

3. Both "Of Revenge" and "The Cask of Amontillado" focus on the idea of revenge. How does revenge fit into Zimbardo's argument about why people do evil things? How might these two texts contribute to or change Zimbardo's research?

4. Do you think Zimbardo's list of situations that seduce people into doing evil things is complete? Do you think there are other scenarios that might cause a good person to momentarily change their ways? Explain.