

50th Anniversary Reflections on the
Stanford Prison Experiment and Related Research
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In August 1971, I undertook what was destined to become the landmark [Stanford Prison Experiment](#). It demonstrated the power of situational forces to overwhelm otherwise good people to become cruel, when role-playing prison guards, or emotionally overwhelmed as prisoners. Its takeaway message is that the majority of ordinary people, even good ones, can be seduced, recruited, initiated into behaving in evil ways under the sway of powerful systematic and situational forces, both the *evil of action*—to do bad things against others, as well as the *evil of inaction*—to do nothing when they could/should do the right thing, being helpful and compassionate.

The weeklong experiment quickly gained international notoriety following two prison riots that erupted shortly after its conclusion. The day after my study was concluded, there was an alleged prison escape at San Quentin Prison in California by Black activist George Jackson, who was murdered along with several prison guards. Three weeks later, in upstate New York, riots rocked Attica Prison and took over the entire prison, in part as a reaction to the loss of George Jackson. The governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, later ordered the National Guard to shoot to kill all prisoners and guards being held hostage in the open prison yard.

I was invited as an expert witness in Congressional hearings on prisons held in Washington, D.C., and also in San Francisco. My testimony on how prisons need to be reformed became part of the congressional record. Because of that publicity, a national TV program, *Chronolog*, presented the story of the prison experiment in October 1971. My prison experiment continued to be influential, most notably during the 2003 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, during which I served as an expert witness for one of the American prison guards guilty of abusing Iraqi

prisoners during their night shift. My situationally based testimony in support of Sgt. Chip Frederick, head of that shift, at his trial in Bagdad had a remarkable effect. It was the first time that a psychological defense was used in a court of law to have an impact on the Judges' verdict—reducing the intended 15-year prison term for the soldier to only 4 years!

In 2007, I wrote about the SPE at length (across 10 chapters) in my book *The Lucifer Effect*, which has become an international bestseller. Later, in 2015, the study was memorialized in a full-length Hollywood motion picture, *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, which won a number of awards, and on which I served as consultant. I then deposited all the materials related to the SPE in Stanford University's historical archives. That included over 40 boxes of information related to the study and its aftermath, as well as all the videotapes and audiotapes we had made during the study. Those materials have been converted into formats available to anyone desiring to know about that experiment in depth and in detail.

Lucifer's Evil. In my book, *The Lucifer Effect*, I explore the dynamic transformations of good people who give in to the temptation to cross the line between good and evil, and become perpetrators of evil. These transformations represent a fundamental personality shift that has serious personal and social consequences. The shift is most likely in contexts where the social forces are powerful enough to overturn attributes such as personal morality, compassion, empathy, and a sense of justice. In this regard, evil is the exercise of power to intentionally hurt physically, harm psychologically, or morally destroy others.

The nucleus of evil is the central process of dehumanization by which certain people or groups are represented as less than human or as inhumane—not comparable in personal dignity to those in power positions who do the labeling. Such dehumanization is a social attribution process, which over time may evolve into transforming ordinary people into vicious perpetrators of evil behavior when they come to accept the stereotyped view of them. In some institutional situations, such as prisons, barracks or hospitals, this risk can be very high and common.

Contemporary social psychology has illuminated the ways in which social situations have the power to constrain individual choices and redirect behavior

from positive to negative directions. Situations are the behavioral contexts in which we live out our lives—some for better, others for the worse. Historically, psychology has tended to focus mainly on dispositional factors within individual actors, whereas this situational view puts the actors on a dynamic stage with audiences, co-actors, costumes, stage directions, and more. Some situations are created as power domains where leaders dominate followers and must continually demonstrate their greater control over them. Prisons are a prototypical instance of such power-centric settings, in which prisoners lose their individuality, are de-humanized, deindividuated, and come to be regarded as inferior beings by their controllers—the prison guards and administration. When that change in perception occurs, prisoners may be physically or psychologically abused. Many other situations share the basic properties of control and power that typifies prisons, such as mental hospitals, schools, summer camps, fraternities that haze new members, and military training facilities.

Converting Evil into Goodness: Villains into Heroes. On the positive side of psychology, we can change systems and construct situations in which people are trained to act courageously against evil. Many psychologists who have adopted a positive psychology orientation are engaged in spreading a strategy that encourages the development of moral courage against social malignancies. Currently, my *Heroic Imagination Project* (HIP) helps train ordinary people of all ages and backgrounds how to act courageously in challenging situations in their everyday lives. Programs are being developed around the world for schools and companies that first fortify individuals against passive anti-social behaviors and the tendency to go along with the group in order to “get along” with others, even when the group is doing immoral things. Then HIP encourages individuals to build heroic action networks to foster civic engagement and develop the skills necessary to implement behaviors and habits with the goal of improving the community. These applications of psychology are interventions based on empirical evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of those practices—practices that “humanize” others, reduce the power of some situations to encourage evil, and help spread social capital among all human beings. In this way, contemporary social psychology is harnessed to change external evil-

generating systems and situations through collective prosocial action in heroic networks.

Unexpected Emergence of Research and Therapy on Shyness and Time Perspective

The next year after SPE, while teaching my introductory psychology class at Stanford University, I proposed a metaphor for shyness as a psychological prison. People who are shy put themselves in a prison that limits their freedom of association and freedom of speech because they play the dual roles of being a guard who imposes restrictive rules and a prisoner who obeys them. I discovered that at that time there was no research on shyness in adolescents or adults, so my students and I went on to develop the Stanford Shyness Research Program. We engaged in many kinds of research: cross-cultural, large data collection, experimental, and case studies. We then created an experimental shyness clinic to try out different anti-shyness techniques on students, and we learned what specific aspects of shyness could be modified in eight-week group sessions. We did not focus on the history or etiology of a person's shyness, but rather, on three features common to shyness: cognitive/negative self-references, social/behavioral (meaning not knowing how to talk or act), and excessive physiological arousal. We invite each person to focus on which of those three elements were creating debilitating self-limits, and then we worked together on modifying them. Within eight-week group and individual sessions we often achieved 100% improvement. We then moved our clinic into the community, where Dr. Lynn Henderson headed it. Now called [The Shyness Institute](#) and focused on "Social Fitness Training," the Institute continues to operate to this day, along with a similar clinic at Palo Alto University. I also wrote a popular book about what we knew about shyness and how it could be overcome. *Shyness* became a national bestseller, with nearly half a million copies sold (Zimbardo, 1977).

Shortly after developing our shyness program, I began doing research on the psychology of time perspective, in part because of my awareness of how time was distorted during the week of the SPE. Again, this research broke new ground, and it led to the creation of an international time perspective consortium, which I headed initially. Later, my colleagues and I developed an original therapy based around client's profiles on the [Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory](#) (ZTPI). For details,

please see our work on this topic (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008; Zimbardo, Sword & Sword, 2012). I also helped to create an [International Council on Time Perspective](#), which has a bi-annual meeting in major European cities.

After the 25th anniversary of the SPE, two colleagues and I published our reflections on the study and mentioned new research and criminal justice reforms we undertook after the SPE was conducted (Zimbardo, Maslach, & Haney, 2000). More recently, the SPE has been criticized on methodological and other grounds, so I have compiled extensive rebuttals and posted them online here:

<https://www.prisonexp.org/links#responses>

Sunday, August 15, 2021, marks the golden anniversary of the Stanford Prison Experiment—50 long eventful years—during which I have worked to enrich my beloved field of Social Psychology. Please see the following pages for a few examples of this work.

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