



## IN CONTEXT

### APPROACH Conformity

#### BEFORE

**1935** Muzafer Sherif demonstrates how groups quickly come to develop a "social norm" in his autokinetic effect experiments.

**1940s** Kurt Lewin shows how people's behavior changes as their situations are altered.

**1963** Stanley Milgram conducts his obedience studies, which demonstrate that people will obey authority even if it means committing cruel acts.

#### AFTER

**2002** British psychologists Steven Reicher and Alex Haslam extend Zimbardo's study to explore positive rather than negative group behavior.

**2004** Zimbardo defends a former Abu Ghraib prison guard in court, arguing that the circumstances caused the guard's cruel behavior.

# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU PUT GOOD PEOPLE IN AN EVIL PLACE?

PHILIP ZIMBARDO (1933–)

**S**tanley Milgram's shocking obedience studies revealed that people will obey authority figures even if this entails acting against their own moral convictions. In the aftermath, Philip Zimbardo set out to discover how people would behave if they were put into a position of authority with unimpeded power. Would they

willingly use (or abuse) the power granted to them? In 1971 he carried out the now-famous Stanford Prison experiment, using 24 middle-class American college students who had undergone tests to establish that they were mentally healthy.

On the flip of a coin the students were randomly assigned the role of either "guard" or "prisoner," and one

## What happens when you put good people in an evil place?

Normal, healthy people start to behave according to the **social roles** assigned to them.

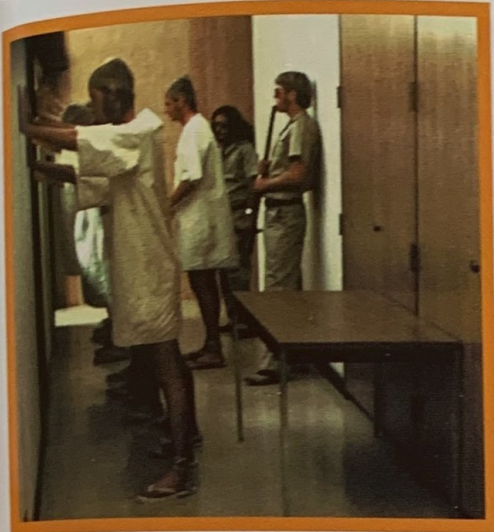
Those in the **position of power** will naturally use (and abuse) their authority.

Those in a **subordinate position** will submit to authority.

It is the **power of social situations**, rather than the dispositions of people, that leads to **evil behavior**.



**See also:** John B. Watson 66–71 ■ Zing-Yang Kuo 75 ■ Kurt Lewin 218–23 ■ Elliot Aronson 244–45 ■ Stanley Milgram 246–53 ■ Muzafer Sherif 337



The “prisoners” rebelled against the “guards,” but the guards’ tactics became more aggressive. They began dividing the prisoners into groups, giving some rewards and others punishments.

Sunday morning soon afterwards, the prisoners were arrested at their homes, booked at a real police station, then transferred to the basement of the Stanford University psychology department, which had been converted into a mock prison.

### The prison environment

In order to make the experience as psychologically real as possible, prisoners were stripped, searched, deloused, and given uniforms and bedding upon their arrival. To heighten their sense of anonymity and dehumanization, they were addressed only by their given numbers, and each had a chain bolted around one ankle to serve as a reminder of their lack of freedom.

The guards wore military-style uniforms and sunglasses (to make eye contact impossible), and carried keys, whistles, handcuffs, and clubs. They were on duty 24 hours a day, and were given complete control over the prisoners, with permission to employ whatever tactics they saw fit in order to maintain order.

To the researchers’ amazement, the environment quickly became so threatening to participants that the study had to be ended after only six days. Every guard became abusive and authoritarian; prisoners were denied food or bedding, hooded, chained, and made to clean toilet bowls with their hands. As the boredom increased, they used the prisoners as their playthings, making them take part in degrading games. After just 36 hours, one prisoner had to be released because of uncontrolled crying, fits of rage, and severe depression. When other prisoners showed symptoms of acute distress, Zimbardo realized the situation had become dangerous and ended the experiment.

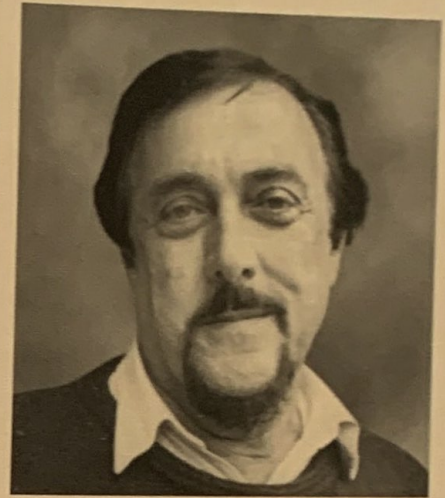
Zimbardo’s experiment showed that good people can be induced into behaving in evil ways by immersion in “total situations” that have an apparently legitimizing ideology and approved rules and roles. The implications are vast, as Zimbardo explains: “Any deed that any human being has ever done, however horrible, is possible for any of us to do—under the right or wrong situational pressures.” ■

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Our study... reveals the power of social, institutional forces to make good men engage in evil deeds.

**Philip Zimbardo**

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### Philip Zimbardo

Philip Zimbardo was born in New York City in 1933 to a Sicilian-American family, and was a classmate of Stanley Milgram at James Monroe High School in the Bronx. He went on to earn his BA degree from Brooklyn College, New York, and a PhD from Yale. He taught at several universities before moving to Stanford in 1968, where he is still a psychology professor.

In 2000, Zimbardo stated that he agreed with George Armitage Miller that it was time to “give psychology away to the public,” and his career has reflected this idea. In the 1980s he presented a popular TV series on “discovering psychology.” The American Psychological Foundation presented him with an award for Distinguished Lifetime Contributions to General Psychology in 2000, and two years later he was elected president of the American Psychological Association.

### Key works

1972 *The Stanford Prison Experiment*  
2007 *The Lucifer Effect*  
2008 *The Time Paradox*  
2010 *Psychology and Life*