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I'm dismayed to see the recent criticism of the Stanford Prison Experiment. I am not sure there is a single study in all of psychology about which more has been written over the years. Unfortunately, in part because of what appear to be pre-existing biases by the authors and the ad hominem nature of their criticisms, this new writing adds little if anything of value to that larger literature. The criticisms themselves contain a number of inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and misinterpretations. I think Phil Zimbardo has responded appropriately, thoughtfully, candidly, and persuasively to them and I have little to add, except to clarify some issues that I am in a special position to address.

The written descriptions that Phil, Curt Banks, and I provided of what went on in the study were accurate reflections of what we saw and experienced. We had the benefit of just having witnessed the events that transpired in the study, in the context in which they occurred, and had each other and our notes to rely on. Our goal was to faithfully report and validly interpret what had happened and why. I stand by the things I have written about the study, including the things that Phil Zimbardo and I have written about it together. I was the senior graduate student on the project, involved in the initial conceptualization of the study, all aspects of its planning, and, except for the last day when I was called to the East Coast for a family emergency, I was on site as much or more as anyone on the research team. Among other things, I can attest to the fact that the guards were not “just following orders” but rather were responding to the situational forces, role demands, and contextual cues that were built into the prison-like environment that had been created. In fact, I also can attest to the fact that, at least in my case, they certainly were not following any orders to be harsh and tough; some of them actually pushed back against me when I instructed them to treat the prisoners more humanely (even though they obviously knew I was one of the researchers).

In addition, I was the last person on the research team who saw the first prisoner who broke down, just 36 hours into the study. (I have refrained over the years from using his name in print, out of respect for his privacy; he has publicly identified himself, but I will continue to refer to him as “Prisoner 8612.”) Interestingly, although it is common knowledge that I was the researcher who released Prisoner 8612, and therefore was the only percipient witness to his emotional state at the time of his release, I was never directly interviewed by any of the recent critics of the study about what actually happened. Prisoner 8612 was in genuine emotional

distress when I saw him on the second night of the study—at times he was shaking, screaming, and crying. He seemed out of control, helpless, and despondent. I did not believe then and I do not believe now that he was “faking.” I treated him respectfully and compassionately, took him to a room outside the “prison yard” to talk with him, and gave him an opportunity to rest and hopefully calm down, while I tried to reach Phil Zimbardo. The possibility of a prisoner actually breaking down was not something that we had anticipated or planned for and we had no protocol for handling it. This was a grievous error on our part, one of several that we have candidly acknowledged (most stemming from the fact that, as researchers, we had placed ourselves in the midst of an environment whose power we underestimated). In any event, when I could not contact Phil, I returned to Prisoner 8612 and asked him if he wanted to stay in the study. It was clear to me that he was still very upset and, when he said he wanted to go home, I made the decision to release him and did. What he says about those events now, and why, is his business. But I accurately described what transpired and always have.

Notwithstanding the misinterpretations others have given it, the Stanford Prison Experiment stands as a dramatic demonstration of several fundamental psychological truths. The truths include the fact that a potentially very destructive dynamic is created when one group of people is given near-total power over another group of derogated others. Especially when it occurs in an otherwise powerful, dehumanizing environment such as a prison or prison-like environment, that dynamic can become punitive and abusive relatively quickly, lead people to engage in harsh and even destructive behavior from which they might otherwise have refrained, and facilitate their becoming inured to the suffering of others who bear the brunt of their mistreatment. It also can instill deep feelings of helplessness, degradation, despondency, and despair in the persons who are on the other side of this equation.

Of course, the Stanford Prison Experiment alone did not “prove” these fundamental truths. Rather it has endured over the years as a vivid illustration of them—in part because we selected the participants in the study on the basis of their psychological health and conventional “normality” (so that whatever happened could not be attributed to their alleged underlying “pathological” traits or dispositions), in part because they were all randomly assigned to their respective roles (underscoring the arbitrariness of the power dynamic that was created), and in part because of how quickly the situation devolved into one of extreme mistreatment. But the truths themselves have been repeatedly empirically documented in a wide range of other studies in social psychology and across various social scientific disciplines more generally. Other researchers—Asch, Bandura, Goffman, Milgram, Mischel, Rosenhan, and Ross among others—have provided similarly astute empirical observations and theoretical explanations about the power of certain kinds of situations to significantly modify and transform human behavior.

For me, these truths are more than textbook statements or laboratory findings. Unlike the recent critics, I have spent many thousands of hours inside actual prisons,

all too often documenting the operation of these very dynamics at work and assessing the toll that they take on prisoners (and, although it is much more difficult to study, on correctional staff members as well). By almost any measure, the conditions created in the “Stanford County Prison” represented a pallid, almost benign representation of the ones that exist inside actual prisons and jails. Nonetheless, I have seen the basic lessons of the Stanford Prison Experiment play out again and again—not always, and not in exactly the same way—but often enough to confirm the wisdom and real world application of those fundamental truths in actual correctional facilities and, by extension, in institutional settings that resemble them. Over the years, I also have had numerous correctional officials and line staff acknowledge to me the validity of the insights that were generated by the Stanford Prison Experiment and the importance of trying to resist the institutional pressures to succumb (whether they were successful in doing so or not).

In the writing I have done about the Stanford Prison Experiment, including writing co-authored with Phil Zimbardo, neither he nor I have ever suggested that these fundamental truths should be used as blanket justifications or excuses for the mistreatment of others, as these recent critics suggest. Rather quite the opposite. Of course, if it can be shown that powerful situational forces have played a significant role in causing or influencing someone’s behavior, then those forces should be taken into account (as the law, in its wisdom, provides). However, in my own professional work, I have spent decades urging prison systems to fundamentally “change the situation” in order to minimize if not eliminate abuse and mistreatment and to alleviate the suffering that occurs inside as a result. Toward that end, I have repeatedly recommended that prisons and jails introduce and implement greater levels of accountability inside correctional environments themselves and make these settings more accessible and transparent. This is the only way that outside ethical and legal norms and standards of humane treatment can be effectively brought to bear and that meaningful oversight and intervention can be introduced and maintained in places where they are often lacking.

To reduce the message of the Stanford Prison Experiment to the “suggestion that all it takes to make us enthusiastic sadists is a jumpsuit, a billy club, and the green light to dominate our fellow human beings,” as one of the recent critics has said, is a profound misinterpretation of the study, one that distorts and trivializes its results. It also does a disservice to this and similar studies that underscore the way that powerful, dehumanizing situations can and often do negatively shape and transform human behavior. This is a difficult, uncomfortable message for some to accept, with significant implications for social, legal, and correctional change. I believe this is why, at least in some quarters, the study continues to be fiercely debated after all these years. But the need or desire to reject the message does not justify these motivated attacks on the messengers.

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