Bad Apples and Bad Barrels: Lessons in Evil from Stanford to Abu Ghraib

By Michael Shermer | July 15, 2007 | 1

The photographs of prisoner abuse from Abu Ghraib shocked most Americans. But social psychologist Philip Zimbardo had seen it all 30 years before in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University, where he randomly assigned college students to be “guards” or “prisoners” in a mock prison environment. The experiment was to last two weeks but was terminated after just six days, when these intelligent and moral young men were transformed into cruel and sadistic guards or emotionally shattered prisoners.

As he watched the parade of politicians proclaim that Abu Ghraib was the result of a few bad apples, Zimbardo penned a response he calls the Lucifer Effect (also the title of his new book from Random House), namely, the transformation of character that leads ordinarily good people to do extraordinarily evil things. “Social psychologists like myself have been trying to correct the belief that evil is located only in the disposition of the individual and that the problem is in the few bad apples,” he says. But, I rejoin, there are bad apples, no? Yes, of course, Zimbardo concedes, but most of the evil in the world is not committed by them: “Before we blame individuals, the charitable thing to do is to first find out what situations they were in that might have provoked this evil behavior. Why not assume that these are good apples in a bad barrel, rather than bad apples in a good barrel?”

How can we tell the difference? Compare behavior before, during and after the evil event in question. “When I launched my experiment at Stanford, we knew these students were good apples because we gave them a battery of tests and every one of
Stu • Share
them checked out normal,” Zimbardo explains. “So, on day one they were all good apples. Yet within days the guards were transformed into sadistic thugs and the prisoners were emotionally broken.” Likewise at Abu Ghraib. Zimbardo notes that before going to Iraq, Staff Sergeant Ivan “Chip” Frederick—the military police officer in charge of the night shift on Tiers 1A and 1B, the most abusive cell blocks at Abu Ghraib—“was an all-American patriot, a regular churchgoing kind of guy who raises the American flag in front of his home, gets goose bumps and tears up when he listens to our national anthem, believes in American values of democracy and freedom, and joined the army to defend those values.”

The guards were transformed into sadistic thugs, and the prisoners were emotionally broken.

Before Abu Ghraib, Frederick was a model soldier, earning numerous awards for merit and bravery. After the story broke and Frederick was charged in the abuses, Zimbardo arranged for a military clinical psychologist to conduct a full psychological assessment of Frederick, which revealed him to be average in intelligence, average in personality, with “no sadistic or pathological tendencies.” To Zimbardo, this result “strongly suggests that the ‘bad apple’ dispositional attribution of blame made against him by military and administration apologists has no basis in fact.” Even after he was shipped off to Fort Leavenworth to serve his eight-year sentence, Frederick wrote Zimbardo: “I am proud to say that I served most of my adult life for my country. I was very prepared to die for my country, my family and friends. I wanted to be the one to make a difference.”

Two conclusions come to mind. First, it is the exceedingly patriotic model soldier—not a rebellious dissenter—who is most likely to obey authorities who encourage such evil acts and to get caught up in believing that the ends justify the means. Second, in The Science of Good and Evil (Owl Books, 2004), I argued for a dual dispositional theory of morality—by disposition we have the capacity for good and evil, with the behavioral expression of them dependent on the situation and whether we choose to act. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who knew a few things about the capacity for evil inside all of our hearts of darkness, explained it trenchantly in The Gulag Archipelago: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”
1 Comments

1. KissShane
   12:03 AM 11/1/08
   I'm not sure. I still believe people who did prison abuse are bad apple!!
   Reply | Report Abuse | Link to this

Add a Comment

You must log in or register as a ScientificAmerican.com member to submit a comment.

Ads by Google

WorldofWatches.com
Up To 80% Off On The World's Finest Watches. Secure Ordering, Shop Now!
WorldofWatches.com

Work Overseas in Science
Global careers in scientific fields
Submit your resume today.
www.globalcorporatecareers.com

NYTimes Online Packages
Get Digital Access To The New York Times Today. 99¢ For First 4 Weeks
www.NYTimes.com