

The Lucifer Effect¹

Reviewed by Major Joon K. Hong*

*This behavior lies just under the surface of any of us. The simplified accounts of genocide allow distance between us and the perpetrators of genocide. They are so evil we couldn't ever see ourselves doing the same thing. But if you consider the terrible pressure under which people were operating, then you automatically reassert their humanity—and that becomes alarming. You are forced to look at the situation and say "What would I have done?" Sometimes the answer is not encouraging.*²

I. Introduction

On 11 May 2009, Sergeant (SGT) John M. Russell of the U.S. Army shot five American Soldiers while he was undergoing treatment at a military mental stress clinic in Baghdad, Iraq.³ In the days and months following the shootings, more information regarding SGT Russell's background surfaced.⁴ He had been in the military for over twenty years, and believed that the military was "the most wonderful thing that ever happened to him."⁵ He was serving his third deployment in six years without prior incident.⁶ However, more than a week before the shootings, SGT Russell had expressed suicidal wishes as his colleagues became more alarmed by his behavior.⁷ He had visited the mental health clinic four times before the shootings.⁸ During those visits, SGT Russell stated that he had seen several doctors, who had made him angry while one particular doctor mocked him.⁹ On 11 May 2013, nearly three weeks after SGT Russell pled guilty to the shootings,¹⁰ more

information about his mental conditions emerged.¹¹ The Army's mental health board had discovered that SGT Russell suffered from severe depression with psychotic features and post-combat stress.¹² A brain scan also showed damage to the part of his brain that affected his impulse control.¹³ Other than these shootings, it appeared that SGT Russell lived a rather mundane life. So how could such a person who had been in the military for over twenty years commit such a heinous act? Did he act out on his latent sadistic impulses, or were there other environmental forces at work? *The Lucifer Effect*, authored by Philip Zimbardo, may provide an explanation as to how a seemingly ordinary man could commit such a crime of extraordinary moral magnitude.

In *The Lucifer Effect*, Philip Zimbardo clearly explains at the outset that his intent is to "understand the processes of transformation at work when good or ordinary people do bad or evil things."¹⁴ Specifically, he aims "to understand the nature of their character transformations when they are faced with powerful situational forces."¹⁵ Zimbardo is the original creator of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE), which was conducted in a university campus basement back in 1971. For this experiment, paid student volunteers assumed the roles of prisoners and prison guards in an attempt to simulate a realistic prison environment for the purposes of determining the degree to which a person adapts to their new roles.¹⁶ Zimbardo then recounts what he observed during the SPE and compares his findings with those findings uncovered during the investigation of the abuses at Abu Ghraib, Iraq, to show the extent to which situational forces could, in fact, transform ordinary human beings. Although some of the conclusions drawn from the SPE are not entirely convincing, Zimbardo does accomplish what he sets out to do in his book, which is to show that everyone of us is susceptible to the powers of situation. And unless we learn

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¹ PHILIP ZIMBARDO, *THE LUCIFER EFFECT: UNDERSTANDING HOW GOOD PEOPLE TURN EVIL* (2007).

² *Id.* at 15 (quoting Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch).

³ Timothy Williams, *U.S. Soldier Kills 5 of His Comrades in Iraq*, N.Y. TIMES, May 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/world/middle-east/12iraq.html?ref=global-home>.

⁴ *Army 'Broke' Soldier Held in Killings, Dad Says*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, May 13, 2009, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/30678715/ns/world_news-mid-east_n_africa/t/army-broke-soldier-held-killings-dad-says/.

⁵ Jomana Karadsheh et al., *U.S. Soldier Charged with Murder in Iraq Shooting Deaths*, CNN.COM, May 12, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/05/12/iraq.soldiers.killed/>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Rod Nordland, *Report Finds Lapses in Handling of G.I. Accused of Murders in Iraq*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 20, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/21/world/middleeast/21iraq.html?_r=0.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Eric M. Johnson, *U.S. Soldier Pleads Guilty to Murdering Fellow Servicemen in Iraq*, REUTERS, Apr. 22, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/22/us-usa-iraq-court-martial-idUSBRE93L0EL20130422>.

¹¹ Kim Murphy, *Five Killings at Camp Liberty in Iraq: Calculation or Despair*, L.A. TIMES, May 11, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-camp-liberty-russell-20130511,0,7643590.story>.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ ZIMBARDO, *supra* note 1, at 5.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 20, 31–32.

to recognize how vulnerable we really are, we could at any point find ourselves SGT Russell.

II. The Stanford Prison Experiment

One of the purposes of the SPE was to find out what would happen when good people are placed in a bad situation.¹⁷ Do good people resist corruption and the temptation to inflict pain, or do they become corrupt themselves?¹⁸ Would the violence that is endemic to most prisons be present in a simulated prison run by normal law-abiding citizens?¹⁹ To test his theory, Zimbardo hired normal, healthy, intelligent, male college students, who agreed to participate for \$15 per day, to become a prisoner or prison guard for two weeks.²⁰ Six were randomly assigned as guards, while nine were assigned as prisoners.²¹ The guards were given minimal instructions and training on how to run the simulated prison. Zimbardo provided the guards with a general overview of what he was hoping to accomplish. Specifically, Zimbardo informed the guards that he wanted to create a sense of powerlessness among the prisoners to see what the prisoners would do to regain power, degree of individuality, freedom, and privacy.²² The guards were given permission to create boredom, a sense of frustration, fear to some degree, and a notion of arbitrariness.²³ The guards were allowed to “produce the required psychological state in the prisoners for as long as the study lasted.”²⁴ The prisoners, themselves, were provided very little guidance as well; however, they were notified that they had the option of quitting the experiment at any time.²⁵

According to Zimbardo, an experiment that started off as a prospective lesson on how normal law-abiding citizens adjust to a prison-like environment transitioned into a lesson on how people could undergo powerful character transformation given the right conditions.²⁶ From the moment the guards took control, they humiliated the prisoners, enforced arbitrary rules, forced prisoners to play meaningless games for their amusement, and inflicted punishments short of physical assault.²⁷ One particular guard employed sadistic tactics, including compelling a prisoner to

pantomime sexual acts towards another prisoner without provocation. The abuses became so violent that Zimbardo had to stop the experiment a week early. Zimbardo observed how the guards became “totally absorbed in their illusory prison.”²⁸ Zimbardo also observed how the prisoners themselves had begun “to focus inward to selfishly consider what they had to do singly to survive” rather than teaming up with other inmates to protest their inhumane and deteriorating conditions.²⁹ The important lesson to be drawn from the SPE, according to the author, is that not only do people internalize the roles that they have accepted but that “most of us can undergo significant character transformations when we are caught up in the crucible of social forces.”³⁰ Unfortunately, this conclusion is not entirely convincing.

In his attempt to legitimize his experiment as a representation of a real prison capable of producing realistic responses, the author fails to account for the extent to which the prison guards were fully conscious of the artificiality of their environment, and explain how such knowledge could have affected their roles as prison guards. Did the prison guards truly undergo a character transformation, or were they merely doing their best to effectuate the intent of the experiment, one of which was to produce a sense of powerlessness?³¹ In fact, one prison guard informed Zimbardo that the experiment was important to him in order to find out how people would react to oppression.³² This revelation is consistent with one of the reasons why some of the student volunteers had agreed to participate in the first place, which was “to learn something about how they [would] handle themselves” in the event they became prisoners for evading the draft or protesting for civil rights.³³ In his scathing critique of the SPE, Erich Fromm writes:

The difference between behavior and character matters very much in this context. It is one thing to behave according

¹⁷ *Id.* at 20.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 20, 30, 32.

²¹ *Id.* at 56.

²² *Id.* at 31, 55–56.

²³ *Id.* at 55.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 48, 222.

²⁶ *Id.* at 55.

²⁷ *Id.* at 46–50.

²⁸ *Id.* at 86, 116.

²⁹ *Id.* at 110, 161.

³⁰ *Id.* at 211.

³¹ Compare the Stanford Prison Experiment with the Milgram experiment, where participants (the teachers) were requested to send electric shocks to punish another set of participants (the learners) whenever they failed to answer questions correctly. *Id.* at 266–72. From the standpoint of the teachers, the object of the Milgram experiment was to improve people’s learning and memory through the use of punishment. *Id.* The teachers were informed that they could send varying degrees of shock to the learners. *Id.* Unbeknownst to the teachers, the learners were not connected to any device where they could have actually felt pain. *Id.* The learners, however, were instructed to play-act according to the level of shock the teachers administered. *Id.* During the experiment, two out of every three teachers administered the maximum voltage allowed knowing full well that such shock could produce fatal results. *Id.* What makes the Milgram experiment particularly useful is that the realism the teachers operated under created a real conflict in which they had to make real choices. *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 188.

³³ *Id.* at 30–31.

to sadistic rules and another thing to want to be and to enjoy being cruel to people. The failure to make this distinction deprives this experiment of much of its value.³⁴

In the case of the SPE, it is unclear whether the guards resorted to sadistic behaviors knowing full well that they were operating in a plastic environment that was moderated by professionals who had the power to safeguard the interests of the prisoners. Furthermore, Zimbardo deprived the guards of the option to act humanely towards the prisoners when he informed them of the objectives of the experiment. Under such artificial circumstances, the guards were never confronted with a true dilemma that required them to choose between different courses of action.

Despite the concerns, above, the SPE does provide valuable insights into how ordinary people could readily assume sadistic roles provided that the system under which they operate sanction their behavior. Zimbardo states:

The most important lesson to be derived from the SPE is that Situations are created by Systems. Systems provide the institutional support, authority, and resources that allow Situations to operate as they do. After we have outlined all the situational features of the SPE, we discover that a key question is rarely posed: “Who or what made it happen that way?” Who had the power to design the behavioral setting and to maintain its operation in particular ways? Therefore, who should be held responsible for its consequences and outcomes? . . . The simple answer in the case of the SPE is—me!³⁵

This revelation is important because it provides a framework through which the abuses at Abu Ghraib could be explained and understood.

III. Why We Support Systems

The natural question that arises from Zimbardo’s revelation, above, is why we choose to support such systems that perpetuate evil in the first place. Zimbardo attempts to answer this question by providing the results of prior psychological tests and historical accounts of atrocities committed by ordinary people while framing these accounts in the context of sociological and psychological principles. In one example, Zimbardo describes an experiment in which

³⁴ ERICH FROMM, *THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS* 81 (1973).

³⁵ ZIMBARDO, *supra* note 1, at 226.

twelve nurses were asked whether they would follow a doctor’s order to administer twice the maximum dosage—four times the usual dosage—of a particular drug to patients.³⁶ Ten of the nurses said they would decline; however, when a new set of ten nurses were placed in a situation where the doctor actually ordered them to administer the double maximum dose, almost all of the nurses complied.³⁷ According to Zimbardo, these results reveal not only our willingness to blindly obey authority, but they also reveal our tendencies to overestimate our own virtues and adherence to ethical standards. Zimbardo warns against the danger of overestimating our own qualities for the following reason:

[T]hese biases can be maladaptive as well by blinding us to our similarity to others and distancing us from the reality that people just like us behave badly in certain toxic situations. Such biases also mean that we don’t take basic precautions to avoid the undesired consequences of our behavior, assuming it won’t happen to us.³⁸

So why do we blindly follow authority? Although Zimbardo offers the idea that we conform due to our inherent desire to belong,³⁹ his explanation does not adequately address the source of these inherent desires and how these desires relate to our relationship to authority. The following explanation from William J. Goode may provide an answer: “The individual’s emotional commitment to an adequate discharge of his role duties, and thus his behavioral consistency, derives ultimately from his experiences of censure and reward in his role relationships.”⁴⁰ Since a child in his earlier years is more likely to be punished for failure in his role performance towards a person, that deviation from the norm becomes censured.⁴¹ Therefore, since a vast majority of people have been reared to respect the role of authority, or else suffer the unpleasant consequences of not complying, the desire to follow authority is permanently wired into all of us.

IV. Abu Ghraib

It is not until Zimbardo explores the phenomenon in Abu Ghraib that the reader can appreciate the findings produced in the SPE and the manner in which he organizes

³⁶ *Id.* at 277.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.* at 261.

³⁹ *Id.* at 258–60.

⁴⁰ William J. Goode, *Norm Commitment and Conformity to Role-Status Obligations*, in *ROLE THEORY: CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH* 313, 314 (1966).

⁴¹ *Id.* at 313.

his book into topically logical order. Zimbardo starts off in this section stating the official military position—that the abuses were the isolated work of a few rogue Soldiers and not indicative of any systemic failure⁴²—and challenges this position by adeptly using various reports produced as a result of the fallout from the Abu Ghraib scandal. As Zimbardo delineates the findings from these official investigations, it becomes clear that whatever forces were working in the SPE were similarly present at Abu Ghraib. The prison guards at Abu Ghraib engaged in similar types of abuse as those inflicted in the SPE.⁴³ The prison guards were provided with minimal to no guidance on how to treat their prisoners.⁴⁴ The abuse at Abu Ghraib was sanctioned at the highest levels.⁴⁵ And most frightening of all, Abu Ghraib was not an isolated incident, but rather a small sample of the systematic tactics employed worldwide by the United States against detainees.⁴⁶ As a result of such systemic failures, those who were merely following orders were punished severely while those responsible for sanctioning the abuse got away.⁴⁷

V. Creating the Right System

Although Zimbardo successfully delineates the extent to which we can all fall prey to the whims of a system, he fails to capitalize on his findings by offering a solution consistent with the theme of his book. Instead, Zimbardo concludes his book by requesting his readers to remind themselves constantly of their individuality,⁴⁸ and to follow the examples of men and women who stood up against tyrannies of evil.

However noble these aspirations are, they undermine the very premise of the book by focusing on the power of the individual. One of the biggest lessons that Zimbardo relays is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to quit a role within a system. The better solution, consistent with the themes of *The Lucifer Effect*, would be to encourage leaders to create systems aimed at preventing people from reaching the tipping point of evil. In fact, Zimbardo offers a perfect example of how creating the right system could prevent

⁴² *Id.* at 325.

⁴³ See generally ZIMBARDO, *supra* note 1, at 324–79.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 387 (“Contributing factors were lack of comprehensive training of guards, poor or non-existent SOPs, . . . ROE [rules of engagement] not posted and not understood, overcrowding, uniform not standardized, and poor communication between the command and Soldiers.”).

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 383 (stating that the Military Police Company, responsible for running the Abu Ghraib facility, were “directed to change facility procedures to ‘set the conditions’ for [Military Intelligence] Interrogations”); see also *id.* at 393 (“Local CIA officers convinced COL Pappas and LTC Jordan that they should be allowed to *operate outside the established local rules and procedures.*”) (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 398.

⁴⁷ See generally *id.* at 324–79.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 453.

abuse. In a letter to Zimbardo, Terrence Plakias, a former Soldier in Iraq, states the following:

[U]nlike the soldiers at Abu Ghraib our unit had very competent leadership and things never got anywhere near the level as at Abu Ghraib. Our leaders knew the rules, set the standards, and supervised to ensure that the rules were followed. Infractions of the rules were investigated and when appropriate, violators were punished. Detention missions are dehumanizing for everyone involved. I think I went numb after the first two weeks. Active involvement by our leaders kept us from forgetting who we were and why we were there.⁴⁹

Mr. Plakias could not have stated better the role that leaders should aspire to assume. As legal advisors, we must assume the role of assisting our commanders with creating such ethical environments. We must also create a system within our own legal profession that will ensure that we do not lose sight of our own moral integrity and fall into the trap of providing advice aimed solely to appease the command or our own superiors. Furthermore, we must remain vigilant against social forces that have the potential to corrupt our moral fiber, and rid ourselves of any delusion that we are immune to such social forces.

VI. Conclusion

The Lucifer Effect is a terrifying reminder of how any one of us can fall prey to the whims of a system; and unless we recognize and understand the social forces that guide our behavior, we may become even more vulnerable to its whims. Sergeant Russell is a reminder of how fragile we all are. And although SGT Russell pled guilty to the shootings, Zimbardo forces us, at the very least, to inquire into the social forces that may have contributed to SGT Russell’s demise.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 354–55.