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My Contributions to Social Psychology Over Many Decades

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I was born during the 1930's depression and raised in the South Bronx, New York, a Catholic second-generation Italian—100% Sicilian, to be precise. A product of the mean streets and the public schools, I loved school and every one of my teachers whose mission I believed was to help Me to succeed in life. I was a really good student, confident, hardworking, socially popular, and happy with my place at James Monroe High School. Then in 1947, for my junior year, my family moved to North Hollywood, California. This imagined paradise turned out to be my social nightmare. For reasons I could not understand, I was shunned by classmates, socially rejected by every one of them. I developed various sicknesses (now known as psychosomatic) that often forced me to stay home from dreaded North Hollywood High school. Why was I being outed?

I discovered the bizarre answer in spring term when I was on the bus headed to a school baseball game from my teammate; I played center field, he was the left fielder, so we often had to share game information. I asked him point blank if he could share the reason for my being shunned. "Sure, most kids are afraid of you; they knew you were the

only Italian kid around, and then assumed your family must belong to the Mafia. And the Mafia kills people!” It did not matter that I was a skinny, bright blue-eyed gentle kid, the biased rumor could not be easily undone.

Thankfully, because of my continuing illnesses our family moved back to New York in 1948, enabling me to pick up where I left off for my senior year at Monroe High School. Within two months, I was voted the most popular boy and vice president of the senior class, and my sicknesses vanished!

I told my story of how I went from popular, to shunned, and back to popular again to my classmate, a little Jewish kid named Stanley—Stanley Milgram. After talking about it, we decided that the shift in fortunes was not about me, it was all about the differences in the situation. As Stanley used to say, “How do you know what you would do until you’re in the particular situation?” (Hartwig, 2021, p. 18). The conclusion we drew from this conversation was prophetic. In 1963, Milgram published the first of his pioneering but controversial obedience experiments demonstrating the power of authority over the individual. Then some years later, I followed up with the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE -- 1971) showing that ordinary people can be induced to change their behavior, sometimes dramatically so, according to the social roles they are given to play.

One other parallel would join the two of us in this situationist enterprise. Despite the profound implications of Milgram’s experiments, he got a lot of flak concerning its ethics because of the extreme stress it induced in many of his participants. Then in 1971, from August 14 to 21, I conducted the SPE, which I talked about at that year’s APA

convention. Afterward, Stanley came up to me, gave me a hug, and said, “Oh thanks. Now you’re going to take all the ethical attacks off my shoulders, because what you did was worse than what I did in my studies.” We kept in touch after that for many years, until he died prematurely at only age 50.

Beginnings - Finding My Way to Social Psychology

After graduating from Monroe High School with honors, I was offered a small fellowship from Brooklyn College, an economical but long subway ride from my Bronx home. In my freshman year I took introductory psychology, and it was the most boring course imaginable! Psychology in the 1950’s was all about rats running mazes and college kids learning nonsense syllables on memory drums. I got my only C grade in that pathetic course. So, I refocused on sociology and anthropology. Then in my senior year I took a class on research methods in psychology. With a partner, we had to try to replicate many classic experiments. I then realized that I loved doing research more than just reading about it. I went on to complete the psych major in one year. Just as I was gearing up for graduate school in Minnesota to work with Stanley Schachter on a new program of research on social affiliation. I got a call from K.C. Montgomery at Yale University. He made me an offer that I could not refuse. “Yale” was a big name in the Bronx, and closer to home than that Midwestern college. I went to work with Montgomery on a series of experiments on the dynamics of exploration—in rats! I tried to do research with as many different faculty as possible, including Neal Miller, with whom I published articles with such titles as, “Facilitation of exploration by hunger in rats” (Zimbardo & Miller, 1958).

As a graduate student at Yale, from 1954 to 1959, initially I was a “rat runner” doing research on their exploratory and sexual behaviors. I then switched into social psychology after reading Leon Festinger’s manuscript of his forthcoming book on cognitive dissonance theory, as part of a course taught by Jack Brehm, a new faculty member who had been Leon’s first graduate student. I realized the value of being well rounded, so I apprenticed with many different faculty members, among them, Neal Miller, Carl Hovland, Irving Janis, Hal Kelley, Seymour Sarason, and Irv Sarnoff.

I delayed submitting my Ph. D. dissertation for a year (from 1958-1959) to avoid being drafted into the Korean War. Instead, I was a post-doc fellow at the West Haven VA. That opportunity broadened my interests in psychopathology and treatment, as I worked closely with individual patients. It also helped broaden the range of my interests throughout my career, enabling me to publish research across nearly 50 totally different topic areas. My eclecticism made writing an introductory psychology text a delightful challenge. I have done successfully over dozens of editions of *Psychology and Life*, as well as *Core Concepts in Psychology*. I also created a PBS video series, *Discovering Psychology*, that has been widely viewed for decades by teachers and students around the world.

The Winding Road into the Stanford Prison

My first academic job in 1960 was a terrible one, at the NYU undergraduate campus in the Bronx. First, there were no graduate students there to assist with my new research endeavors into social affiliation and attitude change. Secondly, there were no colleagues in my area with whom to share ideas. Third, I had to balance any research time with a intensely heavy teaching load of five courses each semester.

My tactic was then to convert a few bright undergrads into viable RAs, so I was able to get some new research conducted and published. The road up the academic ladder to eventual tenure was to publish heavily in peer-reviewed journals. So, I worked my butt off, teaching, researching, writing, advising, and also caring for my newborn son, Adam.

In the mid 60's, I was delighted to learn of the pioneering new research on obedience by Stanley Milgram, then as a beginning assistant professor at Yale, conducted in the research laboratory that I had built earlier. Curiously, as I noted earlier, Stanley and I had been high school classmates in the Bronx. He was the smartest kid on the block, but uniformly disliked for his arrogance. When I visited the Yale Psych dept to give an invited colloquium, I asked Stanley if he could share some information about his new line of research. Surprisingly he said "No". Why? Because "Some people steal others' original ideas." So much for any imagined earlier friendship between us.

In 1967, I was invited to be a one-year visiting professor at Columbia University's social psychology program, to fill in for Bill McGuire who had gone on leave. There I embraced two of the most extraordinary students I had ever known: Lee Ross and Judy Rodin. I gave them a separate tutorial during which we created new ideas about attribution theory and did the first original research in that domain, which we published in 1969. I also taught part time as a visiting professor at Barnard College, the women's side of Columbia. There I was fortunate to interact with a brilliant student, Carol Dweck, with whom I later became a colleague when she joined the Stanford Psychology Department. I managed to get Lee Ross invited to Stanford University shortly after I got there, and he went on to enjoy a brilliant career. I also helped to get Judy Rodin invited to the Yale University

faculty the next year. She rapidly moved up the ladder at Yale, and then left to become President of the Rockefeller Foundation.

The gods of research blessings smiled on me shortly after, in the summer of 1967, when I was invited to be a faculty member on the first European Research Graduate Summer Program in Louvain, Belgium. I was the youngest of the American faculty of Bob Zajonc and Harold Gerard. We each had a team of European graduate students with whom we had to design, execute, and prepare for publication an original experiment. We all lived together in a small village. My team won by finishing a complete original experiment on deindividuation using Belgium soldiers as our participants. I later published that research as the start of related studies on anonymity.

My professional and personal life changed dramatically the next year in 1968, when I was invited to become a full professor with tenure at Stanford's psychology department. Over the next forty years, I was surrounded by amazing colleagues, like Walter Mischel, Al Bandura, Eleanor Maccoby, John Flavell, Al Hastorf, Gordon Bower, and so many others. Then we hired Lee Ross, and later Claude Steele, Hazel Markus, Bob Zajonc, Carol Dweck, and Jennifer Eberhardt. What a department!

I did my best research and prolific writing there, while teaching large introductory psych classes to hundreds and even a thousand students. I published vigorously on a dozen different topics. While there, I met and later married Christina Maslach, with whom I will celebrate 50 years of blissful marriage in August 2022. She is a distinguished professor Emerita at U.C. Berkeley and the pioneering scholar in the area of Job Burnout.

In August 1971, I undertook what was destined to become the landmark Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). 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 most 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 guards. Three weeks later in upstate New York's Attica Prison, inmates rioted and took over the entire facility, in part as a testimony to their lost comrade George Jackson. The governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, later ordered the National Guard to shoot to kill all prisoners in the open prison yard, which then also included many guards being held hostage.

I was invited as an expert witness before Congressional hearings on prisons held in Washington, DC, and in San Francisco. My testimony on how I believe 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 SPE in October 1971. My experiment continued to be influential, most notably during the 2003 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. I served as an expert witness for an American prison guard found 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, helped lead the judge to reduce the intended 15-year prison term for that soldier to only four years.

In 2007, I wrote about the SPE at length in my book, *The Lucifer Effect*, which became an international bestseller. Later, in 2015, it was memorialized in a major Hollywood motion picture, *Stanford Prison Experiment*, which won several awards, and on which I was the major consultant. I then deposited all the materials related to the SPE in Stanford University's historical archives. That included over 40 boxes of various 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. There is another readily accessible resource of much SPE information at the *Social Psychology Network*, headed by Scott Plous, one of my former Stanford graduate RAs.

Anyone who is interested can review the document my colleagues and I wrote 25 years after the SPE for interesting reflections, new research, and legal actions filed over these years (Zimbardo, Maslach, & Haney, 2000). Finally, I have compiled an extensive rebuttal to many recent criticisms of the SPE, available at: www.prisonexp.org/responses.

Lucifer's Evil

In *The Lucifer Effect*, I explore the dynamic transformations of good people who give into the temptation to cross the line between good and evil, and become perpetrators. It represents a fundamental character alteration of the human personality that has serious personal and social consequences. These transformations are more likely in those contexts where the social forces are powerful enough to overthrow the attributes of personal morality, compassion, empathy, or sense of justice. I asserted that 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 inhumane; not comparable in personal dignity to those in the power positions that 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. This risk is high in some institutional situations such as in prisons, military barracks or hospitals.

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. Psychology had tended to focus on dispositional factors within individual actors; 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 the prototypical instance of such power-centric settings, in which prisoners lose their individuality, are dehumanized, deindividuated, and come to be regarded as inferior beings by their controllers -- the prison guards and administration. When that change in perception occurs, they may be abused psychologically and physically. At times, many other situations share the basic properties of control and power that typifies prisons, such as mental hospitals, schools, summer camps, fraternities, and military training facilities.

The Seven Steps of Descent into Evil

1. *Mindlessly taking the first small step.* Consider the Milgram experiment. It began

with the subjects only giving a minor 15-volt shock. Later, the vast majority would go all the way up to a possibly deadly 450 volts shocks. When a person in a uniform or a lab coat tells us what to do, we tend to do it. We follow authorities' dictates. *Evil starts out small but can up end big and bad.*

2. *Dehumanizing others.* In the Stanford Prison Experiment, randomly assigned prisoners were arrested and numbered to dehumanize them. The well-known result was that the experiment went out of control. But a quote from Dennis Burning of Charlie Company concerning the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam more potently illustrates the impact of dehumanization: "I would say that most people in our company didn't consider the Vietnamese human." In that massacre, more than 340 unarmed civilians, women and children included, were killed by members of the U.S. Army's C-company. *Evil involves Dehumanizing the subjects of our hate.*

3. *Deindividuation of self.* The violent power of anonymity is highlighted in the work of anthropologist John Watson, who studied 23 cultures. He found that if they don't change their appearance before going into battle, only one out of eight kills, tortures, or mutilates the enemy. By contrast, when they do change their appearance in various ways before engaging their enemy, then 90 percent of these warriors kill, torture, and mutilate the other. I wrote about this in a paper on the irresistible lure of deindividuation (Zimbardo, 1969). *When we are anonymous, we become violent and prone to evil acts.*

4. *Diffusion of personal responsibility.* Following the New York City murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964, witnesses were said to have seen the slaying, but did nothing to stop the attack. While the initial number and situation of the witnesses has recently come into question, social psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley (1970) began research on what has been called the *bystander effect*. This line of research demonstrated a paradox:

the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely an individual among them is to help a victim. *If others don't do something, I won't either.*

5. *Blind obedience to authority.* Adolf Eichmann defended his role in the Holocaust by saying he was just following Hitler's orders. He did what he was told to do. But obedience isn't only about hurting others. In 1978, over 900 people committed suicide or were murdered in a Guyana jungle because they were blindly obedient to their pastor, the Reverend Jim Jones, head of the People's Temple. Mothers even killed their own children on command. *They gave up their lives because a religious authority told them to do so.*

6. *Uncritical conformity to group norms.* The notorious Manson family, responsible for the Tate-LaBianca murders (in 1969, Los Angeles) was a prime example of both blind obedience and conformity to group norms. The group norm was to do whatever Charles Manson said, including many murders, without question. His cadre of female 'wives' each said, 'Charlie made me do it. *Only doing what everyone else does creates social evil.*

7. *Passive tolerance of evil through inaction or indifference.* In 1972, Dr. Jack Hammond was confronted about the horrific conditions inside Willowbrook State School for learning disabled youth in Staten Island, New York. He responded that "the conditions here are no better or worse than any other facility for the mentally retarded in the state." But now consider that from 1972-1987 five children were murdered or disappeared. Andre Rand was the serial killer found responsible. *Cropsey* is a documentary film, by Joshua Zeman, that vividly portrays these evils in action. *Evil thrives on apathy and indifference.*

Converting Evil into Goodness, Villains into Heroes

On the positive side of psychology, it is possible to demonstrate how we can create situations in which people are trained to act courageously against all forms of evil.

Adopting a positive psychology orientation, many psychologists are engaged in spreading a strategy that encourages the development of moral outrage and 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 have been developed and are in use around the world by schools and companies. They first fortify individuals against passive anti-social behaviors, and against the tendency to go along with the group in order to “get along” with the others, even when the group is doing immoral things. Then individuals are encouraged to build heroic action networks that encourage civic engagement and to develop the skills necessary to implement behaviors and habits that have as their goal Community Goodness.

These useful applications of psychology are interventions based on empirical evidence that has clearly demonstrated that those practices, which “humanize” all others, while reducing the power of some situations to encourage evil, are the vital tools essential for spreading social capital among all human beings. Thus, contemporary social psychology demonstrates that we have the inner power to change external evil-generating systems and situations by collective social action in heroic networks where we work together to create new pro-social realities. Please visit ([www. Heroic Imagination.org](http://www.HeroicImagination.org))

Pioneering Research and Therapy on Shyness and on Time Perspective

The year after SPE, while teaching in my introductory psychology class at Stanford, I proposed a metaphor for shyness as a psychological prison. People who are shy put themselves in this prison that limits their freedom of association and speech because they play the dual roles of being the guard who poses those restrictive rules on the prisoner who

then reluctantly obeys them. I discovered at that time there was no psychological research on shyness in adolescents or adults, so my students and I went on to develop the Stanford Shyness Research Program.

In this program, we engaged in many kinds of research; cross-cultural, large data collection, experimental, as well as case studies. We then created an experimental shyness clinic to try out different techniques on shy students. We were very effective because we knew exactly what aspects of shyness could be modified in eight-week group sessions. We did not focus on history or etiology, but rather on three features common to shyness: cognitive/negative self-references; social/behavioral problems, not knowing how to talk or act; and excessive physiological arousal. We invite each client to focus in on which of those three conditions set debilitating self-limits, and then we work together on modifying them. Within eight-week group and individual sessions we often achieved one hundred percent improvements! We then moved our clinic into the community, where Dr. Lynn Henderson headed it. We renamed it, in positive style, as the *Social Fitness Clinic*. It continues in operation to this day, as does a similar clinic at Palo Alto University. I also wrote a popular trade book titled *Shyness: What it is, what to do* about it. Shyness became a national bestseller, with nearly a million readers (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. I created a new way of measuring individual differences in six domains of time perspective, the *Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI)*, that has become the standard in that domain. I then summarized new research my team and I had conducted in: *The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of time that will change your life*.

(Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008). Later, other colleagues and I developed an original therapy for PTSD based around different clients' profiles on the ZTPI, (Zimbardo, Sword, & Sword, 2012). More recently, we extended our view to use what we know about Time Perspective to enrich all aspects of life, by focusing on living and loving better with time perspective therapy (Zimbardo & Sword, 2017). I also helped to create an International Council on Time Perspective, which has had bi-annual meeting in European cities over the past decade.

Kurt Lewin's Legacy

August 15, 2021 was the golden anniversary of SPE—50 long eventful years—during which I have worked to enrich my beloved field of Social Psychology—by helping to understand the nature of evil and also of heroic goodness. The prison study, and much of my research conducted in its aftermath, were influenced by Lewin's pioneering thinking, experiments, generalist orientation, and social applications. I was recently honored to receive the Kurt Lewin Award (Zimbardo, 2016).

Now as I approach the ripe old age of 89 years, I look back with pride at the accomplishments outlined above, as well as my productivity (over 60 trade and textbooks, along with more than 600 articles and blogs). I was also an energetic President of APA, recipient of many international honorary degrees, along with prized awards for my teaching. I am sure that Mrs. Munvas and my other elementary school teachers at P. S. 25 would be pleased by their vital early contributions to my psychology career.

The Future of the Next Generation of Social Psychology

I will end these reflections by briefly considering what I think is the future path of social psychology. Surely less research on evil and more on positivity, kindness, caring, and heroism are needed. There could be more research on personality trait interactions with

social conditions. We need much more cross-cultural research and more well-developed international collaborations. The impact of climate change on our lives across many domains should also be a hot topic.

As our nation, and others, become ever more divided along political lines, social psychologists should be working with political psychologists to study ways for some reproachments. The same is true for growing major inter-nation global conflicts. Practical persuasion, a la Cialdini, in this time of perhaps a permanent pandemic, is needed to foster greater social adherence to vaccinations and social health habits. More research is needed on younger children's attitudes and beliefs about their uncertain future. Understanding racial and economic diversity is needed in planning better public policies. Cultural sensitivity training should be taught in all police academies. Simply put, it is clear to me that our world needs more well-informed, broadly trained social psychologists able to contribute to the solution of these and other vital issues.

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