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## A SITUATIONIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EVIL

*Understanding How Good People  
Are Transformed into Perpetrators*

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I endorse the application of a situationist perspective to the ways in which the antisocial behavior of individuals and the violence sanctioned by nations can be best understood, treated, and prevented. This view, which has both influenced and been informed by a body of social-psychological research and theory, contrasts with the traditional perspective that explains evil behavior in dispositional terms: Internal determinants of antisocial behavior locate evil within individual predispositions—genetic “bad seeds,” personality traits, psychopathological risk factors, and other organismic variables. The situationist approach is to the dispositional as public health models of disease are to medical models. Following basic principles of Lewinian theory, the situationist perspective propels external determinants of behavior to the foreground, well beyond the status as merely extenuating background circumstances. Unique to this situationist approach is the use of experimental laboratory and field research to demonstrate vital phenomena, that other approaches only analyze verbally or rely on archival or

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The political views expressed in this chapter represent solely those of a private citizen/patriot, and in no way should be construed as being supported or endorsed by any of my professional or institutional affiliations.

correlational data for answers. The basic paradigm presented in this chapter illustrates the relative ease with which ordinary, "good" men and women can be induced into behaving in "evil" ways by turning on or off one or another social situational variable.

I begin the chapter with a series of "oldies but goodies"—my laboratory and field studies on deindividuation, aggression, vandalism, and the Stanford prison experiment, along with a process analysis of Milgram's obedience studies, and Bandura's analysis of "moral disengagement." My analysis is extended to the evil of inaction by considering bystander failures of helping those in distress. This body of research demonstrates the underrecognized power of social situations to alter the mental representations and behavior of individuals, groups, and nations. Finally, I explore extreme instances of "evil" behavior for their dispositional or situational foundations: torturers, death-squad violence workers, and terrorist suicide bombers.

*Evil* can be defined as intentionally behaving, or causing others to act, in ways that demean, dehumanize, harm, destroy, or kill innocent people. This behaviorally focused definition makes the individual or group responsible for purposeful, motivated actions that have a range of negative consequences for other people. The definition excludes accidental or unintended harmful outcomes, as well as the broader, generic forms of institutional evil, such as poverty, prejudice, or destruction of the environment by agents of corporate greed. However, it does include corporate forms of wrongdoing, such as the marketing and selling of products with known disease-causing, death-dealing properties (e.g., cigarette manufacturers or other substance/drug dealers). The definition also extends beyond the proximal agent of aggression, as studied in research on interpersonal violence, to encompass those in distal positions of authority whose orders or plans are carried out by functionaries. Such agents include military commanders and national leaders, such as Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, and others whom history has identified as tyrants for their complicity in the deaths of untold millions of innocent people.

History will also have to decide on the evil status of President George W. Bush's role in declaring a pre-emptive, aggressive war against Iraq in March 2003, with dubious justification, that resulted in widespread death, injury, destruction, and enduring chaos. We might also consider a simpler definition of evil, proposed by my colleague, Irving Sarnoff: "Evil is knowing better but doing worse."

We live in a world cloaked in the evils of civil and international wars, of terrorism (home-grown and exported), homicides, rapes, domestic and child abuse, and countless other forms of devastation. The same human mind that creates the most beautiful works of art and extraordinary marvels of technology is equally responsible for the perversion of its own perfection. This most dynamic organ in the universe has served as a seemingly

endless source of ever viler torture chambers and instruments of horror in earlier centuries, the "bestial machinery" unleashed on Chinese citizens by Japanese soldiers in their rape of Nanking (see Chang, 1997), and the recent demonstration of "creative evil" in the destruction of the World Trade Center by "weaponizing" commercial airlines. We continue to ask, *why?* Why and how is it possible for such deeds to continue to occur? How can the unimaginable become so readily imagined? These are the same questions that have been asked by generations before ours.

I wish I had answers to these profound questions about human existence and human nature. Here I can offer modest versions of possible answers. My concern centers around how good, ordinary people can be recruited, induced, seduced into behaving in ways that could be classified as evil. In contrast to the traditional approach of trying to identify "evil people" to account for the evil in our midst, I focus on trying to outline some of the central conditions that are involved in the transformation of good people into perpetrators of evil.

#### LOCATING EVIL WITHIN PARTICULAR PEOPLE: THE RUSH TO THE DISPOSITIONAL

"Who is responsible for evil in the world, given that there is an all-powerful, omniscient God who is also all-Good?" That conundrum began the intellectual scaffolding of the Inquisition in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. As revealed in *Malleus Maleficarum*, the handbook of the German Inquisitors from the Roman Catholic Church, the inquiry concluded that "the Devil" was the source of all evil. However, these theologians argued the Devil works his evil through intermediaries, lesser demons, and, of course, human witches. So the hunt for evil focused on those marginalized people who looked or acted differently from ordinary people, who might qualify, under rigorous examination of conscience and torture, as "witches," and then put them to death. The victims were mostly women who could be readily exploited without sources of defense, especially when they had resources that could be confiscated. An analysis of this legacy of institutionalized violence against women is detailed by historian Anne Barstow (1994) in *Witchcraze*. Paradoxically, this early effort of the Inquisition to understand the origins of evil and develop interventions to cope with it instead fomented new forms of evil that fulfill all facets of my definition. The phenomenon of the Inquisition exemplifies the notion of simplifying the complex problem of widespread evil by identifying *individuals* who might be the guilty parties and then making them "pay" for their evil deeds.

Most traditional psychiatry as well as psychodynamic theory also locate the source of individual violence and antisocial behavior within the

psyches of disturbed people, often tracing it back to early roots in unresolved infantile conflicts. Like genetic views of pathology, such psychological approaches seek to link behaviors society judges as pathological to pathological origins—be they defective genes, “bad seeds,” or premorbid personality structures. However, this view overlooks the fact that the same violent outcomes can be generated by very different types of people, all of whom give no hint of evil impulses. My colleagues and I (Lee, Zimbardo, & Berthoff, 1977) interviewed and tested 19 inmates in California prisons who had all recently been convicted of homicide. Ten of these killers had a long history of violence, showed lack of impulse control (on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory), were decidedly masculine in sexual identity, and generally extraverted. The other murderers were totally different. They had never committed any criminal offense prior to the homicide—their murders were totally unexpected, given their mild manner and gentle disposition. Their problem was an *excessive* impulse control that inhibited their expression of any feelings. Their sexual identity was feminine or androgynous, and the majority were shy. These “shy sudden murderers” killed just as violently as did the habitual criminals, and their victims died just as surely, but it would have been impossible to predict this outcome from any prior knowledge of their personalities, which were so different from the more obvious habitual criminals.

The concept of an authoritarian personality syndrome was developed by a team of psychologists (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) after World War II who were trying to make sense of the Holocaust and the broad appeal of fascism and Hitler. Their dispositional bias led them to focus on identifying a set of personality factors that might underlie the fascist mentality. However, they overlooked the host of processes operating at political, economic, societal, and historical levels, all of which influenced and directed so many millions of individuals into a constrained behavioral channel of hating Jews and other minority groups, while endorsing and even applauding the views and policies of their dictator.

This tendency to explain observed behavior by reference to internal dispositional factors while ignoring or minimizing the impact of situational variables has been termed the fundamental attribution error (FAE) by my colleague Lee Ross (1977). We are all subject to this dual bias of overutilizing dispositional analyses and underutilizing situational explanations when faced with ambiguous causal scenarios we want to understand. We succumb to this effect because our educational institutions, social and professional training programs, and societal agencies are all geared toward a focus on individual, dispositional orientations. Dispositional analyses are a central operating feature of cultures that are based on individualistic rather than collectivist values (see Triandis, 1994). Thus, it is individuals who are lauded with praise and fame and wealth for achievement and are

honored for their uniqueness, but it is also individuals who are blamed for the ills of society. Our legal, medical, educational, and religious systems all are founded on principles of individualism.

Dispositional analyses of antisocial, or non-normative, behaviors typically include strategies for behavior modification, whereby deviant individuals learn to conform better to social norms, or facilities for excluding them from society via imprisonment, exile, or execution. Locating evil within selected individuals or groups carries with it the “social virtue” of taking society “off the hook” as blameworthy; societal structures and political decision making are exonerated from bearing any burden of the more fundamental circumstances that create racism, sexism, elitism, poverty, and marginal existence for some citizens. Furthermore, this dispositional orientation to understanding evil implies a simplistic, binary world of good people, like us, and bad people, like them. That clear-cut dichotomy is divided by a manufactured line that separates good and evil. We then take comfort in the illusion that such a line constrains crossovers in either direction. We could never imagine being like *them*, of doing their unthinkable dirty deeds, and do not admit them into our company because they are so essentially different as to be unchangeable. This extreme position also means we forfeit the motivation to understand how they came to engage in what we view as evil behavior. I find it helpful to remind myself of the geopolitical analysis of the Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a victim of persecution by the Soviet KGB, that the line between good and evil lies in the center of every human heart.

### THE TRANSFORMATION OF GOOD PEOPLE INTO AGENTS OF DESTRUCTION

My bias is admittedly more toward situational analyses of behavior and comes from my training as an experimental social psychologist as well as from having grown up in poverty, in a New York City ghetto of the South Bronx. I believe that dispositional orientations are more likely to correlate with affluence: The rich want to take full credit for their success, whereas the situationists hail more from the lower classes who want to explain the obvious dysfunctional lifestyles of those around them in terms of external circumstances rather than internal failures. I am primarily concerned with understanding the psychological and social dynamics involved when an ordinary, “good” person begins to act in antisocial ways and, in the extreme, behaves destructively toward the property or person of others. I saw, firsthand, my childhood friends go through such transformations, and I wondered how and why they changed so drastically and whether I could also change like that (e.g., they were bullied, failed in school, parents fought all the time, nothing to look forward to). I was similarly fascinated with the

tale of the behavioral transformation of Robert Louis Stevenson's good Dr. Jekyll into the murderous Mr. Hyde. What was in his chemical formula that could have such an immediate and profound impact? Even as a child, I wondered if there were other ways to induce such changes, since my friends did not have access to his elixir of evil before they did such bad things to other people. I would later discover that social psychology had recipes for such transformations.

Our mission is to understand better how virtually anyone could be recruited to engage in evil deeds that deprive other human beings of their dignity, humanity, and life. The dispositional analysis has the comforting side effect of enabling those who have not yet done wrong to righteously assert, "Not *me*, I am different from those kinds of people who did that evil deed!" By positing a "me-us-them" distinction, we live with the illusion of moral superiority firmly entrenched in the pluralistic ignorance that comes from not recognizing the set of situational and structural circumstances that empowered others—like ourselves—to engage in deeds that they too once thought were alien to their nature. We take false pride in believing that "I am not that kind of person."

I argue that the human mind is so marvelous that it can adapt to virtually any known environmental circumstance in order to survive, to create, and to destroy, as necessary. We are not born with tendencies toward good or evil but with mental templates to do *either*. What I mean is that we have the potential to be better or worse than anyone who has existed in the past, to be more creative and more destructive, to make the world a better place or a worse place than before. It is only through the recognition that no one of us is an island, that we all share the human condition, that humility takes precedence over unfounded pride in acknowledging our vulnerability to situational forces. If we want to develop mechanisms for combating such malevolent transformations, then it seems essential to learn to appreciate the extent to which ordinary people can be seduced or initiated into the performance of evil deeds. We need to focus on discovering the mechanisms among the causal factors that influence so many to do so much bad, to commit so much evil throughout the globe. (See also the breadth of ideas presented by Baumeister, 1997; Darley, 1992; Staub, 1989; Waller, 2002.)

### THE MILGRAM OBEDIENCE EXPERIMENTS

The most obvious power of the experimental demonstration by Stanley Milgram (1974) of blind obedience to authority lies in the unexpectedly high rates of such compliance, with the majority—two-thirds—of the subjects "going all the way" in shocking a victim with apparently lethal consequences. His finding was indeed shocking to most of those who read about it or saw his movie version of the study, because it revealed that a variety

of ordinary American citizens could so readily be led to engage in "electrocuting a nice stranger." But the more significant importance of his research comes from what he did after that initial classic study with Yale College undergraduates. Milgram conducted 18 experimental variations on more than a *thousand* subjects from a variety of backgrounds, ages, both genders, and all educational levels. In each of these studies he varied one social-psychological variable and observed its impact on the extent of obedience to the unjust authority's pressure to continue to shock the "learner-victim." He was able to demonstrate that compliance rates of those who delivered the maximum 450 volts to the hapless victim could soar to 90% or could be reduced to less than 10% by introducing a single variable into the compliance recipe.

Milgram found that obedience was maximized when subjects first observed peers behaving obediently; it was dramatically reduced when peers rebelled or when the victim acted like a masochist asking to be shocked. What is especially interesting to me about this last result are the data Milgram provides on the predictions of his outcome by 40 psychiatrists who were given the basic description of the classic experiment. Their average estimate of the percentage of U.S. citizens who would give the full 450 volts was fewer than 1%. Only sadists would engage in such sadistic behavior, they believed. In a sense, this is the comparison level for appreciating the enormity of Milgram's finding. These experts on human behavior were *totally* wrong because they ignored the situational determinants of behavior in the procedural description of the experiment and overrelied on the dispositional perspective that comes from their professional training. Their error is a classic instance of the FAE at work. In fact, in this research, the average person does *not* behave like a sadist when an apparently masochistic victim encourages him or her to do so.

Milgram's intention was to provide a paradigm in which it was possible to quantify "evil" by the number of buttons a subject pushed on a shock generator, which allegedly delivered shocks to a mild-mannered confederate, playing the role of the pupil or learner, while the subject enacted the teacher role. Some of the procedures in this research paradigm that seduced many ordinary citizens to engage in evil offer parallels to compliance strategies used by "influence professionals" in real-world settings, such as salespeople, cult recruiters, and our national leaders (see Cialdini, 2001).

### TEN INGREDIENTS IN THE SITUATIONIST'S RECIPE FOR BEHAVIORAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Among the influence principles in Milgram's paradigm for getting ordinary people to do things they originally believed they would not do are the following:

1. Presenting an acceptable justification, or rationale, for engaging in the undesirable action, such as wanting to help people improve their memory by judicious use of punishment strategies. In experiments this justification is known as the “cover story” because it is intended to cover up the procedures that follow, which might not make sense on their own. The real-world equivalent of the cover story is an ideology, such as “national security,” that often provides the nice big lie for instituting a host of bad, illegal, and immoral policies.
2. Arranging some form of contractual obligation, verbal or written, to enact the behavior.
3. Giving participants meaningful roles to play (e.g., teacher, student) that carry with them previously learned positive values and response scripts.
4. Presenting basic rules to be followed, which seem to make sense prior to their actual use, but then can be arbitrarily used to justify mindless compliance. “Failure to respond must be treated as an error” was a Milgram rule for shock omissions as well as for false commissions. But then what happens when the learner complains of a heart condition, wants to quit, then screams, followed by a thud and silence? The learner’s apparent inability to respond to the teacher’s testing due to death or unconsciousness must be continually challenged by further shocks, since omission equals commission. The proceedings do not make sense at all: How could the teacher be helping to improve the memory of a learner who is incapacitated or dead? All too many participants stopped engaging in such basic, obvious critical thinking endeavors as their confusion and stress mounted.
5. Altering the semantics of the act and action: from hurting victims to helping learners by punishing them.
6. Creating opportunities for diffusion of responsibility for negative outcomes; others will be responsible, or it will not be evident that the actor will be held liable.
7. Starting the path toward the ultimate evil act with a small, insignificant first step (only 15 volts).
8. Increasing each level of aggression in gradual steps that do not seem like noticeable differences (only 30 volts).
9. Gradually changing the nature of the influence authority from “just” to “unjust,” from reasonable and rational to unreasonable and irrational.
10. Making the “exit costs” high and the process of exiting difficult by not permitting usual forms of verbal dissent to qualify as behavioral disobedience.

Such procedures are utilized across varied influence situations, in

which those in authority want others to do their bidding but know that few would engage in the “end game” final solution without first being properly prepared psychologically to do the “unthinkable.” I would encourage readers to engage in the thought exercise of applying these compliance principles to the tactics used by the Bush administration to cajole Americans into endorsing the preemptive invasion of Iraq (discussed further later in the chapter).

### **LORD OF THE FLIES AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DEINDIVIDUATION**

William Golding’s (1954) Noble prize-winning novel of the transformation of good British choir boys into murderous beasts centers on the point of change in mental state and behavior that follows a change in physical appearance. Painting themselves, changing their outward appearance, made it possible for some of Golding’s characters to disinhibit previously restrained impulses to kill a pig for food. Once that alien deed of killing another creature was accomplished, they could then continue on to kill, with pleasure, both animals and people alike. Was Golding describing a psychologically valid principle in his use of external appearance as catalyst to dramatic changes in internal and behavioral processes? That is the question I answered with a set of experiments and field studies on the psychology of deindividuation (Zimbardo, 1970).

The basic procedure involved having young women deliver a series of painful electric shocks to each of two other young women whom they could see and hear in a one-way mirror before them. Half were randomly assigned to a condition of anonymity, or deindividuation, half to one of uniqueness, or individuation. The appearance of the four college student subjects in each deindividuation group was concealed, and they were given identifying numbers in place of their names. The comparison individuation subjects in the four-woman groups were called by their names and made to feel unique. They were asked to make the same responses of shocking each of two female “victims”—all with a suitable cover story, the big lie that they never questioned.

The results were clear: Women in the deindividuation condition delivered twice as much shock to both victims as did the women in the individuated comparison condition. Moreover, the deindividuated subjects shocked both victims, the one previously rated as pleasant and the other as unpleasant, more over the course of the 20 trials, whereas the individuated subjects shocked the pleasant woman less over time than they did the unpleasant one. One important conclusion flows from this research and its various replications and extensions, some using military personnel: Anything that makes a person feel anonymous, as if no one knows who he or she is, creates the potential for that person to act in evil ways—if the situation gives permission for violence.

## HALLOWEEN DISGUISES AND AGGRESSION IN CHILDREN

Outside the laboratory, *masks* may be used to create the anonymity needed to disinhibit typically restrained behavior. For example, people mask themselves at Carnival rituals in many Catholic countries. Children in the United States don masks and costumes for Mardi Gras and Halloween parties. Bringing the laboratory to the party, so to speak, Fraser (1974) arranged for elementary school children to go to a special, experimental Halloween party given by their teacher. There were many games to play and for each game won, tokens were earned that could be exchanged for gifts at the end of the party. Half the games were nonaggressive in nature, and half were matched in content but involved aggression: Physical confrontations between two children were necessary to reach the goal and win the contest. The experimental design was a within-subject (A-B-A) format: in the first phase the games were played without costumes; then the costumes arrived and were worn as the games continued; finally, the costumes were removed and the games went on for the third phase (each phase lasted about an hour). The data are striking testimony to the power of anonymity. Aggression increased significantly as soon as the costumes were worn, more than doubling from the initial base level average. When the costumes were removed, aggression dropped back well below the initial base rate. Equally interesting was the second result: that aggression had negative instrumental consequences on winning tokens—that is, it costs money to be aggressive—but that cost did not matter when the children were anonymous in their costumes. The least number of tokens won occurred during the costumed anonymity phase, when aggression was highest.

## CULTURAL WISDOM OF CHANGING WARRIORS' APPEARANCES

Let us leave the laboratory and the fun and games of children's parties to enter the real world, where these issues of anonymity and violence may take on life-and-death significance. Some societies go to war without having the young male warriors change their appearance, whereas others always include ritual transformations of appearance by painting or masking the warriors (as in *Lord of the Flies*). Does that change in external appearance make a difference in how warring enemies are treated? After reading my Nebraska Symposium chapter, Harvard anthropologist John Watson (1973) posed a research question, then went to the human area files to find the answer, then published the data: (1) the societies that did or did not change appearance of warriors prior to going to war, and (2) the extent to which they killed, tortured, or mutilated their victims. The results are

striking confirmation of the prediction that anonymity promotes destructive behavior, when permission is also given to behave in aggressive ways that are ordinarily prohibited. Of the 23 societies for which these two data sets were present, the majority (12 of 15, 80%) of societies in which warriors changed their appearance were those noted as most destructive, whereas only one of the eight societies in which the warriors did *not* change appearance before going to battle was noted as destructive. Cultural wisdom dictates that when old men want usually peaceful young men to harm and kill other young men like themselves in a war, it is easier to do so if they first change their appearance by putting on uniforms or masks or painting their faces. With that anonymity in place, out goes their usual internal focus of compassion and concern for others.

## THE THEORETICAL MODEL OF DEINDIVIDUATION AND BANDURA'S MODEL OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

The psychological mechanisms involved in getting good people to do evil are embodied in two theoretical models, the first elaborated by me (Zimbardo, 1970) and modified by input from subsequent variants on my deindividuation conceptions, notably by Diener (1980). The second is Bandura's model of moral disengagement (1998, 2003), which specifies the conditions under which anyone can be led to act immorally, even those who usually ascribe to high levels of morality.

Bandura's model outlines how it is possible to morally disengage from destructive conduct by using a set of cognitive mechanisms that alter (1) one's perception of the reprehensible conduct (e.g., by engaging in moral justifications, making palliative comparisons, using euphemistic labeling for one's conduct); (2) one's sense of the detrimental effects of that conduct (e.g., by minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences); (3) one's sense of responsibility for the link between reprehensible conduct and the detrimental effects (e.g., by displacing or diffusing responsibility); and (4) one's view of the victim (e.g., by dehumanizing him or her, attributing the blame for the outcome to the victim).

## Dehumanization in Action: "Animals" by Any Other Name Are College Students

A remarkable experiment by Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson (1975) reveals how easy it is to induce intelligent college students to accept a dehumanizing label of other people and then to act aggressively based on that stereotyped term. Four participants were led to believe they were overhearing the research assistant tell the experimenter that the students from another college were present to start the study in which they were to

deliver electric shocks of varying intensity to the participants (according to the dictates of a reasonable cover story). In one of the three randomly assigned conditions, the subjects overheard the assistant say to the experimenter that the other students seemed “nice”; in a second condition, they heard the other students described as “animals”; in the third group, the assistant did not label the students in the alleged other group.

The dependent variable of shock intensity clearly reflected this situational manipulation. The subjects gave the highest levels of shock to those labeled in the dehumanizing way as “animals,” and their shock level increased linearly over the 10 trials. Those labeled “nice” were given the least shock, whereas the unlabelled group fell in the middle of these two extremes. Thus, a single word—*animals*—was sufficient to incite intelligent college students to treat those so labeled as if they deserved to be harmed. On the plus side, the labeling effect resulted in others being treated with greater respect if someone in authority labeled them positively. The graphed data is also of interest: On the first trial there is no difference across the three experimental treatments in the level of shock administered, but with each successive opportunity, the shock levels diverge. Those shocking the so-called “animals” shock them more and more over time, a result comparable to the escalating shock level of the deindividuated female students in my earlier study. That rise in aggressive responding over time, with practice, or with experience belies a self-reinforcing effect of aggressive or violent responding: It is experienced as increasingly pleasurable.

What my model adds to the mix of what is needed to get good people to engage in evil deeds is a focus on the role of cognitive controls that usually guide behavior in socially desirable and personally acceptable ways. The shift from good to evil behavior can be accomplished by knocking out these control processes, blocking them, minimizing them, or reorienting them. Doing so suspends conscience, self-awareness, sense of personal responsibility, obligation, commitment, liability, morality, and analyses in terms of costs–benefits of given actions. The two general strategies for accomplishing this objective are (1) reducing cues of social accountability of the actor (i.e., “No one knows who I am, nor cares to know”), and (2) reducing concerns for self-evaluation by the actor. The first eliminates concerns for social evaluation and social approval by conveying a sense of anonymity to the actor and diffusing personal responsibility across others in the situation. The second strategy stops self-monitoring and consistency monitoring by relying on tactics that alter states of consciousness (e.g., via drugs, arousing strong emotions or hyperintense actions, creating a highly focused present-time orientation wherein there is no concern for past or future), and by projecting responsibility outside the self and onto others.

My research and that of other social psychologists (see Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1983) on deindividuation differs from the paradigm in

Milgram’s studies in that there is no authority figure present, urging the subject to obey. Rather, the situation is created in such a way that subjects act in accordance to paths made available to them, without thinking through the meaning or consequences of those actions. Their actions are not cognitively guided, as they are typically, but directed by the actions of others in proximity to them or by their strongly aroused emotional states and situationally available cues, such as the presence of weapons.

### Environmental Anonymity Breeds Vandalism

It is possible for certain environments to convey a sense of anonymity to those who live in, or pass through, their midst. The people living in such environments do not have a sense of community. Vandalism and graffiti may be interpreted as an individual’s attempt for public notoriety in a society that deindividuates him or her.

I conducted a simple field study to demonstrate the ecological differences between places ruled by anonymity versus those conveying a sense of community. I abandoned used but good-condition cars in the Bronx, New York City, and in Palo Alto, California, one block away from New York University and Stanford University, respectively. License plates were removed and hoods raised slightly to serve as ethological “releaser cues” for the potential vandals’ attack behavior. It worked swiftly in the Bronx, as we watched and filmed from a vantage point across the street. Within 10 minutes of officially beginning this study, the first vandals surfaced. This parade of vandals continued for 2 days, by which time there was nothing of value left to strip; then they simply began destroying the remains. In 48 hours we recorded 23 separate destructive contacts by individual or groups, who either took something from the abandoned vehicle or did something to wreck it. Curiously, only one of these episodes involved adolescents; the rest of the vandals were adults, many well dressed and many driving cars, so that they might qualify as, at least, lower middle class. Anonymity can make brazen vandals of us all. But what about the fate of the abandoned car in Palo Alto? Our time-lapse film revealed that no one vandalized any part of the car over a 5-day period. When we removed the car, three local residents called the police to say that an abandoned car was being stolen (the local police had been notified of our field study). That is one definition of “community,” where people care about what happens on their turf, even to the person or property of strangers, with the reciprocal assumption that they would also care about them.

I now feel that any environmental or societal conditions that contribute to making some members of society feel that they are anonymous—that no one knows or cares who they are, that no one recognizes their individuality and thus their humanity—makes them potential assassins and vandals, a danger to my person and my property—and yours (Zimbardo, 1976).

## THE FACES OF THE “ENEMY”: PROPAGANDA IMAGES CONDITION US TO KILL ABSTRACTIONS

We need to add a few more operational principles to our arsenal of variables that trigger the commission of evil acts by men and women who are ordinarily good people. We can learn about some of these principles by considering how nations prepare their young men (admittedly, women are now members of the armed forces in many countries, but it is primarily the men who are sent into combat zones) to engage in deadly wars, and how they prepare citizens to support the risks of going to war, especially a war of aggression. This difficult transformation is accomplished by a special form of cognitive conditioning. Images of “The Enemy” are created by national propaganda to prepare the minds of soldiers and citizens alike to hate those who fit the new category of “your enemy.” This mental conditioning is a soldier’s most potent weapon, for without it, he could probably never fire his weapon to kill another young man in the cross-hairs of his gun sight. A fascinating account of how this “hostile imagination” is created in the minds of soldiers and their families is presented in *Faces of the Enemy* by Sam Keen (1986; see also his companion video). Archetypal images of the enemy are created by propaganda fashioned by the governments of most nations against those judged to be the dangerous “them”—the outsiders who are also “our” enemies. These visual images create a consensual societal paranoia that is focused on the enemy who would do harm to the women, children, homes, and god of the soldier’s nation, way of life, and so forth. Keen’s analysis of this propaganda on a worldwide scale reveals that there are a select number of attributes utilized by “homo hostilis” to invent an evil enemy in the minds of good members of righteous tribes. The enemy is aggressive, faceless, a rapist, godless, barbarian, greedy, criminal, a torturer, harbinger of death, a dehumanized animal, or just an abstraction. Finally, there is the enemy as worthy, heroic opponent to be crushed in mortal combat—as in the video game of the same name.

### Ordinary Men Murder Ordinary Men, Women, and Children: Jewish Enemies

One of the clearest illustrations of my fundamental theme of how ordinary people can be transformed into engaging in evil deeds that are alien to their past history and to their moral development comes from the analysis of British historian Christopher Browning. In *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992) he recounts that in March 1942 about 80% of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive, but a mere 11 months later about 80% were dead. In this short period of time, the *Endlösung* (Hitler’s “Final Solution”) was galvanized by means of an intense wave of mass mobile murder squads in Poland. This genocide

required mobilization of a large-scale killing machine at the same time as able-bodied soldiers were needed on the Russian front. Since most Polish Jews lived in small towns and not the large cities, the question that Browning raised about the German High Command was “where had they found the manpower during this pivotal year of the war for such an astounding logistical achievement in mass murder?” (p. xvi).

His answer came from archives of Nazi war crimes, in the form of the activities of Reserve Battalion 101, a unit of about 500 men from Hamburg, Germany. They were elderly family men, too old to be drafted into the army, from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds, with no military or police experience, just raw recruits sent to Poland without warning of, or any training in, their secret mission: the total extermination of all Jews living in the remote villages of Poland. In just 4 months they had shot to death at point blank range at least 38,000 Jews and had deported another 45,000 to the concentration camp at Treblinka. Initially, their commander told them that this was a difficult mission which must be obeyed by the battalion, but any individual could refuse to execute these men, women, and children. Records indicate that at first about half the men refused, letting the others commit the mass murder. But over time, social modeling processes took their toll, as did any guilt-induced persuasion by buddies who did the killing, until by the end, up to 90% of the men in Battalion 101 had participated in the shootings, even proudly taking photographs of their up-close and personal slaughter of Jews.

Browning makes clear that there was no special selection of these men, only that they were as “ordinary” as could be imagined—until they were put into a situation in which they had “official” permission, even encouragement, to act sadistically and brutishly against those arbitrarily labeled as “the enemy.”

Let us go from the abstract to the personal for a moment: Imagine you witnessed your own father shooting to death a helpless mother and her infant child, and then imagine his answer to your question, “Why did you do it, Daddy?”

### The War on Iraq: A Spurious Creation of Evil Terrorists and Infusion of National Fears

Fast forward to our time, our nation, our citizenry, and the fears of terrorism instilled by the destruction of the World Trade Center towers since that unforgettable day of September 11, 2001. The initial press and official reaction was to label the perpetrators of this horrific deed as “hijackers,” “murderers,” “criminals.” Soon the label changed to “terrorists” and their deeds described as “evil.” *Evil* became the coin of the realm, used repeatedly by the media as fed by the administration, and with an ever-widening net of inclusiveness. Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of 9/11, was the



first culprit designated as evil. But when he proved elusive, escaping from the war zone in Afghanistan, it became necessary for the administration's war on terrorism campaign to put a new face and a new place on terrorism. Of course, terrorism works its generation of fear and anxiety by its very facelessness and nonlocal ubiquity. Several countries were labeled by our president as the "axis of evil," with the leader of one of those countries, Iraq, designated as so evil that he, Saddam Hussein, had to be removed from power by all means necessary.

A propaganda campaign was created to justify a preemptive war against Saddam Hussein's regime by identifying the clear and imminent threat to the national security of the United States posed by the alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) this evil leader had at his disposal. Then a link was erected between him and the terrorist networks to whom, allegedly, he would sell or gift these WMD. Over time, many Americans began to believe the falsehoods that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, was in complicity with Osama bin Laden, and had ready and operational an arsenal of deadly weapons that threatened U.S. security and well-being. Magazine images, newspaper accounts, and vivid TV stories contributed to the "evilization" of Saddam Hussein over the course of a year.

The vulnerability to terrorism that Americans continued to experience on deep, personal levels—in part, sustained and magnified by the administration's issuance of repeated (false) alarms of imminent terrorist attacks on the homeland—was relieved by the action of officially going to war. The public and Congress strongly supported a symmetrical war of "shock and awe"—to rid Iraq of the feared WMD and destroy Hussein's evil menace. Thus, for the first time in its history, the United States endorsed what the majority believed to be a justified aggressive war that has already cost billions of dollars, untold thousands of deaths (soldiers *and* civilians), totally destroyed a nation, weakened the United Nations, and will enmesh the United States in a prolonged, Vietnam-like, "no exit" scenario for years to come.

When no WMD were uncovered, despite the alleged best intelligence reports and aerial photos of them presented by the Secretary of State to the United Nations, collective cognitive dissonance reduction seeped in to maintain the belief that was still a "necessary" and "good" war against evil (Festinger, 1957). After many months of an all-out, desperately intense search of every part of Iraq, American troops and intelligence forces have not unearthed a single WMD! So the original reason for going to war is being played down and is being replaced by the mantra that Iraq is the new front in our worldwide fight against terrorism, thus it is good we are in control of the destiny of Iraq. But who cares what the truth really is regarding the deceptive reasons for going to war, if the United States is now safer and the president is a commander-in-chief of decisive action—as his

image crafters have carefully depicted him in the media. This national mind control experiment deserves careful documenting by unbiased social historians for the current and future generations to appreciate the power of images, words, and framing that can lead a democratic nation to support *and even relish* the unthinkable evil of an aggressive war.

### **The Socialization of Evil: How the "Nazi Hate Primers" Prepared and Conditioned the Minds of German Youth to Hate Jews**

The second broad class of operational principles by which otherwise good people can be recruited into evil is through education/socialization processes that are sanctioned by the government in power, enacted within school programs, and supported by parents and teachers. A prime example is the way in which German children in the 1930s and 1940s were systematically indoctrinated to hate Jews, to view them as the all-purpose enemy of the new (post-World War I) German nation. Space limitations do not allow full documentation of this process, but I touch on several examples of one way in which governments are responsible for sanctioning evil.

In Germany, as the Nazi party rose to power in 1933, no target of Nazification took higher priority than the reeducation of Germany's youth. Hitler wrote: "I will have no intellectual training. Knowledge is ruin to my young men. A violently active, dominating, brutal youth—that is what I am after" (*The New Order*, 1989, pp. 101–102). To teach the youth about geography and race, special primers were created and ordered to be read starting in the first grade of elementary school (see *The New Order*, 1989). These "hate primers" were brightly colored comic books that contrasted the beautiful blond Aryans with the despicably ugly caricatured Jew. They sold in the hundreds of thousands. One was titled *Trust No Fox in the Green Meadows and No Jew on His Oath*. What is most insidious about this kind of hate conditioning is that the misinformation was presented as facts to be learned and tested upon, or from which to practice penmanship. In the copy of the *Trust No Fox* text that I reviewed, a series of cartoons illustrates all the ways in which Jews supposedly deceive Aryans, get rich and fat from dominating them, and are lascivious, mean, and without compassion for the plight of the poor and the elderly Aryans.

The final scenarios depict the retribution of Aryan children when they expel Jewish teachers and children from their school, so that "proper discipline and order" could then be taught. Initially, Jews were prohibited from community areas, like public parks, then expelled altogether from Germany. The sign in the cartoon reads, ominously, "One-way street." Indeed, it was a unidirectional street that led eventually to the death camps and crematoria that were the centerpiece of Hitler's Final Solution: the genocide of the Jews. Thus, this institutionalized evil was spread pervasively and insidiously through a perverted educational system that turned

away from the types of critical thinking exercises that open students' minds to new ideas and toward thinking uncritically and close-mindedly about those targeted as the enemy of the people. By controlling education and the propaganda media, any national leader could produce the fantastic scenarios depicted in George Orwell's (1981) frightening novel *1984*.

The institutionalized evil that Orwell vividly portrays in his fictional account of state dominance over individuals goes beyond the novelist's imagination when its prophetic vision is carried into operational validity by powerful cult leaders or by agencies and departments within the current national administration of the United States. Previously I have outlined the direct parallels between the mind control strategies and tactics Orwell attributes to "The Party" and those that Reverend Jim Jones used in dominating the members of his religious/political cult, Peoples Temple (Zimbardo, 2003a). Jones orchestrated the suicide/murders of more than 900 U.S. citizens in the jungles of Guyana 25 years ago, perhaps as the grand finale of his experiment in institutionalized mind control. I learned from former members of this group that not only did Jones read *1984*, he talked about it often and even had a song commissioned by the church's singer, entitled "1984 Is Coming," that everyone had to sing at some services. I will leave it to the reader to explore the similarities between the mind control practices in *1984* and those being practiced on U.S. citizens in the past few years (see Zimbardo, 2003b).

### THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT: A CRUCIBLE OF HUMAN NATURE WHERE GOOD BOYS ENCOUNTERED AN EVIL PLACE

Framing the issues we have been considering as, in essence, who wins when good boys are put in an evil place casts it as a neo-Greek tragedy scenario, wherein "the situation" stands in for the externally imposed forces of "the gods and destiny." As such, we can anticipate an outcome unfavorable to humanity. In more mundane psychological terms, this research on the Stanford prison experiment synthesized many of the processes and variables outlined earlier: those of place and person anonymity that contribute to the deindividuation of the people involved, the dehumanization of victims, giving some actors (guards) permission to control others (prisoners), and placing it all within a unique setting (the prison) that most societies throughout the world acknowledge provides some form of institutionally approved sanctions for evil through the extreme differentials in control and power fostered in prison environments.

In 1971, I designed a dramatic experiment that would extend over a 2-week period to provide our research participants with sufficient time for them to become fully engaged in their experimentally assigned roles of ei-

ther guards or prisoners. Having participants live in a simulated prison setting day and night, if prisoners, or work there for long 8-hour shifts, if guards, would also allow sufficient time for situational norms to develop and patterns of social interaction to emerge, change, and crystallize. The second feature of this study was to ensure that all research participants would be as normal as possible initially, healthy both physically and mentally, and without any history of involvement in drugs or crime or violence. This baseline was essential to establish if we were to untangle the situational versus dispositional knot: What the situation elicited from this collection of similar, interchangeable young men versus what was emitted by the research participants based on the unique dispositions they brought into the experiment. The third feature of the study was the novelty of the prisoner and guard roles: Participants had no prior training in how to play the randomly assigned roles. Each subject's prior societal learning of the meaning of prisons and the behavioral scripts associated with the oppositional roles of prisoner and guard was the sole source of guidance. The fourth feature was to create an experimental setting that came as close to a *functional simulation* of the psychology of imprisonment as possible. The details of how we went about creating a mindset comparable to that of real prisoners and guards are given in several of the articles I wrote about the study (see Zimbardo, 1975; Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, & Jaffe, 1973).

Central to this mind set were the oppositional issues of power and powerlessness, dominance and submission, freedom and servitude, control and rebellion, identity and anonymity, coercive rules and restrictive roles. In general, these social-psychological constructs were operationalized by putting all subjects in appropriate uniforms, using assorted props (e.g., handcuffs, police clubs, whistles, signs on doors and halls), replacing corridor hall doors with prison bars to create prison cells, using windowless and clock-less cells that afforded no clues as to time of day, applying institutional rules that removed/substituted individual names with numbers (prisoners) or titles for staff (Mr. Correctional Officer, Warden, Superintendent), and that gave guards control power over prisoners.

Subjects were recruited from among nearly 100 men between the ages of 18 and 30 who answered our advertisements in the local city newspaper. They were given a background evaluation that consisted of a battery of five psychological tests, personal history, and in-depth interviews. The 24 who were evaluated as most normal and healthiest in every respect were randomly assigned, half to the role of prisoner and half to that of guard. The student-prisoners underwent a realistic surprise arrest by officers from the Palo Alto Police Department, who cooperated with our plan. The arresting officer proceeded with a formal arrest, taking the "felons" to the police station for booking, after which each prisoner was brought to our prison in the reconstructed basement of our psychology department.

The prisoner's uniform was a smock/dress with a prison ID number.

The guards wore military-style uniforms and silver-reflecting sunglasses to enhance anonymity. At any one time there were nine prisoners on "the yard," three to a cell, and three guards working 8-hour shifts. Data were collected via systematic video recordings, secret audio recordings of conversations of prisoners in their cells, interviews and tests at various times during the study, postexperiment reports, and direct, concealed observations.

For a detailed chronology and fuller account of the behavioral reactions that followed, readers are referred to the above references, to Zimbardo, Maslach, and Haney (1999), and to our new website: [www.prisonexp.org](http://www.prisonexp.org). For current purposes, let me simply summarize that the negative situational forces overwhelmed the positive dispositional tendencies. The Evil Situation triumphed over the Good People. Our projected 2-week experiment had to be terminated after only 6 days because of the pathology we were witnessing. Pacifistic young men were behaving sadistically in their role as guards, inflicting humiliation and pain and suffering on other young men who had the inferior status of prisoner. Some "guards" even reported enjoying doing so. Many of the intelligent, healthy college students who were occupying the role of prisoner showed signs of "emotional breakdown" (i.e., stress disorders) so extreme that five of them had to be removed from the experiment within that first week. The prisoners who adapted better to the situation were those who mindlessly followed orders and who allowed the guards to dehumanize and degrade them ever more with each passing day and night. The only personality variable that had any significant predictive value was that of *F*-scale authoritarianism: The higher the score, the more days the prisoner survived in this totally authoritarian environment.

I terminated the experiment not only because of the escalating level of violence and degradation by the guards against the prisoners that was apparent when viewing the videotapes of their interactions, but also because I was made aware of the transformation that I was undergoing personally (see the analysis by Christina Maslach of how she intervened to help bring light to that dark place and end the study; in Zimbardo et al., 1999). I had become a Prison Superintendent in addition to my role as Principal Investigator. I began to talk, walk, and act like a rigid institutional authority figure more concerned about the security of "my prison" than the needs of the young men entrusted to my care as a psychological researcher. In a sense, I consider the extent to which I was transformed to be the most profound measure of the power of this situation. We held extended debriefing sessions of guards and prisoners at the end of the study and conducted periodic checkups over many years. Fortunately, there were no lasting negative consequences of this powerful experience.

Before moving on, I would like to share parts of a letter sent to me recently (e-mail communication, October 18, 2002) by a young psychology

student, recently discharged from military service. It outlines some of the direct parallels between the aversive aspects of our simulated prison many years ago and current despicable practices still taking place in some military boot-camp training. It also points up the positive effects that research and education can have:

I am a 19-year-old student of psychology [who watched] the slide show of your prison experiment. Not too far into it, I was almost in tears. . . . I joined the United States Marine Corps, pursuing a childhood dream. To make a long story short, I had become the victim of repeated illegal physical and mental abuse. An investigation showed I suffered more than 40 unprovoked beatings. Eventually, as much as I fought it, I became suicidal, thus received a discharge from boot camp. . . .

The point I am trying to make is that the manner in which your guards carried about their duties and the way that military drill instructors do is unbelievable. I was amazed at all the parallels of your guards and one particular D. I. who comes to mind. I was treated much the same way, and even worse, in some cases.

One incident that stands out was the time, in an effort to break platoon solidarity, I was forced to sit in the middle of my squad bay (living quarters) and shout to the other recruits "If you guys would have moved faster, we wouldn't be doing this for hours," referencing every single recruit who was holding over his head a very heavy foot locker. The event was very similar to the prisoners saying #819 was a bad prisoner. After my incident, and after I was home safe some months later, all I could think about was how much I wanted to go back to show the other recruits that as much as the D. I.s told the platoon that I was a bad recruit, I wasn't.

Other behaviors come to mind, like the push-ups we did for punishment, the shaved heads, not having any identity other than being addressed as, and referring to other people as, "Recruit So-and-So"—which replicates your study. The point of it all is that even though your experiment was conducted 31 years ago, my reading the study has helped me gain an understanding I was previously unable to gain before, even after therapy and counseling. What you have demonstrated really gave me insight into something I've been dealing with for almost a year now. Although, it is certainly not an excuse for their behavior, I now can understand the rationale behind the D. I.'s actions as far as being sadistic and power hungry.

#### THE FAILURE OF THE SOCIAL EXPERIMENT OF THE U.S. CORRECTIONAL SYSTEM

As much joy that such personal reactions bring to someone whose vision has always been for psychological research to make a difference in people's lives, I have been saddened by the lack of impact the Stanford prison experiment has had on the correctional system in the United States. When

Craig Haney and I recently did a retrospective analysis of our study, with contrasting views of U.S. and California correctional policies over the past 30 years, our conclusions were disheartening (Haney & Zimbardo, 1998). Prisons continue to be failed social experiments that rely on a dispositional model of punishment and isolation of offenders. Gone is any sense of the modifiable situational determinants of crime or of basic rehabilitation practices that might reduce persistently high rates of recidivism. The United States is now the prison center of the universe, with more than 2 million citizens incarcerated, *greater than any other nation*, and growing. Our analysis revealed that prison conditions had significantly worsened in the decades since our study, as a consequence of the politicization of prisons, with politicians, prosecutors, DAs, and other officials taking a hard line on crime as a means of currying favor of an electorate made fearful of crime by media exaggerations. Misguided policies about sentencing for crack cocaine use and sale and the “Three Strikes” rulings have put a disproportionately large number of African American and Hispanic men behind bars for long sentences. There are now more African American men wasting away in the nation’s prison system than fulfilling their potentials in our higher educational system.

### THE EVIL OF INACTION

Our usual take on evil focuses on violent, destructive actions, but *nonaction* can also become a form of evil, when assistance, dissent, and disobedience are needed. Social psychologists heeded the alarm when the infamous Kitty Genovese case made national headlines. As she was being stalked, stabbed, and eventually murdered, 39 people in a housing complex heard her screams and did nothing to help. It seemed obvious that this was a prime example of the callousness of New Yorkers, as many media accounts reported. A counter to this dispositional analysis came in the form of a series of classic studies by Latané and Darley (1970) on bystander intervention. One key finding was that people are less likely to help when they are in a group, when they perceive that others are available who could help, than when those people are alone. The presence of others diffuses the sense of personal responsibility of any individual.

A powerful demonstration of the failure to help strangers in distress was staged by Darley and Batson (1973). Imagine you are a theology student on your way to deliver the sermon of the Good Samaritan in order to have it videotaped for a psychology study on effective communication. Further imagine that as you are heading from the psychology department to the video taping center, you pass a stranger huddled up in an alley in dire distress. Are there any conditions that you could conceive that would *not* make you stop to be that Good Samaritan? What about “time press”?

Would it make a difference to you if you were late for your date to give that sermon? I bet you would like to believe it would not make a difference, that you would stop and help no matter what the circumstances. Right? Remember, you are a theology student, thinking about helping a stranger in distress, which is amply rewarded in the Biblical tale.

The researchers randomly assigned students of the Princeton Theological Seminary to three conditions that varied in how much time they thought they had between receiving their assignment from the researchers and getting to the communication department to tape their Good Samaritan speeches. The conclusion: Do not be a victim in distress when people are late and in a hurry, because 90% of them are likely to pass you by, giving you no help at all! The more time the seminarians believed they had, the more likely they were to stop and help. So the situational variable of *time press* accounted for the major variance in extending or withholding help, without any need to resort to dispositional explanations about theology students being callous or cynical or indifferent, as Kitty Genovese’s nonhelpers were assumed to be—another instance of the FAE, one that needs to be reversed.

### THE WORST OF THE APPLES IN THE EVIL BARREL: TORTURERS AND EXECUTIONERS?

There is little debate but that the systematic torture by men and women of their fellow men and women represents one of the darkest sides of human nature. Surely, my colleagues and I reasoned, here was a place where dispositional evil would be manifest: among torturers who did their dirty deeds daily, for years, in Brazil as policemen sanctioned by the government to extract confessions through torturing so-called enemies of the state. We began by focusing solely on the torturers, trying to understand both their psyches and the ways they were shaped by their circumstances, but we had to expand our analytical net to capture their comrades-in-arms who chose, or were assigned to, another branch of violence work—death-squad executioners. They shared a “common enemy”: men, women, and children who, though citizens of their state, even neighbors, were declared by “the authorities” to be threats to the country’s national security. Some had to be eliminated efficiently, whereas those who might hold secret information had to be made to yield it up and confess to their treason.

In carrying out this mission, these torturers could rely, in part, on the “creative evil” embodied in the torture devices and techniques that had been refined over centuries since the Inquisition by officials of The Church and, later, of the National State. But our current-day torturers added a measure of improvisation to accommodate the particular resistances and resiliencies of the enemy standing before them, claiming innocence, refus-

ing to acknowledge their culpability, or not succumbing to intimidation. It took time and emerging insights into exploitable human weaknesses for these torturers to become adept at their craft, in contrast to the task of the death-squad executioners, who, wearing hoods for anonymity and sporting good guns and group support, could dispatch their duty to country swiftly and impersonally. For the torturer, it could never be "just business." Torture always involves a personal relationship, essential for understanding what kind of torture to employ, what intensity of torture to use on this person at this time: wrong kind or too little; no confession, too much, and the victim dies before confessing. In either case, the torturer fails to deliver the goods. Learning to select the right kind and degree of torture that yields up the desired information makes rewards abound and praise flow from the superiors.

What kind of men could do such deeds? Did they need to rely on sadistic impulses and a history of sociopathic life experiences to rip and tear flesh of fellow beings day in and day out for years on end? Were these violence workers a breed apart from the rest of humanity—bad seeds, bad tree trunks, bad flowers? Or, is it conceivable that they were programmed to carry out their deplorable deeds by means of some identifiable and replicable training processes? Could a set of external conditions—that is, situational variables—that contributed to the making of these torturers and killers be identified? If their evil deeds were not traceable to inner defects but attributable to outer forces acting upon them—the political, economic, social, historical, and experiential components of their police training—then we might be able to generalize, across cultures and settings, those principles responsible for this remarkable transformation. Martha Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and I interviewed several dozen of these violence workers in depth and recently published a summary of our methods and findings (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, & Zimbardo, 2002). Mika had done a similar, earlier study of torturers trained by the Greek military junta, and our results were largely congruent with hers (Haritos-Fatouros, 2003).

We learned that sadists are *selected out* of the training process by trainers because they are not controllable, get off on the pleasure of inflicting pain, and thus do not sustain the focus on the goal of confession extraction. From all the evidence we could muster, these violence workers were not unusual or deviant in any way prior to practicing this new role, nor were there any persisting deviant tendencies or pathologies among any of them in the years following their work as torturers and executioners. Their transformation was entirely understandable as a consequence of (1) the training they were given to play this new role, (2) group camaraderie, (3) acceptance of the national security ideology, and (4) the belief in socialist-communists as enemies of their state. They were also influenced by being made to feel special—above and better than peers in public service—by the secrecy of their duties and by the constant pressure to produce desired

results regardless of fatigue or personal problems. We report many detailed case studies that document the ordinariness of these men engaged in the most heinous of deeds, sanctioned by their government at that time in history, but reproducible at this time in any nation whose obsession with national security and fears of terrorism permit suspension of basic individual freedoms.

### SUICIDE BOMBERS: SENSELESS FANATICS OR MARTYRS FOR A CAUSE?

Not surprisingly, what holds true for the Brazilian violence workers is comparable to the nature of the transformation of young Palestinians from students to suicide bombers killing Israelis. Recent media accounts converge on the findings from more systematic analyses of the process of becoming a suicidal killer (see Atran, 2003; Bennet, 2003; Hoffman, 2003; Merari, 1990, 2002; Myer, 2003). There have been more than 95 suicide bombings by Palestinians against Israelis since September, 2000. Originally, and most frequently, the bombers were young men, but recently a half dozen women have joined the ranks of suicidal bombers. What has been declared as senseless, mindless murder by those attacked and by outside observers is anything but to those intimately involved. It was mistakenly believed that it was poor, desperate, socially isolated, illiterate young people with no career and no future who adopted this fatalistic role. That stereotype has been shattered by the actual portraits of these young men and women, many of whom were students with hopes for a better future, intelligent and attractive youth, connected with their family and community.

Ariel Merari, an Israeli psychologist who has studied this phenomenon for many years, outlines the common steps on the path to these explosive deaths. Senior members of an extremist group first identify particular young people who appear to have an intense patriotic fervor, based on their declarations at public rallies against Israel or their support of some Islamic cause or Palestinian action. These individuals are invited to discuss how serious they are in their love of their country and their hatred of Israel. They are then asked to commit to being trained in how to put their hatred into action. Those who make the commitment are put into a small group of three to five similar youth who are at varying stages of "progress" toward becoming agents of death. They learn the tricks of the trade from elders: bomb making, disguise, selecting and timing targets. Then they publicize their private commitment by making a videotape on which they declare themselves to be "living martyrs" for Islam and for the love of Allah. In one hand they hold the Koran, a rifle in the other, their headband declaring their new status. This video binds them to the final deed, since it is sent home to the family of the recruit before they execute the fi-

nal plan. The recruits also realize that not only will they earn a place beside Allah, but their relatives will also be entitled to a high place in heaven because of their martyrdom. A sizable financial incentive is bestowed on their family as a gift for their sacrifice.

Their photo is emblazoned on posters that will be put on walls everywhere in the community the moment they succeed in their mission. They will be immortalized as inspirational models. To stifle concerns about the pain from wounds inflicted by exploding nails and other bomb parts, they are told that before the first drop of their blood touches the ground, they will already be seated at the side of Allah, feeling no pain, only pleasure. An ultimate incentive for the young males is the promise of heavenly bliss with scores of virgins in the next life. They become heroes and heroines, modeling self-sacrifice to the next cadre of young suicide bombers.

We can see that this program utilizes a variety of social-psychological and motivational principles in turning collective hatred and general frenzy into a dedicated, seriously calculated program of indoctrination and training for individuals to become youthful "living martyrs." It is neither mindless nor senseless, only a very different mind set and with different sensibilities than we have been used to witnessing among young adults in our country. A recent television program on female suicide bombers went so far as to describe them in terms more akin to the girl next door than to alien fanatics. Indeed, that very normalcy is what is so frightening about the emergence of this new social phenomena—that so many intelligent young people could be persuaded to envision and welcome their lives ending in a suicidal explosive blast.

To counteract the powerful tactics of these recruiting agents requires the provision of meaningful, life-affirming alternatives to this next generation. It requires new national leadership that is willing and able to explore every negotiating strategy that could lead to peace instead of death. It requires these young people across national boundaries to openly share their values, their education, and their resources and to explore their commonalities, not highlight their differences. The suicide, the murder, of any young person is a gash in the fabric of the human connection that we elders from every nation must unite to prevent. To encourage the sacrifice of youth for the sake of advancing ideologies of the old might be considered a form of evil from a more cosmic perspective that transcends local politics and expedient strategies.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is a truism in psychology that personality and situations interact to generate behavior, as do cultural and societal influences. However, I have tried to show in my research over the past 30 years that situations exert

more power over human actions than has been generally acknowledged by most psychologists or recognized by the general public. Along with a hardy band of experimental social psychologists, I have conducted research demonstrations designed, in part, to provide a corrective balance to the pervasive fundamental attribution error. Nevertheless, the traditional dispositional perspective continues to dominate Anglo-American psychology fueled by reliance on the individualist orientation central in our institutions of medicine, education, psychiatry, law, and religion. Acknowledging the power of situational forces does not excuse the behaviors evoked in response to their operation. Rather, it provides a knowledge base that shifts attention away from simplistic "blaming the victim" mentality and ineffective individualistic treatments designed to change the evil doer, toward more profound attempts to discover causal networks that should be modified. Sensitivity to situational determinants of behavior also affords "risk alerts" that allow us to avoid or modify prospective situations of vulnerability.

Please consider this Zimbardo homily that captures the essence of the difference between dispositional and situational orientations: "While a few bad apples might spoil the barrel (filled with good fruit/people), a barrel filled with vinegar will *always* transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles—regardless of the best intentions, resilience, and genetic nature of those cucumbers." So, does it make more sense to spend our resources on attempts to identify, isolate, and destroy the few bad apples or to learn how vinegar works so that we can teach cucumbers how to avoid undesirable vinegar barrels?

My situational sermon has several related dimensions. First, we should be aware that a range of apparently simple situational factors can impact our behavior more compellingly than we would expect or predict. The research outlined here, along with that of my colleagues presented in this volume, points to the influential force of numerous variables: role playing, rules, presence of others, emergent group norms, group identity, uniforms, anonymity, social modeling, authority presence, symbols of power, time pressures, semantic framing, stereotypical images and labels, among others.

Second, the situationist approach redefines heroism. When the majority of ordinary people can be overcome by such pressures toward compliance and conformity, the minority who resist should be considered *heroic*. Acknowledging the special nature of this resistance means that we should learn from their example by studying *how* they have been able to rise above such compelling pressures. That suggestion is coupled with another that encourages the development of an essential but ignored domain of psychology—heroes and heroism.

Third, the situationist approach should, in my view, encourage us all to share a profound sense of personal humility when trying to understand

those “unthinkable,” “unimaginable,” “senseless” acts of evil. Instead of immediately embracing the high moral ground that distances us good folks from those bad ones and gives short shrift to analyses of causal factors in the situations that form the context of the evil acts, the situational approach gives all others the benefit of “attributional charity.” This means that any deed, for good or evil, that any human being has ever performed or committed, you and I could also perform or commit—given the same situational forces. If so, it becomes imperative to constrain our immediate moral outrage that seeks vengeance against wrongdoers and turn our efforts toward uncovering the causal factors that could have led them in that aberrant direction.

The obvious current instantiation of these principles is the rush to characterize terrorists and suicide bombers as “evil” people, instead of working to understand the nature of the psychological, social, economic, and political conditions that have fostered such generalized hatred of an enemy nation, including our own, that young people are willing to sacrifice their lives and murder other human beings. The “war on terrorism” can never be won solely by the current administration’s plans to find and destroy terrorists—since any individual, anywhere, at any time, can become an active terrorist. It is only by understanding the *situational determinants of terrorism* that programs can be developed to win the hearts and minds of potential terrorists away from destruction and toward creation—not a simple task, but an essential one that requires implementation of social-psychological perspectives and methods in a comprehensive, long-term plan of attitude, value, and behavior change.

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 CHAPTER 3
 

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## BASIC HUMAN NEEDS, ALTRUISM, AND AGGRESSION

ERVIN STAUB

In this chapter I describe a conception of universal psychological needs—needs shared by all human beings—and how the fulfillment of these needs creates a strong potential for people to become caring and helpful, whereas their frustration creates a strong potential for hostility and aggression. This view is different from the belief or assumption that human beings are either helpful or aggressive, kind or cruel, good or evil *by nature*. Although I make the assumption that basic human needs are part of our nature, I also contend that it is through experiences that either fulfill or frustrate these needs that inclinations and motives to help or harm others develop. Still, in a sense, it could be said that the fulfillment or frustration of basic psychological needs provide “natural” bases (bases rooted in our nature and common human experiences) for goodness and evil.

This chapter explores the origins of helping and harming others. *Evil* is an extreme and sometimes repeated form of people harming others. Evil might be defined as “intensely harmful actions, which are not commensurate with instigating conditions, and the persistence or repetition of such acts. A series of actions also can be evil when any one act causes limited harm, but with repetition, these cause great harm” (Staub, 1999b, p. 180). A parent persistently diminishing and derogating a child might be an example of the latter form of evil. Evil actions can be conscious and intended—as in the case of plans formulated to destroy a group—or performed without the conscious intention to destroy. Although from a