

Disputing Common Sense:

Revisiting Two Important Social Experiments of the 1970s.

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"Criminals are monsters. Animals. And act according to their evil nature. Bad Acts prove Bad Character." These pervasive ideas are portrayed throughout the media: advertising, the news, movies, novels, etc. These descriptions are espoused by politicians vying for votes as well as water cooler philosophers and seem to be accepted as indisputable fact. Whether they were born that way, as many suggest, or whether their respective environs played a heavy-handed role is under perpetual debate. Most all accept this "common sense" approach that criminal acts are determined by individual behavior irrespective of situational context.

Opposite the criminals are those charged with the duty to secure them: The Guards. Correctional officers, the usual identification given to prison guards today, are those that turn the keys and watch the high, barbed-wire fences. They are generally considered normal, well-adjusted, law-enforcing/law-abiding, security staff, who merely take the necessary precautions to secure dangerous criminals and use the minimum of force to control the violent world inside prison walls. When a particularly egregious act of abuse is perpetrated against an inmate, it is dismissed as an isolated incident. Usually prison officials go to great lengths to minimize, justify, and excuse even the worst cases of abuse. Prisons put forth the



idea that such acts are solely the responsibility of a renegade guard, certainly not a result of sanctioned or unwritten policy, and to not reflect upon a penal system which claims to more than fair to those adjudicated to serve time. The general public comfortably accepts this version as well.

Many ideas, long-held as indisputable facts binding the known world together, have later been shown via scientific inquiry to be completely erroneous. Take this ancient, yet extraordinary, example as a reference:

It was common sense knowledge that a large, stable, non-rotating, terrestrial body called Earth was the center of the Universe and was circled continually by the Sun, stars, and planets. This concept was so firmly rooted in our belief system that anything to the contrary of the Ptolemaic system of astronomy was considered insanity or heresy, and was quite literally a death sentence.

It was only through the keen scientific eye of Copernicus, hundreds of years after Ptolemy, that the truth of our solar system was discovered against a wave of religiosity and the common sense thought of the day. This timeworn case in point is of much value as we critically examine many commonly held opinions, opinions touted as fact, about social institutions and individual behavior. These are the commonly-held opinions which are false and the cause of much misunderstanding and human suffering. In the 1970s, two social scientists critically studied social situations and their effects on behavior: Philip Zimbardo, PhD, and Stanley Milgram, PhD.

Enter Dr. Zimbardo of Stanford University (1973): The esteemed academe and social psychologist desired to study the



impact of "roles" on individual behavior. He devised a study where the roles of "inmate" and "prison guard" would be systematically observed within a mock prison setting. His experiment, which was to last several weeks, needed to eliminate other pertinent factors which might influence behavior, thus leaving the isolated factor of role to be studied. He chose participants from a group of healthy, well-adjusted college students with similar socio-cultural backgrounds: European descent, middle-class, college-educated, with no prior history of drug or alcohol abuse, no history of mental illness, nor any criminal record of any kind. The roles were randomly assigned and all participants were equally compensated.

The experiment needed a mock prison, which was placed in the basement of Stanford's psychology building. The participants were not privy to the location ("arrested" at a local police station and taken blind-folded to the experiment). The prison setting had the appearance of a stage for a high school play; it lacked all appearance of realism, which lends even more weight to the extraordinary outcome of the experiment. Video cameras were present and the group was monitored at all times. The participants were expected to eat, sleep, and play their respective roles at the mock prison during the few weeks of the experiment. This was certainly no San Quentin and the participants were not hardened criminals nor jaded prison guards. Could the mere assignment of a role have any appreciable effect on behavior? Common sense says, "No."

The behavior anticipated by the participants would be completely appropriate, socially-sanctioned behavior. Why would



it not be given the fact that those playing inmates were raised in the mean city streets nor convicted of vicious crimes and the guards had never had their lives placed in peril by a violent convict brandishing a shank. All the participants were able to look around the room at one another and see people essentially just like themselves except for the labels designated by the experiment. How could any behavior but relative equanimity prevail? One should expect that the participants would politely endure a few weeks of sheer boredom. This was hardly the case.

After a mere six days of observation, the role-playing experiment was deemed unethical to continue. Unethical? A small group of college students playing "Prison" under the watchful eye of a professor and a few graduate students was unethical? As part of the rules for participation, no physical force or violence would be permitted. So, what exactly occurred is this:

After a few hours of playfulness, essentially feeling out the new roles assigned to them and working through any awkwardness, the participants began to change radically with respect to the roles that they were assigned. The previously held beliefs (cognitive processes) of the participants allowed for dramatic shifts in behavior that could never been expected: those labeled guards began acting exactly as they thought guards might act and inmates began to act as inmates might act. With this change, participants later reported a striking change in a sense of self which followed along the lines of their new behavior.

Beyond the implementation of solitary confinement and the removal of certain privileges to assert control over a rather



docile group of "inmate" participants, strong sadistic impulses began to surface in the "guard" participants and led to worsening deprivations and a multitude of humiliations. The "inmate" participants mounted little resistance, those that did resist were ostracized, and those guards whose impulses were not markedly sadistic did nothing appreciable to protect those who were being abused.

It was the mere label of guard or inmate which radically altered individual behavior. Years of socialization wiped away within hours due to paradigm shifts of roles. Even a former prisoner who had served time for many years acting as an ex-convict consultant and playing the role of parole board member did not act the sympathetic authority figure, but treated the "inmate" participants in the same harsh, judgmental, and sarcastic manner he himself had endured. Quizzically, Dr. Zimbardo, who played the role of warden, was also swept away in his role-play experiment despite the obvious acts of cruelty and abuse inflicted on the "inmate" participants occurring before his very eyes. Only a single graduate student who was recording the activities and taking notes from the experiment remained objective. It was at this point that the graduate student, the only one completely retaining the "role" of scientific researcher, implored Dr. Zimbardo to stop the experiment.

Even with all of the salient factors considered truly vital to the dynamics of the prison experience removed (e.g., mental illness, addiction, criminality, socio-economic and cultural differences, length of incarceration, etc.), assigning mere labels alone and their respective roles to play resulted with much of the same abuse found in an actual prison setting.



One can only speculate what would have occurred had the experiment run its course, or perhaps continued for perhaps months.

At this point, one must note an important, related study performed by Dr. Stanley Milgram (1974) where again the dramatic effects of a social situation determine individual behavior counterintuitive to many of our preconceived expectations. The experiment was structured to observe obedience even in the face of obvious abuse. Many expect that each of us would not allow violence to occur, little less inflict violence, but given a particular circumstance, this is exactly what can happen.

Dr. Milgram used a sample of individuals who were told that they were going to part of an important research study. These participants were then directed to inflict worsening electric shocks to other participants when those participants when they failed to memory exercises correctly. At no time was any one shocked, but the assistants acting as participants responded with extremely believable screams which grew louder as the intensity of the electric shocks allegedly increased.

Common sense would lead one to assert that healthy, well-adjusted, law-abiding citizens would not inflict pain and injury on others that they had met only minutes before. Yet, that is exactly what the participants did over and over again with only a little encouragement from the researcher. The reactions to the screams demonstrate that the participants did have an aversion to causing harm to the "victim" participants. Still, individually they could mount little resistance to the researcher's insistence and resisted only slightly more when



participants were tested in small groups.

Again, attribution to wrong or harmful acts are attributed to the disposition of an individual: virtue, character, temperament, etc. Not the external factors found within a particular social situation. These external factors are seen as "excuses" for bad behavior and not the cause. It is within this context that these two studies work well together: they offer tangible proof that social situations exert a powerful force on individual behavior, even acts of cruelty and violence, and, furthermore, certain preconceived concepts of authority in particular may open the flood gates for instances of abuse.

History offers the horror of Nazi Germany and most calmly assert that they certainly would have stood against the incomparable abuses and murder of millions. Even as of late, we can look to the abuses of Abu Gharib as egregious acts of a few renegades. Sadly, these are false assumptions that may comfort us on some level and preserve our concepts of the world around us. By their very nature, these abuses are more common than appreciated by the public at large. Whether we speak of war-torn Africa or our own US prisons, we must begin to examine social situations with more vigor.

Labels and roles, particularly where unilateral dominance is a factor, are around us every day: doctor/patient, parent/child, police officer/suspect, employer/employee, soldier/civilian, guard/inmate, pastor/parishioner, etc. Within both studies discussed, the powerful influence of situational factors comes to the fore.

In a broader sense, attributional errors may be elucidated through a rigorous examination of all pertinent factors by isolating each factor to determine its effect. Though often



comforting (he offended because he is bad), many of us do not see the irony when we fall into dire straits (I offended because...). Social scientists today are called to tease out the essential causes and thus begin to solve many of the social ills which plague the world today. The toughest part of this process may be to correct the innumerable misconceptions held up as common sense.

Dr. Zimbardo's prison and Dr. Milgram's obedience experiments not only highlight the importance of roles, but also demonstrate other various mechanisms to greater or lesser degrees, such as social cognition, induced compliance, social categorization, stereotypes, etc. Though the continuation of the Stanford prison experiment would have been unethical and the duplicitous nature of Milgram's experiment cannot be ignored today, we must conclude that these studies offered extremely important insights. The importance of similar work cannot be underestimated as we push forward to gain knowledge and understanding of our many advancing social problems.

Case in point: many of our social institutions, such as prisons, churches, nursing homes, clinics and hospitals, schools, etc., where unilateral power remains predominately unchecked, must be re-evaluated, particularly in light of numerous abuses which continue and yet by the inherent nature of the situations remain largely under-reported. It is imperative that fields such as applied social psychology, critical sociology, social work, ethnocriminology, and others continue to study these areas of concern, create effective solutions, and compel institutions to begin the necessary changes to protect those who remain



vulnerable to abuse. Though wiping away misconceptions and increasing understanding are intrinsically valuable, our pursuit should always be the improvement of human life and the alleviation of human suffering. Objective scientific inquiry may aid us in this vocation where common sense has failed us.