



The Lucifer Effect by Philip Zimbardo

Why Situations Matter

I think, from the experiment's startling revelation of "transformation of character"—of good people suddenly becoming perpetrators of evil as guards or pathologically passive victims as prisoners in response to situational forces acting on them. Good people can be induced, seduced, and initiated into behaving in evil ways.

What we imagine we would do when we are outside that crucible may bear little resemblance to who we become and what we are capable of doing once we are inside its network. The Stanford Prison Experiment is a clarion call to abandon simplistic notions of the Good Self dominating Bad Situations. We are best able to avoid, prevent, challenge, and change such negative situational forces only by recognizing their potential power to "infect us," as it has others who were similarly situated.

Any deed that any human being has ever committed, however horrible, is possible for any of us—under the right or wrong situational circumstances. That knowledge does not excuse evil: rather, it democratizes it, sharing its blame among ordinary actors rather than declaring it the province only of deviants and despots-of Them but not Us.

The primary simple lesson the Stanford Prison Experiment teaches is that situations matter. Social situations can have more profound effects on the behavior and mental functioning of individuals, groups, and national leaders than we might believe possible. Some situations [religious] can exert such powerful influence over us that we can be led to behave in ways we would not, could not, predict was possible in advance.