



MOOD:  aggravated



Franklin Veaux

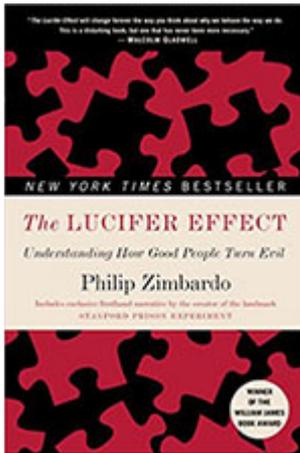
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<https://tacit.livejournal.com/>

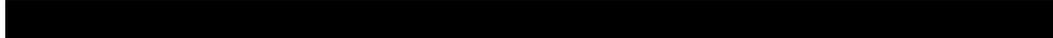
2017-02-07 21:37:00

## The Lucifer Effect effect

Eve loves to read to me. It's one of the love languages we share, and it's been a part of our relationship for years. We've read fiction (like *Use of Weapons*) and non-fiction (like *Parasite Rex*) together.



 *The Lucifer Effect*

 is a

book by Philip Zimbardo, the psychologist who designed the now-infamous Stanford prison experiment

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford\\_prison\\_experiment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment)). The Stanford prison experiment was an attempt to understand the dynamics of deindividuation in prison environments. Zimbardo hypothesized that prisoners lose their sense of individual identity in institutional settings. The experiment, which had been focused on prisoners, ended up showing that prison guards become abusive not because they are evil or abusers, but because the psychological environment of prison creates enormous pressure for otherwise normal people to become abusive and sadistic. The experiment recruited a group of college students to role-play prisoners or guards in a false prison. Within days, the students assigned to guard roles became so violent, abusive, and sadistic, and tortured the students playing the role of prisoners so severely, that the experiment was discontinued.

And the book has turned into a rough ride for me.

Reading the book, which goes into great detail about the physical and psychological abuse inflicted on the "prisoners" by the "guards," has been surprisingly difficult. When Eve reads this book to me, I find my blood pressure shooting up, I end up angry and irritable, and I have trouble sleeping.

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This is Venango Elementary School, in Venango, Nebraska, the tiny town where I grew up.

It's more fair to say this *was* Venango Elementary School. It closed for lack of students decades ago. Venango had 242 people living in it when I was there; at the last census, the population had fallen to 167, none of whom are children. The grounds are still maintained by a retired gentleman who's lived in Venango most of his life, but nobody's had a class here in a very long time.

When I was in middle school, I was socially isolated and alienated. I was the only kid in town who didn't follow football, and the only one who owned a computer. I had no friends, and spent my time building model rockets or dialing computer bulletin boards from my TRS-80.

Needless to say, I was bullied extensively during my career in middle school. The two worst offenders were the two Mikes, Mike A. and Mike C. They were both a couple of years older than I was and quite a lot bigger, and they were inseparable. One of them—I think it was Mike C., though time may have garbled that detail—was fond of coming to school in a T-shirt with iron-on letters on it that spelled out "It's nice to be injected but I'd rather be blown." (It's about cars, geddit? Geddit?)

The particulars of the abuse I suffered at their hands is as predictable as it is tedious, so I won't bother cataloging them. The official response from teachers and faculty was also tediously predictable; they were aware of the abuse but not particularly motivated to intervene.

I went into high school shy and with few social skills. Then, about the time I was midway through my senior year, I changed.

I had always believed that the reason I was bullied was the reasons bullies gave for bullying me: I wore

glasses; I didn't like football; I liked computers. It took a very long time for me to learn that the content of bullying is completely separate from bullying. That is, bullies bully because they are bullies. If I didn't wear glasses, if I didn't like computers, if I did like football, they would still have bullied me, they just would have bullied me about different things.

But that wasn't the life-changing revelation. In fact, it didn't come until after the life-changing revelation.

The life-changing revelation was that bullies bully people who don't fight back. If you want to end bullying, you walk up to the biggest, meanest bully of the bunch, reach back, and punch him square in the face. When bullies realize you bite back, they look for easier prey.

So I went into college with a whole new attitude about violence, one that a lot of folks who know me now find difficult to believe. I was, for a while, quite willing to resort to casual violence in the service of self-protection. I got into fistfights often, and learned yet another lesson: victory does not go to the biggest or the strongest person in the fight. Victory, nine times out of ten, goes to the person who escalates fastest, the one willing to do what the other person is not. I could get in a fight with opponents far larger and stronger than I was, and I almost always came out on top, because I escalated swiftly and aggressively.

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I am not the person I used to be. Or, more accurately, I am not the *people* I used to be. I'm not the shy, friendless, unsocialized bullying victim I was in Venango. I'm also not the aggressive, in-your-face, ready-for-a-fight guy with a hair trigger I was in college. In fact, most of the time it's hard for me to connect with either of those mindsets any more.

But man, this book.

This book does not mince detail. It describes, directly and even clinically, the abuses suffered by the "prisoners" on behalf of the "guards," abuses that range from verbal bullying to refusing to allow the prisoners to use the bathroom and forcing them to urinate and defecate in their rooms.

When Eve reads this book to me, I'm transported back to the person I was in college. I can feel my body amping up—I can feel the adrenaline, the shaking, the hair trigger coiled up inside me ready to explode that I used to feel back in my college days whenever someone would start harassing me. And I mean that literally; my hands will shake while she's reading.

I can identify with the group of students who were made into prisoners. I can understand what they're experiencing. And I believe that if I had been chosen to participate in an experiment like the SPE and had been assigned to the role of prisoner, there is a very strong likelihood I would have injured or killed one of the "guards," or been injured or killed myself in the attempt.

It's been rough, this book. It's brought me viscerally back to a time and place that I haven't been in for more than half my life now. We've had to switch from reading it in the evening before bed to reading it in the afternoon, because when we read it at night, I can't sleep.

The book is an excellent deep dive into the underworld of institutional evil (and it's astonishing how closely the casual abuse that happened in the faux prison in the basement of the Stanford psychology building mirrored the abuses in the real world at Abu Ghraib, and for exactly the same reasons). It's a book I think everyone needs to read, now more than ever, and I'm glad we're reading it.

But man, it's turned into a painful slog.

TAGS: [books](#), [musings](#), [origins](#), [politics](#), [society](#), [suck!](#)



8 comments



[February 8 2017, 06:16:28 UTC](#)

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Yeah, I have to admit it's languished half-finished in my to-read pile for the better part of three years now. It's excellent. It's relevant. It's unrelentingly awful in its vision of humanity and tallies pretty well with my experience of both bullying and organizing. Now that I'm chairing a "civil liberties are for everyone" nonprofit, I am striving mightily to make sure that "everyone" stays literally "everyone", that we don't descend into "civil liberties are for people we currently like" or "civil liberties are for people who voted the way we wanted". Fighting that tendency to tribalism and dehumanizing othering is one of the great works of the world, but ooooh it has to be constantly squashed by example.

How far along in the book are you? Maybe I ought to pick it up and finish, heh.



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[February 8 2017, 06:19:38 UTC](#)

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We're less than a third of the way in. Eve says the second third is about the lessons from the SPE and how they applied to Abu Ghraib, and the last third is about techniques to stop this sort of institutional abuse in the future.



[February 8 2017, 12:21:08 UTC](#)

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This is why, to this day, I have a hair trigger temper. Mine just explodes in words because my bullies were \*so\* much bigger and stronger than I was and they \*were\* willing to escalate as fast as I was, as well as the gender discrimination roadblocking me from adequate self defense training (my parents refused to get me karate lessons because it wasn't ladylike so I didn't find a teacher for proper self defense until my priest taught my entire class in junior year), that I was usually the first one to get physically mangled in an altercation. So I resort to vicious language and arrogant contempt because I got tired of having my shoulder dislocated and ankle broken.

Unfortunately, the Stanford experiment isn't what it appears to be. It's a frightening look into how far normal people are willing to become monsters but not \*why\* they become monsters. It doesn't happen just because people are put in a scenario. It more likely happens when people want to please someone who is cruel. Zimbardo's experiment was hopelessly biased and flawed, influenced by Zimbardo himself. Certainly not all of the participants became the torturous "evil" jailors that Zimbardo likes to claim. Not even a majority of them did. I'd recommend doing a deeper dive into the criticisms after the book, which is a money-making product that benefits the person responsible for the experiment it is reporting on.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201310/why-zimbardo-s-prison-experiment-isn-t-in->

my-textbook

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford\\_prison\\_experiment#Criticism](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment#Criticism)

<https://skeptoid.com/episodes/4102>

<http://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/the-real-lesson-of-the-stanford-prison-experiment>



February 8 2017, 19:12:11 UTC

Edited: February 9 2017, 17:02:51 UTC

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"The Stanford experiment isn't what it appears to be." As described in the book, it's exactly all of the things you say it is. The "criticisms" you refer to are straw-man arguments made either without knowledge of or with complete disregard to the actual content or the book or the way Zimbardo himself has described the experiment and the results (and indeed, his own role in it). The experiment shows exactly what Zimbardo says it does, it's just that these critiques flatly misrepresent what he says—which makes it really easy to dismiss the important lessons of the experiment.

They also disregard the subsequent 40 years of research he's done on both torturers and whistleblowers around the world, which makes up 2/3 of the book.

"It's a frightening look into how far normal people are willing to become monsters but not \*why\* they become monsters." - Nope, that's exactly what it is, along with several decades of related research.

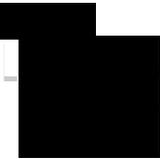
"It doesn't happen just because people are put in a scenario." - You're right, and he never said it does.

"It more likely happens when people want to please someone who is cruel." - Yup, which is one of the points he makes.

"Zimbardo's experiment was hopelessly biased and flawed, influenced by Zimbardo himself." - Yup, which is discussed at length in the book, including how he gave up his role as experimenter and caretaker as he became subsumed in his own role of "prison warden."

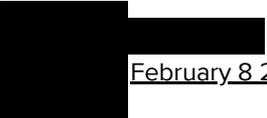
"Certainly not all of the participants became the torturous 'evil' jailors that Zimbardo likes to claim." - He does not claim this. What he does claim is that while certain participants took on this role, others (including him) took on the role of "passive evil" and did nothing to intervene, allowing it to continue.

"Not even a majority of them did." - Correct, and he doesn't say this, either. However, everyone save one person allowed it to continue. (And that includes not just the "guards" who were part of the experiment, but the parents and girlfriends who came to "visiting hours" and the graduate research assistants, consultants and visiting researchers who took part in or visited the project.) It's actually pretty important to remember that failure to act—and most people's tendency to not act—is a crucially important factor in perpetuating evil. Without the complicity of silent enablers, most evil could not continue. This, more than the "creative evil" of a couple of the guards is one of the major points of the book, along with an examination of how we can encourage more people to be the kind of whistleblower who finally stopped the SPE.

   
[February 9 2017, 17:05:09 UTC](#)

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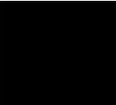
Honestly I find it a little bizarre how obsessed some so-called "skeptics" seem to be with straw-manning the SPE. Of course, given that it seems to be rooted in a very strong resistance to recognizing the ways each of us is complicit in perpetuating oppression, and given the kinds of problem that plague the skeptic community...maybe it's not so strange at all.

  
[February 8 2017, 13:57:15 UTC](#)

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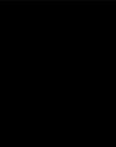
As always, franklin, thank you for writing. your perspective is at once unique and universal and fascinating. I have often thought of anne frank's assertion that people are basically good. I don't think they're basically good or evil but that circumstances tend to push people towards behaviors that in hind sight we judge as "good" or "bad". those judgements made by cool heads are kind of irrelevant in the moment, because people do what they feel they need to to survive. victims may be considered innocent or good and then turn around and become perpetrators later in their lives, like a switch as flipped. we humans really don't understand the switches. this is desperately important for public policy, not to blame individuals for their actions but to understand them. and at this point i'm supposed to say "not that we shouldn't hold people accountable for their misdeeds" but honestly what does justice accomplish? does it make people "good"? our prison system perpetuates that which it seeks to extinguish - evil.

best to you and yours,  


   
[February 8 2017, 17:33:23 UTC](#)

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You do not have to finish reading this book. You might seriously consider not finishing this book.

   
[February 11 2017, 04:43:47 UTC](#)

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oh man. i haven't been on lj in a while, but i'm trying to catch up. and reading this - well, you just said much more clearly in much better language what i found myself trying to articulate to an old high school friend the other day about just how differently different people might \*grow\* to understand and intersect with and engage in not-friendly physical contact. i wish i could have said it this way, because I really wanted him to understand me instead of just shuffle me off into some political category that then shaped the rest of how he interacted with me (online at least). i dunno. time will tell. but this is very clearly said and I think it really needs to be read. thanks for writing it.