

## **Situationist Ethics**

### **Why the Stanford Prison Experiment doesn't explain Abu Ghraib.**

By William Saletan

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Are the American soldiers who abused Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib prison "a few who have betrayed our values," as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld says? Or are they victims of a prison system guaranteed to produce atrocities?

In recent days, the latter view has taken hold, buttressed by the Stanford Prison Experiment, a 1971 study in which ordinary people cast as "guards" in a mock jail abused their "prisoners." The study's designer, former Stanford professor Philip Zimbardo, has been widely quoted on the Iraqi abuse scandal, lending his "situationist" tilt to newspaper, magazine, and television coverage.

The emerging spin is that the Stanford experiment explains, based on science rather than assumption, what happened at Abu Ghraib. But science, particularly social science, isn't free of assumptions. Every experiment starts with a box. Inside the box are the factors the scientist decides to control or measure. The rest—including the experimenter himself—are left out, either because he can't control or measure them, or because he assumes they're unimportant. The excluded factors often turn out to be more important than the included ones. That's why the Stanford experiment doesn't explain—or excuse—Abu Ghraib.

In a *Boston Globe* op-ed this week, Zimbardo draws the analogy this way:

The terrible things my guards [at Stanford] did to their prisoners were comparable to the horrors inflicted on the Iraqi detainees. My guards repeatedly stripped their prisoners naked, hooded them, chained them, denied them food or bedding privileges, put them into solitary confinement, and made them clean toilet bowls with their bare hands. ... Over time, these amusements took a sexual turn, such as having the prisoners simulate sodomy on each other. ... Human behavior is much more under the control of situational forces than most of us recognize or want to acknowledge.

The abuse Zimbardo describes does resemble what happened at Abu Ghraib. But the differences are at least as significant. Here's how Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba described the Abu Ghraib offenses in his now-famous internal report:

Punching, slapping, and kicking detainees; jumping on their naked feet ... positioning a naked detainee on a MRE Box, with a sandbag on his head, and attaching wires to his fingers, toes, and penis to simulate electric torture ... having sex with a female detainee ... Using military working dogs (without muzzles) to intimidate and frighten detainees, and in at least one case biting and severely injuring a detainee ... Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees ... Beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair ... Sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a

broomstick.

Why did the guards at Abu Ghraib, unlike the guards at Stanford, go beyond humiliation to violence, severe injury, and rape? To answer that question, you have to look not at the factors Zimbardo included in his study, but at the factors he left out. For example:

**1. Personality.** The Stanford experimenters picked as guards and inmates "the 24 subjects who were judged to be most stable (physically and mentally), most mature, and least involved in anti-social behavior were selected." This group was so nonviolent that according to Zimbardo, "Virtually all had indicated a preference for being a prisoner because they could not imagine going to college and ending up as a prison guard. On the other hand, they could imagine being imprisoned for a driving violation or some act of civil disobedience." The guards at Abu Ghraib, on the other hand, were led by a military police officer whose ex-wife had secured three restraining orders against him, alleging that he had thrown her against a wall and had threatened her with guns.

**2. Race.** At Stanford, with the exception of one Asian-American, the prisoners, like the guards, were white. At Abu Ghraib, the guards were Americans, and the prisoners were Iraqis. The guards didn't understand Iraq, hated being there, and were under constant assault from Iraqi mortars outside the prison walls. The inmates seemed to them a foreign enemy.

The data clearly suggest that the Abu Ghraib guards wanted less to do with their prisoners than the Stanford guards did with theirs. At Stanford, roll calls lasted 10 minutes at the outset but gradually grew to hours as the guards enjoyed toying with their inmates. At Abu Ghraib, however, roll calls that were supposed to be conducted twice a day were instead being conducted only twice a week. At Stanford, according to Zimbardo, "Most of the guards seemed to be distressed by the decision to stop the experiment. . . . None of the guards ever failed to come to work on time for their shift, and indeed, on several occasions guards remained on duty voluntarily and uncomplaining for extra hours—without additional pay." None of this was true at Abu Ghraib.

**3. Supervisory participation.** On the second day of the Stanford experiment, prisoners began pleading for their release. Over the next five days of the six-day study, the psychologists in charge released five of the 10 "prisoners." If you desperately wanted out, you got out. The experimenters allowed prisoners to be visited by "their own parents and friends on visiting nights, a Catholic priest; a public defender; many professional psychologists; and graduate students, secretaries, and staff of the psychology department, all of whom watched live action videos of part of the study unfold or took part in parole board hearings or spoke to participants and looked at them directly." When guards pushed the limits—for example, handcuffing and blindfolding a prisoner in the counseling office (yes, the inmates received regular counseling—another amenity neglected at Abu Ghraib)—the experimenters ordered them to stop.

At Abu Ghraib, none of this was true. The key issue in dispute seems to be which supervisor—over-aggressive military intelligence officers; Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the

allegedly callous commander of U.S. forces in Iraq; Brig. Gen. Janis L. Karpinski, the allegedly negligent military police boss who ignored reports of abuse, or others—most egregiously abetted the abuse.

Zimbardo thinks his "situationist" theory holds supervisors accountable by focusing attention on the rules they establish. But the theory lets supervisors off the hook in two ways. First, by fixating on general rules, it omits the specific ways in which supervisors unpredictably intervene to worsen the abuse. A week ago, for example, the *New York Times* described the Stanford experiment as a useful template for understanding Abu Ghraib. The *Times* said of Stanford,

Within days the "guards" had become swaggering and sadistic, to the point of placing bags over the prisoners' heads, forcing them to strip naked and encouraging them to perform sexual acts. ... Dr. Philip G. Zimbardo, a leader of the Stanford prison study, said that while the rest of the world was shocked by the images from Iraq, "I was not surprised that it happened." "I have exact, parallel pictures of prisoners with bags over their heads," from the 1971 study, he said.

This account makes it sound as though the guards came up with the idea of the bags. But in fact, that idea came from the researchers, as Zimbardo's wife, Christina Maslach, inadvertently revealed in an article four years ago:

The toilet was outside the confines of the prison yard, and this had posed a problem for the researchers. ... They did not want the prisoners to see people and places in the outside world, which would have broken the total environment they were trying to create. So the routine for the bathroom runs was to put paper bags over the prisoners' heads so they couldn't see anything ...

The same thing seems to have happened at Abu Ghraib. The prisoners have been photographed wearing hoods; but according to the guards, it was the intelligence officers who initially brought prisoners to them "already hooded."

In the *Globe*, Zimbardo compares his "prison superintendent" role at Stanford to Karpinski's role at Abu Ghraib. The analogy is more apt than he realizes. At Stanford, Zimbardo excluded his own role from the study. Similarly, the *Times* reports that in the Abu Ghraib scandal, "General Karpinski has complained that the initial investigation ordered by General Sanchez was limited to the conduct of her military police brigade and did not examine in any detail the role played by military intelligence and private contractors." At Abu Ghraib, as at Stanford, perhaps the most important variable was left outside the investigative box.

Moreover, by focusing on the rules instead of the rule maker, Zimbardo obscures the ability and responsibility of rule makers to change bad rules. He halted the Stanford experiment after six days largely because Maslach came to watch the proceedings and angrily told him, "What you are doing to those boys is a terrible thing!" Reflecting on this moment, Zimbardo recalls,

I had become a Prison Superintendent, the second role I played in addition to that of 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 that the most profound measure of the power of this situation was the extent to which it transformed me.

Note that *Zimbardo* blames not himself but "the situation," which "transformed me." The man who created the situation is just another victim. Perhaps we'll hear the same defense from the military leaders who created and supervised the situation at Abu Ghraib.

The point of the Stanford experiment, after all, was to discredit personal responsibility. "Individual behavior is largely under the control of social forces and environmental contingencies rather than 'personality traits,' 'character,' 'will power,' or other empirically unvalidated constructs," *Zimbardo* told Congress in 1971. "Thus we create an *illusion of freedom* by attributing more internal control to ourselves, to the individual, than actually exists."

The reason we focus erroneously on personal responsibility, *Craig Haney*, *Zimbardo's* colleague in the experiment, added recently, is that "if we can attribute deviance, failure, and breakdowns to the individual flaws of others, then we are absolved." Maybe so. But if we blame everything on the "situation," then the perpetrators are absolved, too.

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