

Interview mit Philip Zimbardo

Das Gespräch führte Sabine Edlinger-Starr

Anlässlich des Internationalen Kongresses der Webster University zum Thema „Burnout und Job Engagement“ vom 5. – 7. Oktober 2006, in Wien, gab es einen Gastvortrag von Philip Zimbardo mit dem Thema „The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil“. Dies ist zugleich das Thema seines im April nächsten Jahres erscheinenden Buches.

Mag. Sabine Edlinger-Starr hat ihn für die PiÖ zu einem Interview getroffen:

Professor Zimbardo, you are an idol for many psychologists all over the world and certainly also in Austria, because of your very essential contributions to psychology. How did you get started with your career, what motivated you?

Zimbardo: Born in 1933 – the time of the Depression – I grew up in New York City in a poor neighborhood, to a poor Sicilian family. For a child that meant that his only enjoyment was from people because toys and games and other entertainment was scarce. This circumstance and being a weak child – due to a six month stay in the hospital because of a contagious disease at the age of 6 – woke my interest in the ‘street social psychology, the psychology of survival’. They call it ‘street smarts’, which in psychological terms means understanding situational dynamics. It was important to really understand – at a primitive level – issues of group dynamics, issues of which boys could be trusted, and which boys were dangerous. I also realized that it was better to be a leader than a follower, so I tried to figure out how much of it was physical, what made somebody a leader. At first the question for me was what to do in order to survive and later it became what to do in order to thrive, and how to become a leader. By the age of 12 I had reached my goal and considered myself to be a leader, which equaled in being chosen as the captain, and as the president of the class, up to president of the American Psychological Association in 2002. The stay in the hospital, where I was exposed to a most alien social environment – that is being in bed day and night, never being touched by anyone – made me even more concerned about social and physical relations between people and increased my interest in what became my life long work and passion. Starting from those negatives I was always searching how to make life more positive and how to improve a bad situation. Being from a background where education was not a tradition, my good grades got the attention of my

teachers who advised my parents to let me continue with school. When I went to college intending to become a psychologist, I was very disappointed with my introductory class in psychology. The textbook, the experiments and the questions that got asked, all were boring: the excitement of “street psychology” was missing. So I switched to sociology and anthropology, where they were asking very interesting questions. Back then topics were, as examples, the ethics of the atomic bomb and race relations. However, these fields rarely had methodology adequate for good answers. Through a coincidence I took up psychology in my last year in college again: at a job interview in the factory where my father worked I got the info that they would not hire sociologists, only psychologists. I took all the psychology classes in one year and majored in psychology, sociology and anthropology. And, then another coincidence: this job required a specialization in industrial psychology, so I took one class in which the instructor hired me as his research assistant. There and then I started doing research and discovered my passion for it. None of these things were planned and yet I found myself equipped with just the right background for my most significant work: the Stanford Prison Experiment. This experiment is about understanding individuals in institutional settings, which is blending psychology with sociology.... I still see my life as opportunities falling into place rather than being planned. My ideas for research topics come from reading books, listening to lectures, watching TV, observing people, and trying to make sense of my personal experiences, all combined with innate curiosity.

What do you consider to be your most significant study, your favorite one, your main contribution to humanity?

Zimbardo: The obvious answer seems to be what the world has known about me for more than 30 years. The answer, The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE), has been shown in a German movie with the actor Moritz Bleibtreu, and, currently, a version is in production in Hollywood. But I blame my fame on the coinciding occurrence of a number of factors. Originally it had been intended to be a little study, which simply demonstrated the power of social forces over individuals, and ending in a scientific journal article – in 1971. Coincidentally, about the same time there were prison riots in California and in New York and prisons became a

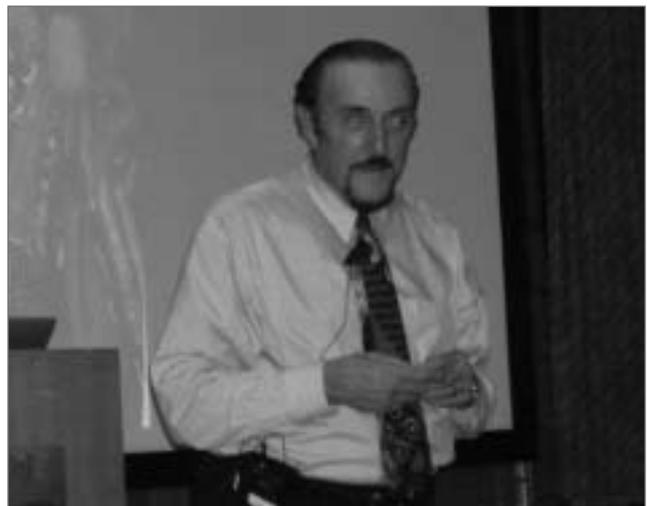
topic of high interest. The study pointed to the dehumanizing effect of prison environment, to the abuse of power by the guards. The U.S. Congress turned to me in order to hear about how to improve the prison system. Another reason for the importance of the SPE is the change in ethical requirements in research. The SPE, as it had been done, could not be done over again at a later time, now it would be considered unethical. Now, only pencil and paper questions are possible, meaning people have to answer theoretically what they would do if they participated in an experimental prison, where – by random assignment – they are either a prisoner or a prison guard. The SPE had been planned to last 2 weeks. After 6 days it had to be ended, because the dynamics that had developed amongst the subjects were getting out of control. So the experiment has been put in a ‘time capsule’, which makes it more interesting to people. It is like looking back to another era, historically fascinating. Most recently, another reason for the popularity of the SPE is that these same behavioral dynamics started to happen in a real prison, the abuses in the prison of Abu Ghraib had been exposed. In Abu Ghraib, American soldiers tortured and abused Iraqi detainees. The visual parallels to the experiment were stunning: prisoners being stripped naked, bags put over their heads, and there was sexual degradation. My new book illuminates the parallels between the psychological bases for abuse in the Stanford research prison and the horrible real prison in Abu Ghraib.

I consider myself primarily as a teacher. So when I do research I am always concerned to document every step beginning with the hypothesis, the research procedures, and ending with the results; thus, I can use those photos in my lectures. This approach makes my research so interesting – even 35 years later. I take you with me inside each experiment with photos, videos and even using the present tense, always having the visual element of research in mind so the audience and I are sharing the same external constructed reality. This technique makes science far more than just a graph at the end with dry and lifeless numbers. I sometimes get questions from my students, that stimulate me to answer them with experimental research. So teaching leads to research, which in turn leads back to add to the power of my teaching.

Another significant question was raised by the SPE: why the participants of the SPE who had the role as prisoners did not exit the experiment by just saying ‘I quit the experiment’. This brought me to another important field of my work. I began to do research on the conditions why people would limit their own freedom: The beginning of my research on shyness. I discovered that in 1972, there was no literature on shyness in adults. I thought of shyness as a self-imposed psychological prison, where the shy person is his own guard and prisoner at the same time. I started with teaching a course on shyness and gathering questions about it together with the students. A first study followed with the results that not being shy – not now, not in the past and not in certain situations – was the exception (only 5 per cent). Most people reported being currently shy – 40%, or previously shy – 40%, or shy in certain situations – 15%. Cross cul-

tural studies and an article in *Psychology Today*, 1975, followed: ‘Social Disease of Shyness’. There was a big response from readers, asking for help on that topic. I set up an experimental shyness clinic, which at first worked with Stanford students only, and after a while this study expanded into the Stanford area community, and is today part of the clinical training program at a school in Palo Alto.

The therapy approach consisted of three interventions: to change the thinking – cognitive therapy, to change the shy people’s behavior – changing non verbal behavior and verbal behavior, and also directly working on anxiety reduction. The results of the 8 weeks long treatment showed that a combination of all three approaches created a successful shyness treatment in most shy adults. Numerous articles and two books – ‘Shyness’ and ‘The Shy Child’ – followed. I also want to point out the positive aspects of shyness: Shy people are very sensitive to interpersonal relations. They never dominate the conversation, never abuse people. Through the treatment they should be helped to be able to use these positive sides of shyness and get to where they don’t limit themselves so much, so they do make a contribution to conversations. For example, I consider myself the opposite of shy, which being a leader really means. One has to put himself out there, being the leader, being the first one to raise his hand, and so on. Considering the original question, I see my work on shyness having the most impact in helping people directly.



I also want to mention a third main area of my work, which is not as well known as the two fields described above, yet this third field I consider as very important and interesting: The social and cognitive basis of madness. I have done research for 20 years on how do people first begin to develop the symptoms of psychopathology. The approach of the research is to look at how normal people first have the initial symptoms of the problem. I experimentally created paranoia, phobia or hypochondria in laboratory experiments. The people in the 3 groups were given a specific focus when trying to explain certain discontinuities they were experiencing in that setting: the physical environment (phobia), the

social environment (paranoia), or body and health (hypochondria). The basic idea for madness is that people have learned classes of biased explanations they use whenever experiencing unusual events in their lives. But this complicates the search for an explanation of what they experience, because, if one is 'stuck' with one kind of explanation and the truth lies with another kind of explanation, one will never get to. The real reason for the source of their problem. Then, if this happens in an area that is important for the self identity, this is where I see the possible beginning of madness. I could show that psychologically normal people show significant signs of paranoia on the MMPI paranoia scale within 30 minutes of the experiment, others become phobic or hypochondriacal depending on what type of explanation they use to explain their discontinuity. This research has not had much resonance in the scientific world because of at least two reasons: I think that hypnosis (a technique I use in this research) as a research tool is still under suspicion. Also the comprehensive article has been published in 'The Advances in Experimental Social Psychology', which is not being read by many clinical psychologists, which I now consider to be the wrong placement of the article. I call this field of my work the most fascinating personally and at the same time the most disappointing for my career, but I have not given up on it yet.

What is your vision or wish for psychology in the future?

Zimbardo: According to my own orientation I want psychology to ask questions about important personal, social, political, and environmental issues and to use the best technology for generating valid answers. Then those answers should be organized in ways that will influence society (social psychology), improve treatment of people (clinical psychology), improve business environments (organizational psychology) and improve the functioning of the nation (political psychology). The basic research should not be done for the sake of doing research, but rather to apply it as a service to people. There exists an artificial distinction between basic research – which is considered high prestige – and applied research – which is less valued. We need a better synthesis, where researchers, when they finish their research, generate ways these ideas can be used in a practical positive way.

What do you believe is the most important contribution of Psychology to mankind?

Zimbardo: When I was President of the APA in 2002 I initiated the homepage www.psychologymatters.org. The purpose of this homepage is to list psychological studies that had a significant effect on mankind, that were of service to people. Many studies are carefully presented on that site. One study had the most wonderful application of Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which says that people learn behaviors, emotional reactions, and attitudes from role models. The nonprofit group Populations Communications

International (PCI) airs soap operas in Latin American countries, using this model, where these serial TV dramas are very popular. They promote topics like reducing the number of children and thus are better able to provide for the children they have, also women getting an education, and also practicing safer sex, in order to reduce the spread of HIV. In the programs actors showing the risky or negative behaviors suffer adverse effects. The characters with positive behaviors have good results and positive outcomes. PCI also does controlled studies to monitor the success of these programs in changing their audience's behaviors. These evaluations reveal that these "psychological" soap operas actually influence many people to change their behavior in constructive ways.

You were President of the APA in 2002. What are your comments about working with volunteers, about volunteer work, and why do you think people do volunteer?

Zimbardo: It is incredible, what volunteers enable to happen. For example, only in psychology, there is the APA for the whole US, then a Western American Psychological Association, and an Eastern Association. And then every US state has a psychological association, plus many larger cities have their own psychological association. Thousands of volunteers give of themselves and of their expertise, for a good cause. Many people are thankful for the good education they received, for having had mentors, and now they want to give something back, now that they are in a position to be able to.

Your latest book, which will be out in April, is called 'The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil'. What made it a good time to write that book now?

Zimbardo: When the pictures of prisoner abuse from the prison in Abu Ghraib showed up, the similarities to the SPE were remarkable. 30 years after the SPE study, the real thing happened in a real prison. My new book raises a fundamental question about human nature: How is it possible for ordinary, average people to become perpetrators of evil? The book provides for the first time a detailed chronology of the transformations in character that took place during the SPE. The book contains both classic and new research on conformity, on obedience to authority, on role-playing, on dehumanization, on deindividuation, and on moral disengagement. It also talks about how powerful but subtle situational forces can seduce people into evil. The first part of the last chapter is on how can people resist unwanted social influence: Dr Z's 10 steps for resisting unwanted influence. The second part of the last chapter is about the celebration of heroism. We mostly think of physical heroes, but there are also heroes who show social courage: they stand up their cause and they challenge the system. They are called 'Blow the Whistle'. There are also different kinds of evil people: only a few are evil most of their lives, whereas the

larger percentage is evil only temporarily- in situations that give them permission to act in those ways. The book ends on this positive note: the readers are told that there may come a time in their life when they have to pick from one of three paths: 1. to do what many other people are doing in a situation and become a perpetrator of evil, 2. to look the other way, ignore it and allow evil to go on, which is the evil of inaction, or 3. to challenge the system. This means one has to be willing to take a risk, when one is to become a hero. The book ends with the message: 'It's your choice!' But I hope that by encouraging people to think about the possibility of engaging in heroic deeds, my book will stimulate the Heroic Imagination in all of us.

Professor Zimbardo, thank you very much for this interesting interview.

Professor Emeritus Philip Zimbardo got announced as internationally recognized scholar, educator, researcher and media personality, winning numerous awards and honors. He has been a Stanford University professor since 1968, having taught previously at Yale, NYU, and Columbia. Zimbardo's career is noted for giving psychology away to the public through numerous publications and a popular TV series. He was recently president of the American Psychological Association.