Reflection Assignment 1: The Power of the Situation

<https://www.learner.org/series/discovering-psychology/the-power-of-the-situation/?jwsource=cl>

I personally found Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison study to be the most compelling. It was interesting to me how in less than a week individual’s attitudes and actions can drastically change when having to act the part of another individual, such as either a prison guard or a prisoner. In the Stanford prison study, social roles influenced behavior. A group of individuals who volunteered to participate in this study were randomly divided to act the part of either a prison guard or a prisoner. Before being accepted to participate the individuals had to be tested and had to be psychologically and physically healthy. The research question was “What happens when you put good people in a bad situation and in this case, jail?”. The procedures consisted of the individuals playing the role of their assigned “job” including wearing the appropriate uniform and acting the part and was supposed to last for two weeks but only made it to six days. The prisoners were treated like prisoners including being picked up at their house or dorm in a police car. They also had to live in cells and were cut off from the outside world for 24 hours a day and had to listen and obey the prison guards who only worked 8 hours a day. The main finding in this study was that basic and good people have a capacity of good and evil and waiting for the right or wrong situation will eventually bring the action(s) out. This was seen as prisoners became detached and guards became brutal when conforming to social roles. However, after the situation ends then the individuals can return to their old state. The most compelling part of this study to me was how the experiment was conducted, and how the results happened in such a short amount of time which was less than a week.

Although I found Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison study to be the most compelling, I also found it to be the most unethical study discussed in the Power of the Situation video. Many of the prisoner participants developed extreme stress responses due to the suffering involved in this study. These healthy individuals got sick, nice kids became rude and brutal guards, and once active individuals became passive. Also, a story told by Prisoner 416 further influenced by attitudes about the ethical guidelines of this study. After the conclusion of the study, he said he felt like while being a prisoner, he was distant from his former identity before imprisonment. He also felt as if he had become just his prisoner number and was just Prisoner 416 with no other identity. Due to the suffering and reactions to this study, this two-week study ended at six days. This study violated ethical guidelines such as the benefits resulting of the study. The benefits in this study did not outweigh the risks because many former healthy individuals that became prisoners also became sick and experienced extreme stress responses due to the severity and suffering of this experiment. Also, it could possibly violate the informed consent guideline because the participants were probably not aware of the risks that would be involved and the suffering they would experience when agreeing to participate.

Zimbardo believes that the social context enriches an individual’s life and that we need others to reach our own personal potential. However, he thinks that the social context can also work against us, such as in the time of Hitler and in many studies since. Leaders can directly affect followers as seen in Stanley Milgram’s experiment where an individual, acting as a teacher, believes he was having to shock the “student” as punishment for incorrect answers by command of a higher authority. Ultimately, he focused on situational power having negative effects. He is trying to convey that human behavior is shaped by other individuals as they interact through social context which can be positive or negative and I agree with this as I reflect back on my own and other people’s interactions. People are being influenced by other people throughout their entire life and sometimes this can have negative impacts. This video emphasized this idea through multiple experiments where participants conformed to the decisions or the demands of others or higher authorities which could result in violations of ethical guidelines. Zimbardo thinks that being alone hosts a whole group of issues regarding body and mind and that it is ultimately essential to have interactions among other individuals because they are what shape our behavior.