

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?

San Francisco psychologist says environment plays big role in evil behavior

Edward Guthmann, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Naked men in hoods form a human pyramid. A prisoner crawls on the floor tethered to a dog leash. And next to them, grinning at the camera like soul-dead fools, are the Army reservists, one of whom dismissed the torture of Iraqi detainees as "fun and games."

No one can forget those images from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Now, three years later, San Francisco psychologist Philip Zimbardo has written a book arguing that the men and women who participated in the torture were not just "rotten apples," as the Bush administration has argued, but the unfortunate products of a "rotten barrel" mind-set that left them unsupervised, poorly trained and ignorant of Iraqi culture. He sees the American military establishment in Iraq as complicit in what happened at Abu Ghraib.

In "The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil," Zimbardo writes that human nature is dualistic: Each of us, given certain uncontrolled circumstances, is capable of sadistic or abusive behavior. A professor emeritus of psychology at Stanford University, Zimbardo, 74, believes this so strongly that he spoke as an expert witness in defense of Staff Sgt. Ivan "Chip" Frederick, the military guard who supervised the night shift on Tiers 1A and 1B at Abu Ghraib, where the beatings, torture and sexual humiliation took place.

Zimbardo describes Frederick, the son of a West Virginia coal miner and a devout Baptist, as "superpatriotic," a man who considers himself spiritual even in the wake of Abu Ghraib. Despite Zimbardo's testimony, Frederick was sentenced to an eight-year prison term, which Zimbardo calls "outrageous."

"What I'm saying is that they're good soldiers," Zimbardo explains during a conversation at his Russian Hill home. "The whole point of the book is to change people's minds. ... (The perpetrators) were just at the bottom of this barrel; there was all this pressure on them to do this."

Trying to understand the Abu Ghraib disgrace, he says, isn't the same as excusing it. "If you don't understand the dynamics -- and if you don't change the situation -- then it's going to happen over and over again."

Even apart from the lack of proper supervision, Zimbardo writes, the environment at Abu Ghraib -- a 280-acre complex, where Saddam Hussein tortured and executed critics of his Ba'athist

government -- was so hellish that everyone was on the verge of cracking.

Porta Potties overflowed in 110-degree heat, leaving a nonstop stench. There were no mess halls, no proper showers, no separate facilities for prisoners with mental illness or contagious diseases such as tuberculosis.

In two months, the population on Tiers 1A and 1B swelled from 200 to 1,000 prisoners -- most of them innocent men rounded up in random military sweeps. Mortar and rocket-propelled grenade attacks on prison guard towers, launched by insurgents from the roofs of nearby buildings, occurred as often as 20 times per week.

"We all got numb in different ways," Zimbardo quotes one reservist saying.

Studying evil, which he defines as "intentionally behaving in ways that harm others," has occupied Zimbardo for years. He's lectured on the psychology of evil in classrooms and at professional conferences, and traveled to Brazil where he interviewed men who had been torturers and death-squad executioners. In the book, he draws examples from the 1994 Rwandan genocide of the early '90s, the lynching of blacks by whites in the American South and the more recent phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers.

He cites examples of men who, at the same time they inflicted evil in the context of work, maintained parallel lives as family men and loving fathers. "What I'm saying is that the human mind is so complex that any of us have templates to do anything. I mean, we could be Mother Teresa, we could be Idi Amin. We could be Nelson Mandela, we could be Saddam Hussein. But for most of us, we go in and out. It's not even a choice."

Evil needn't be on the scale of Abu Ghraib torture, he adds. Everyday evil includes "telling a racist or sexist joke, spreading gossip in school that can ruin another kid. Spousal or child abuse, doing something at work that violates your values. The newest evil now is cyber-bullying."

The division between good and evil is "permeable and nebulous," he writes. "It is possible for angels to become devils and, perhaps more difficult to conceive, for devils to become angels."

The largest section of Zimbardo's book deals with the Stanford Prison Experiment, a study he initiated and supervised in August 1971. After screening 100 male students from around the country, Zimbardo and his team selected 24 men -- "the most normal, most average, most healthy kids" -- paid them \$15 per day and randomly assigned them to enact the roles of guards and prisoners.

The dynamics that arose, Zimbardo says, were "exactly" the same as those at Abu Ghraib -- even though the participants in the experiment were mostly anti-war activists.

The experiment was conducted in the basement of a building on the Stanford campus. "Guards" wore reflective sunglasses and fake military uniforms; "inmates" wore women's smocks and no underwear. At first, nothing happened and Zimbardo wondered if the experiment would be a bust.

After 36 hours, the prisoners rebelled against the guards' verbal and psychological degradation. Four men suffered emotional breakdowns, one broke out in a psychosomatic rash that covered his body.

"They became guards and prisoners," Zimbardo writes. "Anyone, when given complete control over others, can act like a monster." Instead of letting the experiment run its course of two weeks, he ended it on day six.

"There's no question they suffered," he says. "I mean, to that extent it was totally unethical. Kids suffered unnecessarily over an extended period of time." He spent a day debriefing with the participants after the study ended, and says he's still in touch with several of the men 35 years later.

Despite the trauma the men endured, none of them sued. "Nobody thought about it," Zimbardo says. "People didn't sue in 1971. Right now, I'd be sued. They'd have the house."

The lessons in human behavior demonstrated by Abu Ghraib are chilling, Zimbardo says. But, just as the essentially good person can manifest evil in adverse conditions, he believes that everyone -- even those conditioned to evil -- is capable of heroic action.

In Zimbardo's appearance on "The Daily Show" Thursday, host Jon Stewart agreed, and cited the example of Ishmael Beah, the former child soldier from Sierra Leone who, with his book "A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier," demonstrates the possibility of such a transformation and the inspiration it delivers.

"It is not an abstract concept," Zimbardo writes. "As we are reminded by the Russian poet and former prisoner in Stalin's Gulag, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "The line between good and evil is in the center of every human heart."

E-mail Edward Guthmann at eguthmann@sfchronicle.com.

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