

Zimbardo's Conclusions

It is widely accepted in psychology that behavior is a result of both personality and situations. However, I have tried to show in my research that situations are much more powerful in shaping human behavior than they are generally given credit for (by psychologists or the public). I have designed experiments to provide a balance to the *fundamental attribution error**. Nevertheless, English and American psychologists (and the public) continue to believe that a person's personality is far more important in determining their behavior than the situation the person is in. This belief is not that surprising; Americans have a strong belief in individualism, which is shown in our medical, educational, and legal systems. However, acknowledging that the situation plays a large role in determining a person's behavior does not excuse the behaviors themselves. Instead, it helps people move away from blaming the person and trying to find methods to "fix" or "correct" that person to trying to prevent the creation of situations in which most people would do something violent or evil.

Think about this statement that sums up my argument: "While a few bad apples *might* spoil the barrel (which is filled with good "fruit"), a barrel filled with vinegar will *always* transform sweet cucumbers into sour pickles, no matter how good the cucumbers start out". That said, does it make more sense to spend our time and money trying to identify and fix the "bad apples" or to make sure that cucumbers don't end up in vinegar barrels?

My strong belief in situational factors has several parts. First, we should know that situational factors shape our behavior far more than we would expect.

Second, the focus on situational factors redefines what it means to be a hero. When the majority of people can be made to do something violent by putting them in a certain situation, the people who resist can be considered heroic. We should try to learn from their examples to understand *how* they can rise above the situational forces. I also think that it is important that more psychologists focus on understanding heroes and heroism.

Third, I think all of us should be humble when trying to understand the "unthinkable", "unimaginable" or "senseless" acts of evil. Instead of saying that "those people are bad and I am good", we should understand that most of us are also capable of those acts. We are all capable of committing horrible atrocities – given the right situation. That means that we should focus less on punishing the people who commit these crimes and more on uncovering the situation that led them to do so.

Currently, there is a trend to label terrorists and suicide bombers as "evil" people, instead of trying to understand the psychological, social, economic and political conditions that led young people to be willing to kill themselves and others. The "war on terrorism" can never be won by Bush's plan of finding and killing all the terrorists – since any person can become a terrorist at any time. Instead, we need to look at what situations cause people to become terrorists and try to prevent those situations. This will be an extremely difficult task, but a very important one.

Key Terms

- ❑ **Disposition** – someone's personality. "She has a very sweet disposition".
- ❑ **Situational** – having to do with the situation a person is in.
- ❑ **Fundamental Attribution Error** – when people assume that a person committed an evil act because he or she is an evil person, instead of looking at the forces that pushed the person to commit the act. In other words, when the evil a person commits is attributed to his/her disposition instead of the situational force.