The Psychology of Evil: A Situationist Perspective on Recruiting Good People to Engage in Anti-Social Acts

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A situationist perspective on the causes of anti-social behavior by individuals and violence sanctioned by nations is illustrated through experimental research and social-historical analyses in which "ordinary," good men and women are induced into behaving in evil ways. This social psychological view is contrasted with the more traditional dispositional focus on the internal, or personality-based, causes of anti-social behavior. The research foundation of this article demonstrates the Lewinian principle that it is possible to investigate social phenomena vital in the "real world" using experimental procedures. The presentation features my laboratory and field studies on deindividuation, aggression, vandalism, and the Stanford Prison Experiment, along with a process analysis of Milgram's obedience studies, and Bandura's analysis of Moral Disengagement. This body of research demonstrates the under-recognized power of social situations to alter the mental representations and behavior of individuals, groups and nations. The immediate context for this talk will be the current epidemic of violence in the U.S. My paper is an elaboration of the slide-based lectured given to the Society of Japanese Social Psychology in Osaka, 1994.
Dr. Zimbardo uses a situationist perspective on the ways through which anti-social behavior is understood, treated and prevented. This view contrasts with the traditional dispositional perspective, which locates evil within individual predispositions and looks at a person's internal factors and traits. The situationist perspective is different in that, unlike the dispositional perspective, it often uses experimental and laboratory research to demonstrate vital phenomena, whereas other perspectives may only use archival or correlational data to suggest such answers. Psychology is the investigation of the mind and how it processes and directs our thoughts, actions and conceptions.