

— The roots of evil – Ch. 4

Transcription of the interview with Philip Zimbardo¹

4. Men, women, and environment

Is it possible that a long lasting exposure to situation factor – such as a long lasting imprisonment – will make personality changes or emotional stress permanent?

Yes. It's not clear what you mean by long term, but I think being in a prison, away from family, away from community, away from friends, away from doing any meaningful activity is deteriorating. I mean I think it begins to change your mentality. You begin to think less well of yourself. In some ways, when you're a prisoner the way you survive is by acting crazy so other prisoners won't bother you. You have to convince other prisoners that if they bother you, you'll kill them. People I know have said, "My job was to act crazy, and then sometimes I did really crazy things".

Almost every prisoner gets out of prison in worse shape than they went in. They're not penitent. They're angry because they always believed the sentence was unfair, even if they know they committed the crime. Six years was too much for robbing a grocery store or something. They are less suited to be reintegrated into society than if they had not gone to prison. If they just went for a short period.

The other thing is that when you live in a prison, you live in an all male society, other prisoners, guards, and like being in the military a long time, you come to live in a male centric environment. Women are only fantasy. Women are only sexual fantasy.

The Social Sensing Syndrome

¹ Prof. Philip Zimbardo, Psychologist, professor emeritus at Stanford University.

So, the Social Sensing Syndrome is that over time

Many men prefer the company of men. To be in an all male setting, and they're unaware that's it almost like a high to be with men, rather than with women, so women it's awkward.

Yeah, something we've done a little bit of research on and again, it's something that I think I'm the first person to talk about it in this way that for many men, there is a high, an unconscious high of simply being in the presence of other men. More so the more dynamic, the more physical, the more energetic the situation is... so, again, for many men being on an athletic team, especially teams like soccer team, football team.

Not on a tennis team, not on a golf team, but its physical contact with other men and your job is to hurt. It's similar to in war. In war your job is to kill, but if you're in most sports, the most physical like soccer, rugby, American football, not so much European soccer, your job is to hurt the player. Knock him out so they have to take him out of the game. I'm saying this is an unstated high for many, many men.

What do you expect from a Stanford prison experiment with female guards and prisoners nowadays?

I wanted to do that study. When the study was over I wanted to do two recert to say, "Let's redo it with all women. Women guards, women prisoners". And let's redo it because many people I knew who were into human development said, "If we could train the guards, you wouldn't get ... We could train them to be compassionate. We'd put them through compassionate training, empathy training. You wouldn't get that effect".

I applied to Stanford to do two things. I wanted to do the study with only women, and we compare them with the study we did, and do a study where we have several experts, train guards with different compassion versus empathy and we would use the original study as the comparison. The committee at Stanford said, "Can you guarantee that there would not be a negative outcome?" If you could guarantee it you don't do it. They said, "If you can't guarantee, it could be negative and we don't allow it". So they said no. We couldn't do it.

Again, I'm almost sure. Several women who had been in women's prisons contacted me afterwards and said...

"...The violence of guards against prisoners in women's prisons is just more subtle. It's never physical. It's psychological. It's making you feel helpless. Making you feel worthless"

In some cases making you feel like a child. In some prisons they would encourage them to have dolls or pets, but many of these are women who had families. Many of them are there because of drugs or prostitution and so when they get out, they're even less able to function affectively in their family, in their life again.

Men dominate by physical force and women dominate by emotional, psychological force, but it would be nice to be able to show that. Again, there's almost no research in prisons. I'm saying this. There's no research comparing a male prison with a female prison within the prison. That's why I'm saying they're secret societies that we don't really know. We have psychologists, even criminologists

We don't know.

[to be continued]