The Lucifer Effect : Stanford Prison Experiment by Philip Zimbardo

This essay analyzes the ethical issues around the experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo. In the first part of this paper, I briefly summarize facts and goals of the experiment, pose the questions that need to be answered regarding ethical issues in social sciences. The second part of the essay provides evaluations and answers to the posed questions.

Goal of the Zimbardo while conducting the experiment was identification and clarification of the phenomena of human behavior and personalities. Particularly, the American guards whether they had sadistic personalities or the environment in which they work constructed their personalities. Zimbardo studied the roles people play in prison situation. In the experiment, 24 male college students were involved. They were paid 15 dollars per day. Randomly divided into prisoners and guards, they had to play their role during fourteen days. Experiment ceased on the sixth day due to extreme violence, brutality and uncontrolled circumstances. Key questions regarding the experiment and its results can be formulated as what happens when good people are put in evil place, how simulation can become real, how power enables people to step up the humanity.

Experiment clearly demonstrated the impact that environment can have over human. Major issue during the whole process was battle between conformity and individuality. Guards as well as prisoners were focused on the “survival”. In other words being accustomed to the status quo or rebel against it. In this process human can lost its individual perception or attitudes, find the comfort zone and behave in a way which make simple of their survival. Guards action determined the action of prisoners and on the contrary. Each participant found themselves accountable to behave in a way that they did. Precisely because it was the only one way of survival. Environment and the leverage of others is one point of explaining the experiment. Prison with all its elements is not perfect place or at least place where person can be protected from others’ influence. On the other hand Guards behavior can be explained not because of prisoners rebellious nature but because of perception of power. They had the possibilities to feel themselves superior over the other and consequently things such as: violence, oppression, brutality became acceptable. In this case Lord Acton’s words can be used for explaining phenomenon, “Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

To draw some conclusions, experiment justified its goal. Participation was voluntarily, all the participants were informed and consented. Considering the results, there are various ways for explaining the behavior of guards and prisoners. Important implications include, group actions strength over individual acts, environment’s dreadful influence over human conscious. Experiment unfolded the practice of “thinking in the box” in other words how limited, destructive and dangerous are human when they have no other goal but survival.

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