

Chapter 6

WHAT'S EXPECTED OF PEOPLE

WHERE THEY ARE

The True Story of the Pretend Prison

Craig awoke suddenly, drenched in sweat and feeling very shaken. He saw that he was at the university, and remembered that it was his turn to sleep overnight at the two-week experiment they were running there. But he had just had a terrible dream about what they were doing.

The experiment was a pretend prison that they had set up at Stanford University. All the prisoners and guards were actually college students who had volunteered. The experimenters had set it up to be as close to real as they could make it. They had even gotten real police to go and arrest the prisoner-students at their homes.

In the dream that Craig Haney had, some of the prisoners in the study were now in the guard uniforms. On thinking about the dream afterwards, Craig thought the ones

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that were in the dream were the ones that were the most upset when he saw them in the real world. But in the dream, they were angry and rude to him. He had a strong feeling there was no escape. That's why he woke up so shaken.

But he didn't think about it anymore the next day. He was a social psychologist, and along with Phil Zimbardo and others he had this experiment to run. They were going to observe what prisons did to the human mind and to people's behavior. They didn't have to worry about details like the prisoners being the type of people who had actually committed crimes, or guards being the type of people who wanted that kind of job.

So the pretend prison went on. People had been assigned to be prisoners or guards without any reason for picking one person over another for each role. They had just been picked by chance. They had all been tested before the prison was set up to make sure they were all mentally healthy, too, so that anything that happened wouldn't happen just because a person with unusual mental problems had gotten in.

People did kind of treat it as a joke at first, but over time people really got into those roles. They got into them so well that they started thinking like prisoners, or like guards, and that meant thinking in ways that they never usually did.

Some of the guards, who were normally nice people, got so they would do nasty things to keep the prisoners in line. These were things that were meant to be really humiliating. They would punish all the prisoners when just one misbehaved, so the prisoners would blame the prisoner that misbehaved for getting all of them in trouble. The prisoners started treating each other in ways that they would never have done as college students.

The experiment also had a fellow come in to be a parole officer. This would be someone who would interview prisoners to see if they could get parole. Parole means being let out of prison while still being supervised, so it's not the same thing as being set free, but it's the next best thing.

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The fellow they hired to do this had been a real prisoner himself. They hired him because they wanted his advice to make it seem as real as they could. But what he found out about himself was that when he was in the role of parole officer, he started talking to them the same way that parole officers had always talked to him when he was the prisoner. He had hated that. He had really, really hated being scolded that way. Yet here he was, doing the same kind of scolding, the same words to put people down. Once he was in that role, it just seemed to come to him naturally.

At one point in the experiment, there was a rumor of a plan for a prison break by a large number of the prisoners. Now, the psychologists who were running the experiment were in the role of administrators of this prison. If they were acting like normal psychologists, they would have thought this was interesting, and waited to see how things developed, and taken good notes. But instead, they thought like administrators. They took stern measures to foil the plot. While Phil Zimbardo, the head experimenter, was sitting in a hall waiting to stop a prison break which in fact never happened, another of the teachers in the university came along and asked him pleasantly how his experiment was going. He tells us later that this had made him really mad, that he had a crisis on his hands, and some ding-dong was asking him about something trivial! Of course, he would never have reacted that way during an ordinary experiment, and he realized later how silly that was.

Christina Maslach was Zimbardo's girlfriend, who did later become his wife. She was another professor of psychology, but she had not been involved in this experiment. She had been busy moving from one home to another, so she hadn't seen anything of how all this was set up or how it was run. She never saw the beginning steps that seemed to make sense to people as they were happening. All she saw was the set-up after people had gotten so nasty. There was a man she had talked to in the hallway going in, who seemed to be a very nice fellow. She saw

him being downright brutal once he got into his dark sunglasses and guard uniform. She watched as the prisoners had paper bags put over their heads and were marched in chains all over the basement before being led to the restroom, instead of being taken there directly. This was just a way of keeping them humiliated so they would give less trouble to the guards. She was astonished as everyone, including her beloved soon-to-be fiancée, seemed to regard this as normal. She saw it as a madhouse.



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She had a long argument with Zimbardo about this. The argument really scared her. She didn't want to upset him. She was also fairly new to her job and didn't want to take any chances of losing it by criticizing other people. But she could see that things had really gotten out of hand. So she argued.

Finally, she won the argument, and they realized she was right. The pretend prison, that was supposed to last two weeks, was shut down after only six days.

When Expectations Lead to Violence

In plays and movies, actors take different roles. When we act in real life, we also have different roles. A person in the role of a student in class is expected to behave differently than that same person in the role of a student on the school bus, or that same person in the role of someone attending a wedding. A different person in the role of a teacher will behave differently in the same classroom as the people in the role of students.

Just as actors have cues that tell them what they're supposed to say or do next, we have cues all around us to tell us what behavior is expected of us. And while it's not always true each and every time, people do tend to do what's expected of them in the particular situation they're in.

Even people who constantly misbehave in class are people who have gotten themselves into the roles of people who constantly misbehave in class. People around them treat them accordingly. That makes it more likely that they'll keep acting that way, since other people now act like that's what's expected of them.

Following what's expected is ordinarily a good thing. Since there are thousands of different ways of behaving, it helps to have cues to help us narrow down the options. We still have options, but we know that reading a book in a library is one of the options, reading a book while waiting in line at a cafeteria would be odd but not unheard of, and reading a

book in the middle of a football field while others are trying to play a game is likely to be strongly discouraged by others.

The former prisoner that changed his behavior so much when he was behaving like a parole officer shows how strong the power of expectation can be. He had all the cues that told him to behave like a parole officer, even though he had always hated that behavior when he was at the receiving end of it. Your own parents or guardians and teachers have probably found themselves amazed the same way when they find themselves scolding children in a way that they always hated when they were children, and were sure they would never do. It's not that people are helpless to make choices. It's that the power of the situation is very strong.

Some guards in the pretend prison became brutal and others didn't, so there are individual differences in how people behave in the same situation. Yet those that did become brutal were not that kind of people outside of that situation. They were not only people who could be perfectly nice and polite out in regular situations, but had been that way that very same morning before going into the pretend prison. The behavior differences were clear not just over time, but in the very same day.

This prison experiment is often compared with the Milgram obedience experiments that we talked about in the first chapter. In some ways, it was the opposite. They weren't trying to encourage aggression, but rather to keep it down. The participants were never lied to, and were always told exactly what they would be going through. It was the institution of prison that was the authority, rather than another person. But it was the same in showing how people can do violence because it's so clearly expected by other people. In this case, other people have set up a structure where how to behave is not decided on by one person, but is a structure that everyone follows.

Prisons are a structure like that, and so are armies, and organized terrorist cells, and the Nazi bureaucracy that sent

people to death camps. Some structures are ordinarily good or at least neutral, but can become violent if they start doing violent things, like business corporations. Many corporations are full of responsible people putting out a good product, but sometimes people in corporations try to get away with polluting, or with paying people such low wages that they can't live on them, or with using violence to try to get rid of people protesting them. People in those corporations responsible for causing these problems may be perfectly nice people to talk with or play a game of baseball with, because outside the office they are in roles that have no expectations of violence. But when they're making decisions in the office, they take the cues of the corporation on what's expected of them, and that's what they do.

When violence is obvious, with one person or group directly harming another, that's called "direct violence." A guard beating a prisoner—or a prisoner beating a guard—or a death squad killing the leaders of a strike would be direct violence. Wars are direct violence. But when people are harmed indirectly by the structures that have been set up, that's called "structural violence." When people suffer from the pollution dumped into their nearby river by the factory upstream, there never was an individual that decided to hurt specific people, but they're harmed because the structure was set up that way. If people are poor even though they work hard because the owners of a factory pad their own pockets by paying wages too low, and the poor workers have no place to go where they can get paid what their work is worth, then the workers are victims of structural violence. The owners aren't intending to harm people. It's a side-effect of becoming rich. The violence doesn't come from deciding to be mean, but from not caring or maybe not even noticing.

Within violent institutions, there may be some people who are sadists and like to hurt others. After all, people who are like that are more likely to go to the violent places rather

than somewhere else. But most of the people caught up in these organizations aren't like that. They're people that would be as nonviolent as the rest of us if only they hadn't gotten caught up in that arrangement.

How Do We Stop the Violence?

This power of expectation can actually help in nonviolent campaigns. One of the strengths of nonviolent campaigns is that one of the major strategies is to set up new expectations for how violent people will behave. When people use a war, or guerrilla strikes, or violent revolutions, they expect that opponents will react with violence. That's well communicated. The opponents usually oblige. It's not uncommon for opponents to react with violence to a nonviolent campaign as well, as when attack dogs are sent after nonviolent marchers. But while the nonviolent campaigners are prepared for such violence, they also communicate over and over again, in different ways and every way they can think of, that this is not what they expect of their opponents. They expect that, over the course of time, the opponents will come to see that they should change their behavior.

Those who are used to using violence make fun of this idea. They think it shows how naïve the campaigners are. But the campaigners are actually using the same kind of mental process that works so well to make nice people do violence, only working it in reverse. Over time, it has been shown to work.

Of course, when it's a large situation that has been going on for many years, it would make sense that it would take a long time to change it. Changing the behavior of a lot of people takes more time than changing the behavior of a few. When we also need to change a whole organization of things that has been strongly set into place, it takes longer yet.

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This kind of idea can work much more quickly in situations with small groups of people. You may be able to try it for yourself sometime. When one person starts yelling at another, if the other person responds not by yelling back but by continuing on in a normal conversation, maybe looking a little puzzled, but clearly expecting the other person to calm down and move to normal conversation also, then more often than not, that is what the other person will do.

Then there's also the question of those people that are in violent arrangements right now. Sometimes, they leave. Soldiers or veterans of a war start protesting the war. People who carry out executions stop. Men who were active with nuclear weapons have left and written about how they now think they're a bad idea. People who have left governments run by a dictatorship can often be the most effective spokespeople against that dictatorship.

Sometimes people leave these arrangements because they have decided they object to them. Other times, they leave for other reasons, like retiring or finding a different job, but then find later that they object. The power of expectations in the situation kept their mind thinking a certain way as long as they were in the situation. What was expected of them kept being given to them as cues for their behavior over and over again. But when they were out of the situation for a while, that power got to be less and less, until it was gone. Then they could see things a different way. Because they knew more about how things were organized from the inside, they were among the best people for explaining to others what was wrong and how to change it.

Of course, the best thing to do to keep organizations from making otherwise nice people be violent is to change those organizations. In some cases, like building nuclear weapons, that would probably mean getting rid of those arrangements entirely. In other cases, like prisons, it means

finding good nonviolent alternatives, ways of treating people that have committed crimes that will be more likely to work in keeping them from committing crimes any more. Factories that pollute can be turned into factories that don't pollute.

Sometimes protesting campaigns will be needed to make changes, and other times lobbying for new laws will do it. Sometimes inventing new technology will help, and other times having a good long talk with administrators can bring about some progress. Educating the public about the need for change is practically always helpful. Sometimes finding good nonviolent ways of doing things that had been done with violence before will work, with a small project first to show how well it works and letting the idea spread.

Using creativity in figuring out how to change what needs changing, we can come up with all kinds of ways of doing it. We can look at what's worked before, and what hasn't worked well, and then we can try out new things to see how well they work. Historians can help us know what has and hasn't worked, and social scientists can study what we're doing now to see if it works well.

In all cases, of course, we'll be better able to come up with good ways of making changes if we understand how the problem we're trying to change works in the first place. That's why it's good to have an understanding of how much people behave as their expected to in the situations they're in.