

Interview mit Philip Zimbardo

Das Gespräch führte Sabine Edlinger-Starr

Anlässlich des Internationalen Kongresses der Webster University zum Thema „Burnout und Job Engagement“ vom 5. – 7. Oktober 2006, in Wien, gab es einen Gastvortrag von Philip Zimbardo mit dem Thema „The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil“. Dies ist zugleich das Thema seines im April nächsten Jahres erscheinenden Buches.

Mag. Sabine Edlinger-Starr hat ihn für die PiÖ zu einem Interview getroffen:

Professor Zimbardo, you are an idol for many psychologists all over the world and certainly also in Austria, because of your very essential contributions to psychology. How did you get started with your career, what motivated you?

Zimbardo: Born in 1933 – the time of the Depression – I grew up in New York City in a poor neighborhood, to a poor Sicilian family. For a child that meant that his only enjoyment was from people because toys and games and other entertainment was scarce. This circumstance and being a weak child – due to a six month stay in the hospital because of a contagious disease at the age of 6 – woke my interest in the ‘street social psychology, the psychology of survival’. They call it ‘street smarts’, which in psychological terms means understanding situational dynamics. It was important to really understand – at a primitive level – issues of group dynamics, issues of which boys could be trusted, and which boys were dangerous. I also realized that it was better to be a leader than a follower, so I tried to figure out how much of it was physical, what made somebody a leader. At first the question for me was what to do in order to survive and later it became what to do in order to thrive, and how to become a leader. By the age of 12 I had reached my goal and considered myself to be a leader, which equaled in being chosen as the captain, and as the president of the class, up to president of the American Psychological Association in 2002. The stay in the hospital, where I was exposed to a most alien social environment – that is being in bed day and night, never being touched by anyone – made me even more concerned about social and physical relations between people and increased my interest in what became my life long work and passion. Starting from those negatives I was always searching how to make life more positive and how to improve a bad situation. Being from a background where education was not a tradition, my good grades got the attention of my

teachers who advised my parents to let me continue with school. When I went to college intending to become a psychologist, I was very disappointed with my introductory class in psychology. The textbook, the experiments and the questions that got asked, all were boring: the excitement of “street psychology” was missing. So I switched to sociology and anthropology, where they were asking very interesting questions. Back then topics were, as examples, the ethics of the atomic bomb and race relations. However, these fields rarely had methodology adequate for good answers. Through a coincidence I took up psychology in my last year in college again: at a job interview in the factory where my father worked I got the info that they would not hire sociologists, only psychologists. I took all the psychology classes in one year and majored in psychology, sociology and anthropology. And, then another coincidence: this job required a specialization in industrial psychology, so I took one class in which the instructor hired me as his research assistant. There and then I started doing research and discovered my passion for it. None of these things were planned and yet I found myself equipped with just the right background for my most significant work: the Stanford Prison Experiment. This experiment is about understanding individuals in institutional settings, which is blending psychology with sociology.... I still see my life as opportunities falling into place rather than being planned. My ideas for research topics come from reading books, listening to lectures, watching TV, observing people, and trying to make sense of my personal experiences, all combined with innate curiosity.

What do you consider to be your most significant study, your favorite one, your main contribution to humanity?

Zimbardo: The obvious answer seems to be what the world has known about me for more than 30 years. The answer, The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE), has been shown in a German movie with the actor Moritz Bleibtreu, and, currently, a version is in production in Hollywood. But I blame my fame on the coinciding occurrence of a number of factors. Originally it had been intended to be a little study, which simply demonstrated the power of social forces over individuals, and ending in a scientific journal article – in 1971. Coincidentally, about the same time there were prison riots in California and in New York and prisons became a