

The science of being a hero

Annabel Stafford

Philip Zimbardo has seen a lot of evil. He literally wrote the book on it. He designed the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, which had volunteer "guards" abuse fellow volunteers. He's studied the worst of the Abu Ghraib atrocities. And for two years, as he wrote *The Lucifer Effect: How good people turn evil*, he was steeped in the horrors of the Holocaust, Rwanda and other genocides. So it's fair to assume it would take a lot to spook him. But right now, Zimbardo is spooked.

"I think a unique thing is happening which is illustrated by the election of Donald Trump," Zimbardo tells Fairfax Media. Nations across the world are "moving from democracy to right-wing totalitarianism".

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Sylvia Gray is involved in a civic project that encourages people to become heroes.

Sylvia Gray is involved in a civic project that encourages people to become heroes. Photo: Joe Armao

He points to fascist and right-wing movements in France, Poland and Hungary warning that increasing numbers of people "are willing to give up personal responsibility, to say, 'I'll let the powerful people tell me what to do' ... That's never good."

The world, Zimbardo says, needs heroes.

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In 1971, Zimbardo's improvised jail in the basement of the Stanford Psychology Department was "working" so well, the guards were emotionally abusing their fellow volunteers and two of the prisoners had had breakdowns. "We'd

proved our point," Zimbardo says, "it was a measure of the power of the situation." Then his girlfriend threatened to split up with him.

"She challenged me that what I was doing was wrong," he remembers. "I was allowing the guards to abuse the prisoners, to make them suffer ... She said '... these are not prisoners, they're not guards, these are boys and they're suffering and you are personally responsible. And if you don't see this the way I see it, well, I'm not sure I want to continue my romantic relationship with you'."

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Zimbardo stopped the experiment early (he and his then girlfriend, psychologist Christina Maslach, later married), but something niggled at the back of his mind, a question about why his girlfriend had seen what he didn't, why she was "the only one who stood up, spoke out and challenged unjust authority". It was, Zimbardo says, "heroic."

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More than 30 years later, in 2004, photos surfaced documenting the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison. The soldiers "were doing exactly what our guards did, only much worse and they were documenting it ... with photos and videos".

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Zimbardo wasn't the only one with déjà vu. Noting the similarities with Stanford, the legal team for one of the accused guards asked Zimbardo to be an expert witness on how the situation at the prison would have affected their client's behaviour. In return, they promised him access to all the material associated with the case. "[I] would be one of the few people who knew what really happened".

After the trial had finished (Zimbardo's situationist argument was largely rejected), Zimbardo decided to write about Stanford and Abu Ghraib and everything else he'd learnt about evil. That write-up became *The Lucifer Effect*, the controversial thesis of which is that the only thing separating evil people from most good ones is that the latter have never had the opportunity to turn bad.

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A US soldier with a naked detainee at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

A US soldier with a naked detainee at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. Photo: AP

Exceptions to the rule

Still, as he wrote, Zimbardo noticed individuals like Maslach who had bucked the trend. There was the army reservist, Joseph Darby, who turned over a CD of incriminating photos from Abu Ghraib, the petty criminal who had stolen a bus to drive others to safety during Hurricane Katrina, the Europeans who hid Jews at risk to their own lives.

"In every case there's always a minority who resist," he says. "But nobody's ever studied that minority because we have all been fascinated by the people who did what we didn't think could be done," he says. "So in the Milgram experiment (in which volunteers administered apparently ever-stronger electric shocks to students who answered questions wrong) the fact that two-thirds went all the way, shocking somebody nearly to death, that was the remarkable thing. Nobody said: 'What about the one-third who didn't? What were they thinking?'"

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Matt Langdon

These thoughts became the coda to Zimbardo's book. "I began to think ... maybe those people who can resist powerful group pressures, we can think of them as heroes. And then I began to say, well, what are heroes?"

Zimbardo had witnessed what Hannah Arendt, after watching the trial of Adolf Eichmann, called the "banality of evil", but now he wondered whether there could be a banality of heroism too. "We now know how easy it is for good people to be transformed to do evil deeds, evil of action and evil of inaction," he says "[but] could ordinary people be inspired and trained to do heroic deeds?"

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In a 2006 article, *The Banality of Heroism*, Zimbardo and his colleague, Zeno Franco, admitted that social science couldn't yet explain why some people acted heroically, while others stood by and did nothing. Still, Zimbardo was willing to bet heroism could be learnt and in 2008 the psychologist turned activist and founded the Heroic Imagination Project.

As well as in the US, Heroic Imagination Projects have now run in Hungary, Poland and Sicily and, as of November 2015, in Geelong. The project generally includes six lessons on themes like the bystander effect and situational pressures that schools or businesses or even whole countries can buy the licence to.

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Students participate in the Stanford Prison Experiment 1971.

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"So you see a video of a woman lying on the steps at Liverpool station," Zimbardo says of one lesson. "The clock goes for four minutes and you see 35 people pass by within one foot and no one stops." Students are asked questions about the video and what they would do in a similar situation. In some cases, such as Hosok Tere in Hungary, trainees go on to stage their own experiments.

"They pretend to be a victim lying down on the street and the rest of the group videotapes," Zimbardo explains. "When people help they ask, 'Why ... and give some small reward'. If people don't stop they also ask, 'Didn't you notice? Why didn't you help? Make a promise that you'll help next time'."

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The "imagination" part is crucial, Zimbardo says, because "heroism starts in the mind ... with thinking I could do that, I could be the one, I could make a difference."

Heroic impulse

When mother rats notice a baby rat has wandered off, whether it's their own child or not, they retrieve the wanderer so quickly and so repeatedly that scientists have suggested the behaviour may be the result of an ancient impulse, an impulse that may also explain why some people rush into extreme danger to save strangers.

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In a chapter in the Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership released last month, neurobiologist Stephanie Preston suggests that the heroic impulse may have evolved from the same urge that makes rats retrieve baby rats.

Preston points out that the parts of the brain (mainly the amygdala) engaged when rats retrieve offspring are the same as those engaged when humans act altruistically in a neuroimaging experiment or during extreme altruism. She also highlights research by other scientists that has found stronger amygdala responses in people who have donated kidneys to strangers, compared with those with psychopathic tendencies.

Interestingly, the amygdala also lights up in rats who don't help, but the neural path ends in a different location for helpers and non-helpers. This, Preston says, suggests that the helping response is switched on by pregnancy hormones or activated when rats that aren't mothers get used to the novelty of newborns. Applied to humans, it would explain why some people are willing to stand by while others are hurt "when inaction is actually the adaptive response".

Still, there is no definitive evidence that we are hardwired for heroism and perhaps there never will be. You can't put people into life-threatening situations to test if they'll react, and Zimbardo says nothing like the Stanford Prison Experiment would be possible in today's litigious culture (for the record he doesn't regret the experiment, though regrets not ending it sooner).

Nonetheless, the field of heroism research has expanded exponentially during the past decade. Olivia Efthimiou, one of the organisers of an international conference on heroism science held at Murdoch University in July, says the momentum "has all the hallmarks of an emerging social movement".

Much of the new research contradicts Zimbardo's argument that heroism (and evil) are dependent on situations rather than individual disposition. A 2013 comparison of 25 Canadians who had received awards for life-risking bravery with 25 ordinary people found the heroes were distinguished from non-heroes on the basis of personality composition and that they shared similar "life narratives". Authors William Dunlop and Lawrence Walker concluded, "those who possess the 'right' type of story may be more likely to intervene while under the press of peril".

A more recent study of heroes found they shared characteristics including courage, perseverance, honesty and kindness as well as a disregard for what others thought of them. Beyond this the heroes fell into two distinct groups, the first, according to Claremont Graduate University researcher Brian Riches, were "open, loving and risk-taking", while the second were "spiritual, socially responsible and prudent", suggesting heroes come in different varieties.

Despite finding heroes may have unique features, Riches argues his study could be used by programs such as Zimbardo's to identify the characteristics that can be fostered to create potential heroes.

Back to school

Jeff Neall, principal of Michigan's Grand Blanc West Middle School, who signs his emails "Peace, Jeff", was embarrassed when two of his seventh-grade girls got into a fight at a school picnic and no one stepped in to help. He called in Matt Langdon.

Langdon was an Australian who'd been living in the US for more than a decade and working as a school camp counsellor. He had recently quit his job managing a YMCA camp to start The Hero Construction Company. The aim was to take the character-building workshops he'd developed at camp into school rooms, specifically middle school, which in the US covers years 6, 7 and 8..

Langdon was nervous: he'd quit partly because his boss had said kids wouldn't "get" the hero workshops. But when he spoke about the hero's journey at Grand Blanc West Langdon got a standing ovation, kids lined up to shake his hand or hug him, and the sixth-grade teachers cancelled the rest of the day's lessons so the students could talk about what they'd heard.

He starts his training by getting kids to recognise the "hero's journey" – a recurring literary pattern identified by American academic Joseph Campbell in 1949 – in their own lives. Then he encourages them to be a hero to others.

"The opposite of a hero is not a villain, it's a bystander," he says. "And this isn't a one-time decision, it happens every day ...The idea is to push the ratio towards acting [despite] variables that might hold you back, whether that's the bystander effect, peer pressure, social structures, conformity with the crowd."

A few months after Langdon's presentation, Neall rang to report that a six-former had successfully confronted an older girl who was bullying another student. "Even better ... the girl who was confronted was the same girl who'd been in the fight the year before," Langdon says. "So this was a tough girl with a tough reputation."

Langdon made, by his own estimate, hundreds of school visits, but he noticed that for many schools money was a barrier, so when he returned to Australia in 2014, he decided to change direction and develop free lesson plans for schools to deliver themselves (the first plan is complete and Langdon hopes to have ten by the end of the year).

He funds the Hero Construction Company, a not-for-profit organisation, through "The Hero Round Table" conferences, which he started in 2013 and which are slowly becoming profitable.

Langdon posted a local Facebook group to ask for feedback on his new website and got a response from a Geelong-based woman, Sylvia Gray, who said he couldn't go wrong with a quote from Zimbardo. Langdon suggested they have coffee.

Gray, an American who moved to Australia when she was 20, had first come across Zimbardo just a few years earlier when she heard him speak about Stanford and situational pressures as part of an online course she and her husband were taking. A lot of what he said rang a bell.

Gray had been through a hero's journey of her own. At the age of 21 and newly married, she adopted her younger sister from the US in a bid to rescue her from what Gray describes as the abusive home that she herself had run away from at age 14 (Gray divorced her parents at 16).

By the time she commented on Langdon's Facebook post, her sister had grown up and left home and she and her husband, Atticus, were looking for a way "to give back".

Over coffee in Geelong, Langdon invited Gray to his next Hero Round Table, which was taking place in Michigan. In Michigan, Gray learnt about the Heroic Imagination Project (of which Langdon is a board member) and thought maybe she could bring it to Australia.

"I remember calling my husband and saying this is a little silly and crazy and we're students but should we do this?"

Atticus (the couple changed their names to Sylvia and Atticus Gray in 2014 to mark a break with Sylvia's past) "was 110 per cent for it" and two months later, in November 2015, Geelong played host to another Hero Round Table, which this time included Zimbardo.

The famous psychologist also launched Hero Town Geelong – the Australian partner of HIP run by the Gray that stages lectures, runs public heroism training and is piloting a high school curriculum at the Surf Coast Secondary College in Torquay.

Heroism is revealed in only the worst of times so, says Langdon, no one should want to be a hero. But, Jeff "Peace" Neall, feels, like Zimbardo, that perhaps these times are upon us.

"As a society we are polarising at what I consider an alarming rate," he writes. "Heroes and heroic deeds teach kids that the awful things happening are not normal, that normal people can and do make a difference every day and they can be a part of that."