Not So Situational

June 01, 2007

To the editor:

We are concerned by the message that has been conveyed to the general public regarding the power of the situation to "trump individual dispositions" ("The Banality of Evil," *Observer*, April 2007). In contrast to Zimbardo, we believe that there is actually little scientific evidence indicating that situations are more important than dispositions for explaining behavior. Indeed, researchers recently summarized over 25,000 studies and found that personality and situations contribute almost equally to various outcomes, and many studies demonstrate the complex ways in which people react differently to similar situations. Our concern is that Zimbardo has misrepresented the scientific evidence in an attempt to offer a purely situational account of the antisocial acts perpetrated at Abu Ghraib. The scientific consensus, based on existing data, is that people vary in their propensity for antisocial behavior and that environments transact with personalities. Some people are more likely to turn out to be bad apples than others, and this is particularly evident in certain situations.

Respectfully,

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