

Zimbardo Tells All: How Psychologists Can Achieve World Domination

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The above headline got your attention, right? It got my attention too when a Stanford graduate student offered a chance to hear Phil Zimbardo talk about “how psychologists can achieve world domination.” Well, he never actually offered a blueprint for conquering the globe (although you get the impression he might have one tucked away somewhere). But, Zimbardo, an APS Fellow and Charter Member, offered plenty of useful advice for excelling in the field of psychological science.

Zimbardo

The event, held late one Friday afternoon last Spring, drew about thirty people. Zimbardo brought wine, Italian salami, and crackers to share, as well as his wisdom from years as a distinguished and nationally-recognized researcher, teacher, and public figure. Mixing anecdotes, jokes and advice, he responded to questions from the audience: How do you balance being flamboyant as a teacher with being accepted as a serious academic? What sort of research gets popular attention? How does it feel when people misquote you? How much does ability to read the Zeitgeist matter to achieving success and fame in a career?

Zimbardo said that teaching provides him the emotional rushes he needs to fill in the long gaps between research milestones. He observed that, once he thought of an experiment, he had to wait a year and a half until he could fund it. Over two years after having a new idea, he finally published the results, and then “two years after my results are published, someone might read them,” he said.

“Even if I keep four experiments going in various points in the process, there is still a lot of time to fill while I wait for things to happen. Teaching fills in. It adds interest and excitement as research slowly progresses.”

IDEAS FROM TEACHING

A number of his research ideas have come from teaching, said Zimbardo. “Ideas for my first experiments in human aggression came from discussions we had in a research seminar about Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*.” At the time, his class discussed whether changing one’s external appearance and making everyone dress alike would lead to changes in inhibited behavior. As part of the class, Zimbardo conducted an experiment in which female subjects demonstrated a willingness to “shock” other female confederates. This experiment illustrated the power of deindividuation to disinhibit violent behavior.

When a student asked if he thought teachers need a track record of outstanding research before they can do outrageous things in the classroom, Zimbardo responded that “you need to start out by teaching creatively. You need to make things interesting for students, and for yourself,” adding that “a lot of things are constantly competing for students’ attention.”

PLAN FOR MEDIA POTENTIAL

Although Zimbardo could not provide a formula for achieving popular success, he made several recommendations for increasing the appeal of psychological science. For example, he said that the press wants to report on demonstrations that show direct results of a single variable or process.

“Demonstrations of human phenomena tend to capture more media attention than in-depth programmatic research.”

“It is best,” he explained, “if you can show dramatic differences in outcomes by making minimal interventions that are not obvious.” It also helps when researchers plan for the media potential of their studies. This means having videotapes of the research, including the methodological process as well as the resulting behaviors.

Zimbardo recognized that fame may be due more to circumstances than to planning. The day after his now-famous Stanford prison experiment ended in August 1971, there were prison riots in San Quentin and a few weeks later at Attica. Suddenly, Zimbardo found himself in demand as an expert on prison violence. He eventually testified at congressional subcommittees formed to investigate prison conditions. “In my usual dramatic fashion, I showed a slide show of the Stanford mock prison, which had greater shared reality with the congressman than abstract presentations of prison conditions by real prison experts,” Zimbardo recalled. (The same slide show is available for viewing at www.prisonexp.org.)

“It helps to put your listeners in the drama of the thing you want to show in your lectures,” he said. “For every experiment I talk about, I use photos from the subject’s point of view. I use present-tense language and I tell my audience what’s going on as if they were subjects experiencing what is happening.”

Zimbardo acknowledged that while science writers tend to understand biology because they’ve had training in it, “very few are trained in psychology. Because of their lack of familiarity with what makes good psychology, many journalists tend not to describe control groups or the most important results correctly.” Understandably, it bothers him when science writers misquote him. “Writers call me, talk to me for half an hour or more, and then only use sound bites that support some argument they wanted to make anyway.”

Zimbardo is intent on improving the quality of science journalism. As APA President in 2002, he plans to organize seminars for journalists to help teach them how to explain science of psychology and how to interpret psychology research.

Another way Zimbardo wants to get the word out that psychology has a lot of significant research to give the public is to encourage psychologists to write more op-ed pieces that can reach huge audiences.

He wanted more psychologists to reach the general readers by writing quality trade books about their own work.

WHAT SHAPES A CAREER

Zimbardo said that graduate students and young faculty have much to gain from monitoring their Zeitgeist. But he qualified his comments by pointing out that, because most research requires university resources, he explained that careers are shaped by what is currently being funded. He predicted his listeners would eventually rethink their careers to make their work sound fundable.

“It is vital to think about whether what you are doing will really make a significant difference in our lives. Will your research area still be in vogue in a decade, or short-lived?” he cautioned.

Rather than focusing on whether a research topic will bring fame, Zimbardo advised his audience to do work in areas they like in domains that are new and on problems that demand solutions. He warned against spending an entire career following up an advisor’s research.

“Take some risks and blend them with some sure outcome studies until you have tenure,” Zimbardo concluded, “after that, only do challenging research that has potential to change how we think about human nature and human relationships.”

One final note: since that gathering, Zimbardo has become the psychological consultant for NBC TV. His role is to help develop new programming on basic aspects of human nature.