
THE GENERALIST'S CORNER

On 50 Years of Giving Psychology Away: An Interview With Philip Zimbardo

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Philip G. Zimbardo, emeritus professor of psychology at Stanford University, is internationally recognized as the voice and face of contemporary American psychology. He earned his PhD in social psychology from Yale University in 1959 and has since received seven honorary doctorates for his contributions to psychology and society. The author of more than 300 publications and 50 books, Zimbardo's research spans 20 topics, including shyness, evil, teaching, persuasion, hypnosis, dissonance, time perspective, and heroism. He is best known for his landmark study, the Stanford Prison Experiment; his widely seen TV series, *Discovering Psychology*; and his best-selling textbook, *Psychology and Life*. He is past president of the Western Psychological Association (WPA) and the American Psychological Association (APA), and has received distinguished teaching awards from WPA, APA, Stanford University, Phi Beta Kappa, and the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. His aim to "give psychology away" is evident in all he does.

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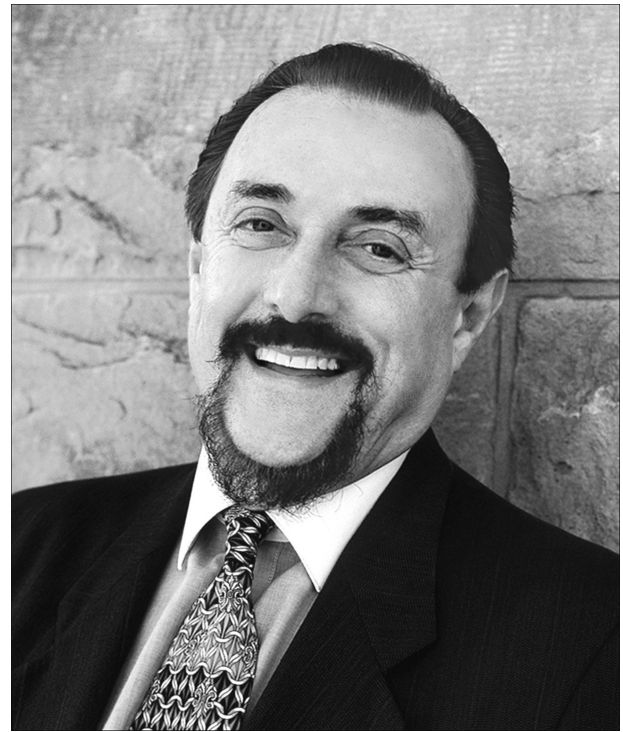
Slavich: Thanks for meeting with me, Phil, and congratulations on your recent 50th teaching anniversary! Tell me how it all began.

Zimbardo: I guess you could say I was an intuitive psychologist and "situationist" from the beginning. I was born at home, hands first, in New York City's South Bronx ghetto during the Great Depression, and we moved 31 times while I was a child. Being poor back then was not as bad because everyone around you was also poor. And without TV, we really didn't know how rich folks lived. Poverty nevertheless took quite a toll on my body. I was a skinny bag of bones for most of my childhood and at age 6 was hospitalized for 6 months with double pneumonia (both lungs) and whooping cough. Those were the days before penicillin!

The South Bronx provided my first informal education in psychology. To survive, you had to be street smart: You had to know who to trust, how to make friends, and how to make money. To help make ends meet, I sold magazines door-to-door, delivered laundry in Harlem, and worked as a shoeshine boy in front of a bank on Southern Boulevard. The pay was not great (only 5 cents for a shine!), but by age 10, I had a thriving business.



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School was my ticket out of the ghetto. It was clean, predictable, and structured, and the social skills I learned dealing with nurses in the hospital gave me the ability to ingratiate myself with teachers, who in turn provided me with a great education. Perhaps most important, the situational change from the streets to school completely refocused my time perspective away from the hedonistic present that my friends and family exhibited and toward learning how to delay gratification, set goals, and plan for the future. I can't overestimate the extent to which those teachers and that environment influenced my life trajectory.

Slavich: You were high school classmates with renowned social psychologist Stanley Milgram. Seriously, what are the chances?

Zimbardo: Pretty slim, I'd say! Milgram and I were classmates during our senior year at James Monroe High School in the Bronx. That was 1950. Monroe was a midlevel school. I had gotten into Stuyvesant High, an elite school, but when I got there, I realized there were no girls. So, I quit after my first term.

What's interesting is that my family moved to Hollywood after my first year at Monroe, and during that entire year, I was shunned, completely. It was inexplicable. Literally, I would sit down in class, and other students would not sit near me. It wasn't until springtime that I found out why. I was going to a game with the baseball team and had expressed my concern to a team-

mate sitting next to me on the bus. "Of course we're afraid of you," he said. "You're from New York, and you're Italian! Everyone thinks you're in the mafia!"

I was a harmless kid: 6 feet tall, 150 pounds, really skinny, and very polite. Nevertheless, I developed asthma that year as a consequence of the loneliness and rejection, and that was the excuse my family used to return to New York. So, we went back to New York, and I started my senior year at Monroe. In 6 months, I was voted most popular boy in the senior class. The accolade was that I was "Jimmy Monroe." I talked with Milgram about my spike in popularity when I got back to Monroe, and together we wondered—in primitive terms—whether it was me or the situation that had changed. We agreed it was probably the situation.

Interestingly, Milgram was concerned about the Holocaust even back then. Some people had heard about it, but it wasn't taken seriously. His work on blind obedience to authority really derived from his concern about whether the same thing could happen here. Everyone said, "No way! That was Nazi Germany, and this is America." But he wasn't satisfied with that answer. He said, "How do you know until you're in that situation?" He was really the first person to say that it's not enough to *think* or *say* that you won't do something. Indeed, it's not even enough to *imagine* you're in a situation, because it's something about *being* in powerful social settings that is transformative.

I met Milgram again 10 years later, when he was coming to Yale and I was leaving for New York University (NYU). Ed Zigler, a new faculty member at the time, was hosting a party and said, “Hey Zim, here’s your old friend, Stanley!” The most curious thing that Milgram said to me was, “You were Jimmy Monroe, and I should have been.” I thought it was a joke, but I was never quite sure because he was clearly not a popular kid—mostly because he was super smart, and smart kids are never really liked that much. As it turns out, he always wanted to be popular, and I always wanted to be smart. We both had to settle for less!

Slavich: To support yourself in college, you checked coats and sold concessions at Broadway’s historic St. James Theater, which premiered shows like *Oklahoma*, *The King and I*, *Where’s Charley?*, and *Hello, Dolly*. Did this exposure to show business influence your early thoughts about teaching?

Zimbardo: You bet. I actually started working at the St. James Theater during my senior year in high school. The schedule was brutal: five nights a week and all day Saturday for \$3 a performance. The experience taught me two things that are important for teaching. First, it taught me discipline. When I was going to Brooklyn College, the commute was 1.5 hours each way (from home to school), so I had to be able to study on the subway, in short periods of time, with people leaning all over me. Then, every night I would go to work. I’d have 30 minutes of setup, a 45-minute break during which I’d study again, 15 minutes of selling orangeade and programs, and another 45 minutes of studying. If you want to be a great teacher, you have to be able to prepare great lectures with whatever free time you have. This experience taught me that all free time is valuable prep time.

Perhaps more important, working at the theater taught me about the virtues of performing really well. We saw parts of the shows all the time; we memorized the songs and many of the lines. I still remember seeing actors like Ray Bolger in *Where’s Charley?* capture the audience with command performances. Watching those actors on a daily basis showed me how joyous performing can be, but it also taught me that if you’re going to do something, then you should do it well. That means practicing your lines and preparing yourself so that each time you set foot on “stage,” you give your best performance. That’s what I try to do when I teach. I think of it as “entertaining while educating.”

Slavich: After graduating from Brooklyn College, you attended Yale University for graduate school, and while at Yale, you became the first graduate student

to teach introductory psychology there. Tell me about the experience.

Zimbardo: The previous year I had taken a course on teaching from Claude Buxton, the department chair at Yale. At the end of the year, I asked him, “When do we teach?” He said, “You don’t! We don’t allow graduate students to teach the Yale Man. They do that at Harvard and call them proctors, but we don’t do that.” I was really downhearted.

That spring, though, one of my professors, Irvin Child, asked if I’d give a lecture on group conflict in his class. I was so excited that I prepared a whole course for that one lecture. Then in the fall, Yale redesigned the introductory psychology course from a few large lectures to 15 small sections, to be taught by the assistant professors. One of the professors left Yale at the last minute, though, and because I was the only other person with any teaching experience, I jumped in to teach. I still remember that class. I immediately got students involved in doing research, and they loved it. It was so interesting because these kids’ parents ran the world. For example, to conduct a research project, a student would just get his father to distribute the questionnaires to the entire plant; and sure enough, in 1 week, he would have 1,000 completed surveys!

The other interesting thing was the difference between the prep school and public school kids. At that time (in 1957), about 50% of the students at Yale came from prep schools, and the other half came from public schools. The difference was dramatic: The prep school kids wore button-down shirts with collars and tweed jackets; they knew how to ask and answer questions, and their essays were great. Basically, they dressed and acted like their professors. The public school kids were the opposite. Interestingly, though, the differences between these two groups disappeared after the first semester. It told me that the prep school kids just had better teaching up until that point, but that with enough exposure to a rich intellectual environment, all students can thrive. That’s basically what happened to me. Again, it’s all about the power of the situation.

Slavich: Your first academic job at NYU had you teaching 13 courses per year. How did you make that work and at the same time remain passionate about teaching?

Zimbardo: I was the only assistant professor at NYU when I began there in 1960. My salary was \$6,000, and when I arrived, they just said, “Here’s your teaching program!” It included 5 lecture courses per semester, for a total of 10 courses per year; for another \$1,000, I also taught 2 summer courses. Then, for 2 of those years,

I went back to Yale during the summer and taught yet another course on learning. It was insane!

The thing I learned immediately was that I had to use my time and effort efficiently. So, I identified the best students in introductory psychology, sent them a letter telling them how wonderful they were, and encouraged them to take social psychology the next term; if they were good, I encouraged them to take attitude change and then group dynamics. Some students, therefore, majored in me: They took five of my lecture courses and topped it off with research credit. This was the only way I was going to make it, though. Training students in research was a form of teaching in itself, but, more important, it enabled me to develop the skills of individuals who could in turn increase my research productivity. The research we did generated content for my lectures, and my lectures generated ideas for my research. The process was totally synergistic.

Slavich: One day, out of the blue, while you were an assistant professor at NYU, Al Hastorf, the department chair at Stanford University, called to offer you a job. Describe what happened.

Zimbardo: I had a great research group at NYU. At that time, though, NYU wasn't the place to be: The faculty were not stimulating and students didn't want to be there. Also, after 6 years, I was still an assistant professor, without tenure. I asked the department chairman for an early promotion, but he said, "People think you're too brash; you need time to mellow. And you also need to make a quantum leap in visibility." I said, "I don't know what that means, but I'll do it!"

Then one day I got a call from Al. He said, "Hi, I'm Al Hastorf, chair of the Psychology Department at Stanford. The senior faculty have met, and together we invite you to join us as a full professor with tenure." I thought it was a joke, that someone was putting me on. He asked, "What will it take you to come here?" I said, "Sunglasses and a one-way ticket!" Guessing that this was the "quantum leap in visibility" my chair was looking for, I immediately took the job.

Slavich: Your interest in activism harkens back to your days at NYU when Anne Zeidberg, your secretary at the time, compelled you to get involved with social and political causes. What do you see as the relation between activism and teaching?

Zimbardo: That's a great question. I've always been a reluctant activist because activism takes time, and time is something I've never had enough of. As psychologists, though, people are our world: We study their attitudes and values, what they do, and what they think. Teaching and activism are even more closely related in my case because I study things like situa-

tional influences, persuasion, political behavior, and terrorism.

Anne Zeidberg was one of the first women to join the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and she did, in fact, compel me to become more involved. At one point, we picketed the Time-Life building because they had written an article arguing that fallout shelters were the way to deal with nuclear threat. The notion was that if you were rich enough, then you could just build a shelter and not worry about the threat. That argument was crazy, though, because (a) no New Yorker had enough space or money to build a fallout shelter, and (b) there was no evidence that fallout shelters work! At the same time, I knew that kind of logic was encouraging the cold war mentality of "we can nuke you before you nuke us." So, I really did feel compelled to speak out. I still remember people yelling, "Go get a job, commie!" We were all well-dressed professors from NYU.

Slavich: Your APA presidency was marked by September 11, 2001, and the political perspective that followed was characterized by a dispositional stance on "good and evil." In instances like this, when one's knowledge or research relate to a major social or political issue, what responsibilities and privileges do teachers have?

Zimbardo: As a citizen, you are responsible for being concerned about your country: about what it's doing right and what it's doing wrong. In this context, teachers typically have a significant amount of credibility. For starters, then, it's your responsibility to make clear what's opinion and what's fact. That has always been a fine line for me because my research is closely related to the social issues I care passionately about. To address that, I always try to say things like, "And now, a word from our sponsors!" or "Psychology does not take responsibility for what I'm about to say!" I've also handled the issue by hosting an open mic session 10 minutes before each class. That way, any student can say what he or she thinks about any current issue or statement I made in class. The approach is a good one because it promotes free speech while sharing some of the power in the classroom.

Slavich: Against this backdrop of weapons of mass destruction, you created several tools for mass instruction. These include a widely seen educational TV series, *Discovering Psychology*, and the oldest current textbook in psychology, *Psychology and Life*. What do these initiatives say about you or your view of teaching?

Zimbardo: These initiatives say that if you're going to teach, then your outreach should be limitless. The problem with teaching in a classroom is that there are

walls. I taught 1,000 students at a time at Stanford. As big as those classes were, though, my impact was still limited to students who could afford to go to Stanford. Being a poor kid from the Bronx, I always found myself asking, “What about all of the people who can’t afford to go to a private school—a privileged school?” So, when I was asked to write *Psychology and Life* and create *Discovering Psychology*, I jumped at the opportunity.

Slavich: In addition, you have authored more than 300 articles and 50 books. Your most recent books, *The Lucifer Effect* (Zimbardo, 2007) and *The Time Paradox* (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008), summarize your work on situational determinants of behavior and time perspective, respectively. But you have studied 20 different topics in all. Are you particularly proud of any of these lines of research?

Zimbardo: The thing I’m most well known for is the Stanford Prison Experiment. That experiment and Milgram’s experiments on blind obedience to authority are really bookends that elucidate the power of the situation. For example, whereas Milgram’s research was all about the power of individual authority over an individual person, the Stanford Prison Experiment was all about the ability for a system to repeatedly create situations that strongly influence behavior. In a paradoxical way, though, the thing I’m proud of is what started the year after that study—namely, the line of thinking that led to my research on shyness.

Because I believe deeply in the synergy between teaching and research, after the Stanford Prison closed its doors, I took slides and photos from the project and turned them into classroom lectures for introductory and social psychology. And when I give this lecture in class, I always ask students, “Why should you care about this study? Most of you will never be guards or prisoners!” The answer, of course, is that in some ways, everyone will be a prisoner or a guard at some point in their life, because a guard is simply someone who limits the freedom of another person. Parents, spouses, and bosses do this all the time. And the recipients of this behavior? Well, they are the prisoners.

What’s most interesting is that if you think about it, shy people have internalized the role of both prisoner and guard. On the one hand, they set strict limits on their freedoms of association and speech; on the other hand, these limits are entirely self-imposed. Shyness is very unique in this sense because, in essence, it is a system of thoughts and beliefs that are entirely self-generated and that have the effect of creating a self-imposed psychological prison. The internalized guard says, “Don’t ask that girl to dance, don’t ask your boss for a raise, and don’t raise your hand because you’re

going to look foolish!” Meanwhile, the prisoner self says, “But I think I like her, I think I deserve a raise, and I think I know the answer.” The wishes of the prisoner are strong, but the guard usually wins out.

To make a long story short, one day after I gave this lecture in 1972, a student came up to me and said, “What else can you tell me about shyness? I’ve been shy all my life and I really want to know why.” I told him I didn’t know anything about shyness, but that I’d be happy to mentor him on an independent study project. He came back the next day and said, “There’s basically no research on shyness. I found only one study, and it was done at Stanford Medical School. The authors concluded that shyness is a reaction formation against wanting to be a voyeur.” His interest prompted us to create a seminar on shyness. Twelve students showed up for the first meeting, and that was the beginning of my shyness research group at Stanford. We conducted a variety of studies on shyness and were shocked by the initial results: Ninety percent of Stanford students had a lifetime history of shyness!

Fast-forward to 1977. A publisher called and asked me to write a book on shyness, to which I responded, “No, we don’t have enough research. We’re collecting it, but we’re not ready to write a book.” He said, “That’s too bad because someone is writing a book on your work, and there won’t be a market for two books.” Then he said, “I’ll tell you what, though. I’ll send you my best editor to see how much you can finish in a week.” The next thing I knew, I was checking into a hotel with the editor. In 1 day, we laid out the entire book on the walls of the hotel room. I wrote a chapter a day for 7 days, and by Sunday, the book was done. It was a huge bestseller. Its popularity made us realize that we needed to create a shyness treatment and research clinic for the public, so that’s what we did. As it turns out, the entire story was just a setup, a big lie: There was no “other book!”

In any case, that’s my ideal teaching model in a nutshell. First, I did an experiment (the Prison Study) and worked it into a lecture, which led to an idea about the prison-shyness metaphor. A student then wanted to learn more about the topic, so I told him to find relevant research. He found none, so we conducted a few studies. Based on those studies, I created a course on shyness; on the basis of that course, we did more research. We wrote articles on shyness, which led to writing a book. The book led to the shyness clinic, and the clinic has been serving the public for the past 30 years.

Slavich: As someone mentored by a handful of master teachers, what do you believe early career

instructors should aim to learn from more experienced teachers?

Zimbardo: Early career instructors should remember that each mentor has something unique to give. In terms of research, for example, some advisors are really good at framing a question, whereas others are really good at selecting the best methods to test a question. The same principle applies to teaching. Young teachers, therefore, should aim to have as many teaching models as possible.

At the same time, nobody should teach without sitting in on other classes. Some teachers say, "Well, I did that as a student." But that's wrong; observing a class prompts a very different attentional orientation, and the goal of this exercise is not to get as much information as possible from the lecture, but rather to analyze the teaching process. Sit in on the classes of great teachers, but also observe teachers who you've heard are not so good. For the good teachers, focus on what they are doing right; for the others, focus on what they're doing wrong and on how they can improve. And for both types, always ask, "Is that the best way they could have introduced or explained that point?"

There is a sense in psychology—which is really foreign to our whole field—that good teachers are born. That perspective is wrong, I think: Good teachers are not born; they are made by hard work, by understanding teacher–student dynamics, by learning from models, and by practicing. Not every opening gambit or classroom demonstration works, and you have to be willing to analyze why and then change your approach based on your analysis. Ask, "Was it me? Was it the demonstration? Or was it the situation?" If teaching is what you're going to do in life, then your goal should be to work to perfect it. And teaching is an endlessly perfectable skill.

Slavich: And conversely, what can experienced instructors learn from their students?

Zimbardo: Each decade of students seem to be very different from the last in terms of their attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills. This is due in part, I think, to the profound influence that technological advancements have had on students' brains. Students nowadays are capable of processing multiple sources of information very quickly and in parallel, and this means that traditionally formatted lectures run the risk of being boring. Experienced teachers can take cues from students and change their lectures to include more relevant examples. Teachers need to do more than that, though. The most important issue is not how to revise the content of a lecture to make it better, but rather how to enhance the process by which one teaches to make it more en-

gaging. Put another way, the question is this: How can I improve my approach to teaching so that it is more consistent with the basic nature of these new student minds? This question is relevant for new teachers, but it's even more important for more senior teachers, like me, who learned the trade when reading a lecture or giving a low-tech presentation was normal.

My solution for adapting has been to adopt a transformational approach to classroom instruction. In this approach, teachers are thought of as intellectual coaches who create teams of students who collaborate with each other and with their teacher to master bodies of information. Teachers facilitate students' acquisition of key course concepts, but they do so with a focus on promoting students' personal development and increasing their engagement with the course material. This approach includes doing things like establishing a clear vision for the course. At the heart of the method, however, is the creation of experiential lessons that are congruent with the key course concepts and that extend student learning beyond the bounds of the classroom (see Slavich & Zimbardo, 2009). Students will show and tell you what they are capable of learning, but you have to listen and watch closely. Listening in this way made me realize that transformational teaching is the only way to go, because it puts students in charge of critical aspects of the learning process.

Slavich: Looking forward, it seems as though recent technological advancements, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and genetic mapping, are reshaping psychology. Are we embarking on a new era of psychological science and, if so, what is the relevance of this change for teachers?

Zimbardo: In psychology, there has always been a strong desire to be biological or physical. Early on, we wanted to be like physics, but the urge is just as strong now as some researchers work to incorporate technologies like fMRI into everything they do. They aim to make psychology more like a "real science," but I'm not convinced that getting people's brains to light up in a scanner is any more scientific than conducting interviews that uncover important phenomena. It's exciting that the boundaries of psychology are expanding to include multiple systems and levels of analysis, and we have seen the benefits of this increased integration in fields like health psychology and social cognitive neuroscience. At the same time, it's important not to get so fascinated by technology that you abandon theory or reduce explanations for complex social phenomena to the activation of particular voxels in the brain.

This changing landscape has clear relevance for teachers. My message for early career instructors is that

your best chance for getting and keeping a new job involves being able to teach courses like introductory psychology, as difficult as that is. I know that many jobs are reserved for specialists. Therefore, you really do need to know everything there is to know about your dissertation area. At the same time, you also have to be trained widely enough that you can teach introductory courses. Every department needs faculty who are really good at teaching introductory psychology. Thus, the take-away message is that you have to be a specialist—because no one is hiring generalists these days—but that it's not enough to be just a specialist.

Slavich: We've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything else to know about you or your views on teaching or psychology?

Zimbardo: Yes, two things. First, I've found that you can learn a lot from extending yourself in new ways. Even though I've taught for 50 years, I am now teaching in two other venues where I'm learning new things. One opportunity involves teaching social psychology to clinical psychology students; the other involves teaching a course on the psychology of terrorism at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, which offers advanced degrees to fire chiefs, CIA officials, and other first responders. What's exciting is that these opportunities have required me to think about my material and presentation style in entirely new ways. It keeps me young to have new kinds of teaching audiences rather than simply to rework my old stuff for the new generation of undergraduates.

The final message concerns the potential benefits of great teaching and the deleterious consequences of bad teaching. The only C I ever got was in introductory psychology. I was Phi Beta Kappa and graduated summa cum laude from Brooklyn College. And then, there was the C. So, was it me, or was it the situation?

When I think back on that course, everything about it was bad: The lectures were disconnected, the exams were confusing, the textbook was terrible, and the textbook supplement, which was titled *Great Experiments in Psychology*, included no great experiments. I switched

my major to sociology and anthropology because of that experience, and I came back to psychology in my senior year only because my buddy, Jerry Platt, needed a lab partner for experimental psychology. As it turns out, I fell in love with experimental psychology from that moment on; Jerry, on the other hand, hated it and immediately switched to sociology. The point, though, is that good teaching can have a very profound impact on students' life course. And what a wonderful privilege that is to have!

Slavich: Thanks again for your time, Phil.

Zimbardo: My pleasure, George!

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Notes

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