

< The Influence You Have: Why We Fail To See Our Power Over Others

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SHANKAR VEDANTAM, HOST:

From NPR, this is HIDDEN BRAIN. I'm Shankar Vedantam. Philip Zimbardo grew up poor.

PHILIP ZIMBARDO: I was born in New York City in the South Bronx.

VEDANTAM: And as he went to school and played in his neighborhood, he noticed something. There were lots of ways for kids from poor families to get into trouble.

ZIMBARDO: One of the things about growing up poor is you're surrounded by evil, meaning people whose job it is to get good kids to do bad things for money. And even as a little kid I was always curious about why some kids got seduced and other kids like me were able to resist.

VEDANTAM: Were some kids smarter, tougher? Lots of people might draw such conclusions, but from an early age, Phil found himself interested in another explanation - the context in which a good kid would do something bad, the situation. At school...

ZIMBARDO: James Monroe High School also in the Bronx.

VEDANTAM: ...Phil got close to a classmate who was interested in the same questions.

ZIMBARDO: And it was a little Jewish kid named Stanley Milgram. We were in the same class. We sat side by side. He was the smartest kid in the class. He won all the medals at graduation, so obviously nobody liked him because we were all envious of him. But he was super smart and super serious.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

VEDANTAM: If you know anything about psychology, you will know that these teenagers went on to become two of the most influential psychologists in history. Phil became famous for conducting the Stanford Prison Experiment where he turned the university's psychology department into a makeshift prison. Stanley Milgram made his mark with a study that examined the power of situations to seduce good people to do bad things. It involved asking a volunteer to administer a memory test to another person. If the answers were wrong, the volunteer was told to deliver a series of electrical shocks as punishment. The study has invited a great deal of admiration and a great deal of criticism over the years.