

Rationally Speaking #241: “Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host Julia Galef, and my guest today is Thibault Le Texier. He is an associated researcher at the University of Nice, in France, studying the history of ideas.

Our topic today is something you've probably heard about if you've taken an intro to psychology class in the last few decades -- or just read any media in the last few decades. It's a very famous experiment called the Stanford Prison Experiment. And the basic story of the Stanford Prison Experiment goes like this:

Stanford professor Philip Zimbardo in 1971 recruited students for this simulation of a prison experience. So he randomly assigned half of them to be guards and half of them to be prisoners. And ran the simulated prison in the basement of the psychology department. Very sketchy.

Very quickly the students assigned to be guards became abusive and cruel, humiliating the prisoners. The prisoners became depressed and demoralized. And the experiment had to be cut short after less than a week because it was total chaos. And the takeaway you've probably heard is, people easily conformed to the roles that they're put in. Even if that means doing horrible things to their fellow man.

So that's the story as it's been told for decades. And then in the last few years, the Stanford Prison Experiment has come under increasing scrutiny and increasing criticism. And not the normal replication crisis criticism, where it's like, “Oh, it didn't replicate, that's too bad.” No. The prison experiment has been called an outright lie, and a fraud.

And Thibault, our guest, has been central to this recent wave of scrutiny. He's published a book on the prison experiment last year called *History of a Lie*, which is unfortunately just in French. But he's also just published a journal article in English about a month ago titled “Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment.”

And that is what we're going to be doing today. So Thibault, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Thibault: Hi, thanks for having me.

Julia: Thibault, I mentioned your book, but you were also originally working on a film about the prison experiment. Is that right?

Thibault: Yes. At first, I got interested in the experiment when I discovered that it had been filmed -- there was a hidden camera in a wall in the basement of the department of psychology. And I was interested in making a documentary film only from these archival materials.

So I got some money to go to Stanford, because I wanted to see the material and to discover new material and tapes. And to build a movie from this material. And that's how I discovered all the evidence that I presented in my book and paper.

Julia: And is the film still in the works or if not, why not?

Thibault: No, I tried for three years to set up the financing, but we didn't make it. So I decided to turn the movie into a book. Which is more fortunate, because there's a lot of material, and in the movie we couldn't put so much material.

Julia: Got it. Okay, great. So when you approached this topic, to start out, were you approaching it with the idea of skepticism -- that you were going to use the footage for an expose? Or did you have some other motivation?

Thibault: No, I really believe that the official narrative, the one you summarized at the beginning, was true. I had heard about critiques about the experiment. I knew that some people were skeptics. But I had no personal reason to think that it was a setup.

So it took me some time to realize that... I started to discover some papers, some archival material that was a bit different from what I knew about the experiment. And it took me some time to realize it, and to face the fact that it was a setup.

Julia: I suppose before we go further, we should clarify the extent to which the prison experiment was not actually an experiment in the normal sentence, right?

Thibault: Yeah. So actually Zimbardo himself says sometimes that it's more "demonstration" than an experiment.

And that the difference between an experiment and the demonstration, is that in a demonstration, you know from the beginning what you want to prove. And you have a theatrical setup to demonstrate your idea, to make it more graphic, more catchy.

In an experiment you don't really know what you're going to end up with. And you run a lot of experiments, and replications, and then you analyze the data and you try to sort out what you found out.

But he says that when he's accused of having run the experiment only once. So it cannot really be said to be an experiment, because it's happened only once.

But most of the time he is talking about it as an experiment. And the expression, the "Stanford Prison Experiment," has been coined by Zimbardo himself.

Julia: Right.

Thibault: It's in a press release that he broadcast on the second day of the experiment. He coined it, he christened the name of the experiment.

Julia: This is definitely something I've noticed in Zimbardo's public statements, and his responses in interviews -- that he seems to equivocate between these different descriptions of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Where sometimes he calls it an experiment; and other times he falls back on this "Well, it's just a demonstration."

But even so, I thought that when he called it a demonstration, he meant something more than a theatrical production. I thought that even when he called it a demonstration, he was claiming that it *showed* something.

If he literally was clear from the beginning, that he was just setting out to put on a theatrical demonstration of something he already believed... there's no way that would've got the amount of attention and influence that it had.

I think he was portraying it as, "I didn't know what was going to happen when I got these students together and assigned them the roles of prisoners and guards. And it wasn't as rigorous or carefully controlled as something you would call an experiment -- but still, the outcome was all due to the students. It wasn't just me telling them what to do."

Right? Isn't that what he said?

Thibault: Yes. Zimbardo has always repeated that he was taken aback during the experiment. That he didn't expect it, those reactions. That he

himself became immersed in his role as a director of the prison. That he lost a lot of weight, that he didn't sleep for 48 hours, that it was himself taken by the situation. And he was completely surprised to see how extreme it had been.

Julia: Right? Sorry to interrupt, but it's probably important to tell listeners who aren't familiar with this, that this is another way in which it was very much not an experiment. That Zimbardo himself, the experimenter, was participating. Was he the prison superintendent, or what was his role?

Thibault: Yeah, he was the director. And he had two PhD students who were his lieutenants. And he had an undergraduate student who was the warden, the chief of guards.

Julia: Right. So he was very involved, not an objective outside observer.

Thibault: He was completely involved. And one of the things I discovered is that he knew exactly the result he wanted to achieve, and he knew exactly how to achieve it. And in fact the experiment was written as a theater play, or as a movie. There was a script and the characters were following the script.

Julia: Can you maybe give an example or two of the thing that went down during the Stanford Prison Experiment? I kind of gestured at it, but there's plenty of details to be had.

Thibault: The kind of abuses that were witnessed during the experiment. Yeah, sure.

For instance, the prisoners that were brought to the prison, they were naked. And had a chain [on] their ankle. They wore no underwear. They were woken up at night, at two o'clock. And they had to line up against the wall and to recite their number -- because they all wore a number on their outfit.

They had to do pushups. They had to clean the toilets with their bare hands. They [were made to do] stupid games like jumping jacks, things like this. And they couldn't take any shower during a week.

They didn't have fresh air. And they had no window on the outside at all. That's the situation they had to live in.

Julia: So when you say that Zimbardo had a script, how literally do you mean that?

Thibault:

I mean that all the things I just described were written. And there was a schedule. So the fact that the prisoners were woken up in the night -- it was something they had, the guards had to wake up the prisoners because they were to follow the schedule.

And the fact that [they were made to] do pushups was an instruction given by the warden, who was a student of Zimbardo. They had a set of rules that were written by the experimenters.

And more generally, the guards had a training day -- it was called "orientation day," but it was a training day -- where they were explained what result the experimenter expected to achieve. And they were explained the punishments they could give to the prisoners. And they were explained that all this was very important for science and for prison reform.

So they had a script, and they had also the motivation to follow the script.

Besides the fact that they were paid, and they were paid at the end of the experiment. Usually in an experiment, you pay the people at the beginning, and you explain to them that whatever happens, they would keep their pay. So as not to induce certain behavior from them. But in this case they were paid at the end.

So that was an incentive to stay in the experiment, and to behave in the way that was expected by the experimenters.

Julia:

Right. There was an interview in Vox, I guess last year, Brian Resnick did this interview with Zimbardo. And he quoted a few lines from one of the recordings in which the student warden, whose name was Jaffe I think -- the guy who's a student of Zimbardo -- he was talking to one of the guards, who I guess was having second thoughts. Or he was feeling reluctant to be as brutal as he was supposed to be.

And so the warden was telling him, "Every guard is supposed to be what we call a tough guard." And I forget the rest of the line, but I remember the phrase "The guards have to be tougher. We want everyone to be a tough guard."

And so Brian Resnick in this interview quoted that. And then also quoted Zimbardo saying, as he has many times. "We did not give any formal or detailed instructions about how to be an effective guard."

And he asked Zimbardo, how do you explain this seeming contradiction?

And Zimbardo replied, "Well, the point is telling a guard to be tough doesn't mean telling a guard to be mean, to be cruel, to be sadistic. Which many of the guards became of their own volition, playing the role of what they thought was a prison guard." And he concluded, "So I reject your assumption entirely."

So what do you think of Zimbardo's defense that, "We just gave the guards kind of an outline of what we wanted from them, and then they filled in the blanks themselves" ?

Thibault: Well, what happened actually last year is that I published my book, and then an American journalist called Ben Blum contacted me -- actually he contacted me a bit before the publishing of my book. I gave him some elements from the book, and he put it in the paper that was widely circulated.

Julia: On Medium, right?

Thibault: Yes, on Medium. And then Zimbardo wrote a reply, saying, "Okay, there's been a book about the experiment in French and there's been an article on Medium. Now I'm going to reply to all the criticisms." And he published that paper on his official website of the Stanford Prison Experiment.

But actually in the paper he only replies to Ben Blum. It doesn't reply at all to my critiques, but he looks like he's replying to everybody...

So I think now the debate is about to start. Because the paper you talked about is about to be published in print. It's going to be published in *American Psychologist*, which is the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association.

So it's going to be hard for Zimbardo to deny these critiques, or to pretend that they don't exist. And now we're going to see what he has to reply with. To me, there's nothing to reply, because the evidence is overwhelming.

Julia: Yeah. I read quote after quote from the lieutenant or the warden saying, like you alluded a few minutes ago, to the orientation in which the guards were told that this was important for prison reform.

To me, that's especially damning. Because it means that if the guards conform, it could just be out of the motive of wanting to show how terrible it is when guards are sadistic, right? That's the exact opposite --

Thibault: Most of the guards at the time didn't want to be guards. It was a spirit of the time, anti-institutions, anti-cops and anti-war. And so they hated "pigs," and these things.

And so for them, Zimbardo told them that, great, now you have an occasion to demonstrate that pigs are wrong, that the cops are bad, and that prisons are bad... You just have to behave how you would picture that pigs would react. The meaner you will be, the better it will be for the experiment, and for prison reform.

So if you want to be a good citizen, or if you want to help science, you have to be mean. We know you are not mean, but you have to pretend.

And anyway what he said to the guards is that we are not testing you. We are just testing the reactions of the prisoners. You are like actors.

Julia: So the guards felt they were like confederates?

Thibault: Yes, exactly. He said, "You're part of the scientific [experiment], you're like scientists, we are not studying you."

Julia: One of my theories for how it could possibly be that Zimbardo was arguing in good faith, was that it was just the warden and lieutenant and other people who got carried away, and started putting their thumb on the scale, but Zimbardo himself wasn't aware of that.

But you're saying that all of this explicit, laying out what was expected -- this came from Zimbardo?

Thibault: Yes.

Julia: Wow.

Thibault: It's very obvious from the archive. There's tons of evidence of that. And Zimbardo lied about this. He never said that the guards were deceived.

Because when you do a scientific experiment, you can deceive the participants and make them believe things, but when you publish

your results, you have to say it. You have to say “We deceived the participants.” Because it's part of the result, it can explain many things in the results. And Zimbardo just has always hidden this fact. He's never said that the guards were deceived.

Julia: Here's what I don't understand. Zimbardo knew that material was in the archives, right? He knew about the camera. He knew the material was all going to be there. What did he think was going to happen?

Thibault: I don't think he knows really what's inside the archive. I don't know if he went through the archive since the experiment took place.

He wrote a book about the Stanford Experiment and about Abu Ghraib in 2007 - the Iraqi prison. But I found in the archive that the book was mainly written by two students of his, who went into the archive and took notes.

So himself, I'm not sure he really knows what's inside the archive.

Julia: Oh man.

Thibault: And for me, my explanation -- because many people told me, “If the experiment is a lie, why did Zimbardo gave all his archives to the Stanford Library? He should have destroyed all these pieces of evidences.”

But my explanation is that he doesn't really know what is inside the archive.

Julia: Oh man. I don't know if that is a more exonerating, or more damning, explanation. I really can't decide.

Thibault: To me what happened is that in a way Zimbardo got trapped into his own narrative. He started to spread the official narrative before he had time to analyze his data. He started to talk to the press, he started speaking to the American Congress, before he analyzed his data. And he started to circulate this official narrative.

And then six, seven, eight months later, when he has analyzed the data and he could see that the narrative is not so clear cut -- it's too late. People are expecting from him the official narrative. It's hard for him to deny what he has been circulating for six or eight months.

So he just kept on repeating the official narrative. And that's what he's been doing, for 49 years.

Julia: But I mean, he was there. I don't understand why he would need to analyze the data in order to realize that, "Gee, this experiment doesn't really prove anything." He was there. He told the guards --

Thibault: He was not there all the time, because it was running 24 hours a day. He had to sleep, he had to buy food, he had to be able to supervise.

Julia: But you said he was the one during orientation who told the guards what was expected of them?

Thibault: Yeah, he knew that. He knew that, but he couldn't see the extent to which each of the participants [was] pushed in the same direction. So he thought that maybe he pushed the guards to behave in a certain way, but he didn't know how much his PhD students and the warden pushed in the same direction.

And he thought, okay, that's just one influence. So maybe it's not ... I can hide this, and it's not so detrimental to science.

But he was not acting much of the time as a scientist, but much more as an activist. He wanted to prove that prisons are bad for prisoners, that we should reform the prison system. He keeps on repeating this at the time.

Julia: Right. I have a quote here from Zimbardo a couple months after the experiment, when he was speaking to Congress. And he said, "The guards were simply told that they were going to go into a situation that could be serious and have perhaps some danger. They made up their own rules for maintaining, law, order and respect."

That's the thing where I don't understand how you could have, two months earlier, told the guards what was expected of them and then you go to Congress and say that.

Thibault: Yeah, he was obviously lying.

Julia: Yeah. Okay. I guess what I really want is [an answer to] "Why, though??" -- but I guess you can't really give me that. Go on.

Thibault: Well... the more he was hiding his own participation in the experiment, the more striking were the results.

You know about the Milgram Experiment, I guess? Where you have a scientist pushing the participant to send electric shocks to another participant, who is in fact a confederate.

And Zimbardo said “We went further.” Because we didn't even need the scientists. We just have people inflicting pain on other people just by the magic of the situation. We removed the experimenter from the Milgram Experiments. So it's like a Milgram 2.0 ... we are going further than Milgram.

So he really wanted to hide as much as possible his participation in the experiment.

But I think that also he was not fully aware of the role that one of the participants played in the experiment -- David Jaffe. He was the warden. And he happened to organize a Prison Experiment in a dormitory, three months prior to the Stanford Prison Experiment.

And it's when I discovered about this dormitory experiment, that I really understood that the Stanford Prison Experiment was a lie. Because I had never really heard about it. I heard about it very briefly here and there, but never read any description about it. And Zimbardo barely talks about it, in the scientific papers that he published about the Stanford Prison Experiment.

In fact, this dormitory experiment provided a blueprint for the Stanford Prison Experiment. The rules, the schedules, the whole setting came from these experiments. And he recruited David Jaffe explicitly to reproduce the striking results that he got when he organize this dormitory experiment.

Julia: Well, charitably, couldn't that just be a replication? He wanted to replicate those results, but in a more official setting.

Thibault: Yes, but they didn't want to leave anything to chance. So he told David Jaffe, here are the results I want to achieve, and just make sure we get the same results.

And so David Jaffe took a very central position in the Stanford Prison Experiment. He was at the interface, between the guards and Zimbardo. He was in direct touch with the guards, and he really pushed them to be harsh and to behave as bad cops. And he took a central part during the orientation day, too.

Zimbardo might not have been aware at the time how much Jaffe pushed for these results.

Julia: I wanted to ask you, I don't know if this came up during your research, but when I was reading articles about the case, one of the more bizarre aspects of the story that I didn't see covered as widely as I would expect... It has to do with an ex-convict -- an actual ex-con, not a student playing a convict -- named Carlo Prescott, who Zimbardo hired as a consultant on the experiment.

And then about 12, 13 years ago, Prescott wrote an op-ed saying the experiment was a lie, and that a lot of the guards' behavior was suggested by him.

And then the weird part is Zimbardo claims that the op-ed wasn't even written by Prescott. That it was secretly written by one of Zimbardo's enemies, a producer who lost the movie rights to the Prison Experiment. And he's angry at Zimbardo. So according to Zimbardo, this guy ghost wrote the op-ed and got Prescott to put his own name on it.

Are you familiar with this wrinkle in the story?

Thibault: Yes. I've talked to Carlo Prescott actually-

Julia: You have?

Thibault: Before this came out. I talked to him about five years ago... We discussed this, the issue of what was his input in the Stanford Prison Experiment.

His memory is not perfect. I don't know how far he gave advice to Zimbardo as to the, for instance, buckets in the cells, for the prisoners. And they put some blindfolds on their heads.

But what is sure is that Zimbardo knew nothing about prison. And that he picked up a lot of ideas from David Jaffe, who had done some research about prison for his Dormitory Experiment, for his own Dormitory Experiment.

To me, it's not a real issue to know how much Prescott put into the experiment. Because in a way Zimbardo didn't want to reproduce a real prison. He was not interested in having something as realistic as possible... The prisoners were wearing gowns, with no underwear. They're wearing panties on their head. It's really a very strange situation.

And Zimbardo himself said that in order to produce results in two weeks, he had to produce an extreme environment. He had to push something that went further than the original prison.

So, usually in prisons, you don't have one guard for three prisoners. You don't have this level of harassment. And most of the time, a lot the time is boring. In prison, you don't get interrupted by the guards all the time.

So Zimbardo was not interested in making a prison as realistic as possible. He was just trying to produce very distressing situation on the prisoners, in order to get them to have a nervous breakdown. Or to have them be very annoyed and distressed by the situation.

Julia: Yeah, I agree that the extent to which the conditions in the Stanford Prison Experiment actually mirror a real prison isn't all that relevant to, how we should update from it.

I just found the question of Prescott's involvement interesting, because it seems so weird that Zimbardo was claiming the op-ed was secretly ghostwritten. And also, there was this quote from Zimbardo back in 2007 when he was making this claim, which -- it's not directly related to the fraud claim. But it's just a disturbing side note...

Carlo Prescott is black. And when Zimbardo was saying that the op-ed wasn't actually written by Prescott, his actual quote was, "It's white boys' language. It's not the language of the ghetto." Referring to the Op-ed. That was Zimbardo's explanation for why it couldn't have been written by Prescott.

Which is disturbing.

Thibault: Yeah, and Zimbardo, in the discussion he focused on this detail to say, okay, if this detail is wrong, then the rest of the critique is wrong. That's very shrewd of him. He doesn't have to reply to all the critiques. He's just focusing on one critique, and showing that it's not that strong. So he doesn't have to reply to all the other critiques.

Julia: Right.

Thibault: So he's focusing on one weak element in the critique. And he focused on the Ben Blum critique, because Ben Blum's critique is mainly based on interviews with the participants 50 years after the

fact. And it's very easy to debunk testimonies 50 years after the fact...

So it's very easy to debunk Ben's Blum paper. That's why Zimbardo is focusing on it and doesn't say anything about my book. Because my book is based on the archive, what was written at the time, what was recorded from the guards and the prisoners at the time.

For instance, when I quote from the archive that the prisoners and the guards themselves found the prison to be unrealistic and that, they didn't believe it. They knew it was a setup.

This is much more annoying for Zimbardo than the guards and the prisoner saying the same thing 50 years later.

Julia: Is it true that you were the first researcher to go into the archives and go through this footage? And if so, why? For such a widely cited and impactful study, why would no one have gone in and looked at the footage up till now?

Thibault: I don't know. It's very surprising. To me there's a failure of the scientific community in this because it's a very widely circulated and quoted experiment. And no one bothered to have a look at the archive.

Maybe Zimbardo refrained people from looking into the archive? He gave the archive to the Stanford Library in 2011; prior to 2011, I don't know how accessible were the archives. Maybe it was difficult to get access to.

As far as I'm concerned I'm the first person to publish all this material. For instance, the dormitory Experiment -- you had one or two researchers who talked about it in 50 years. But without knowing what took place in this experiment. They just knew that an experiment took place before the Stanford Prison Experiment.

I'm the first person to publish a summary of what happened during this experiment. And to show the extent to which it served as a blueprint for the Stanford Prison Experiment.

So this is very surprising, that no one cared to have a look at this archive so far.

Julia: But there were critics of the Prison Experiment almost from the beginning, right? What were some of the prominent criticisms?

Thibault: Well as the most prominent critique was about the ethics of the experiment.

Julia: Right. That's the one I heard.

Thibault: Saying that it was unethical because the students suffered, and that's why the experiment wasn't replicated since then. Because it puts participants in such a hard situation, that it's impossible to reproduce the experiment.

Another set of critiques was saying, "All the guards didn't become rude and abusing. Actually about a third of the guards did. So the experiment would tend to prove that people do not spontaneously become abusive if they are told to. Or they don't just don't need to wear a uniform, and be put into prison to become abusive guards."

So the experiment demonstrates the contrary, that people can resist their environment. That was another critique.

And the third set of critiques focused on what is called "demand characteristics." Which is how much the participants in an experiment can guess what the experimenter is trying to pull.

Julia: So they were the closest to the real criticism. They got closest.

Thibault: Yes. So for instance, two researchers took a set of students and gave them the rules of the prison experiment. They explained them how it was organized. And then they asked them, "According to you, what do the researchers want to prove?" And about 80% of the students guess right.

So these researchers showed that the demand characteristics in the Stanford Prison Experiment were very strong.

Julia: You're saying demand, right? Demand characteristics.

Thibault: Demand, yeah.

And those were the main critiques against the Stanford Prison Experiment.

Since then you have another critique, which was quite strong, which showed that there was self selection bias. Which means that when you advertise an experiment lasting two weeks, about prison, there's a certain [type of] participants which will show. It's not like

you pick randomly participants. There's a certain set, a certain psychological profile of people who will answer these ads.

Julia: Right. I mean, those are all good criticisms, although they all seem pretty beside the point, when you find out how the experiment was actually run.

But I was interested in the extent of the criticism that was made before the footage was revealed, in part just because I want to figure out how this information -- the whole travesty of the Stanford Prison Experiment -- how it should change my opinion of psychology as a field. I mean, they still put the Stanford Prison Experiment in their textbooks, right? It's in all the "intro to psych" textbooks.

Thibault: Yes. A lot of textbooks -- I consulted about 100 textbooks in psychology and sociology, and a majority of them discuss the Stanford Experiment without quoting any of the critiques against the experiment.

So that's a major failure, for me, from this community of people writing textbooks. That they are not taking into account the many criticisms against the experiment.

And I guess that my paper won't change much about it.

Julia: Why?

Thibault: I think that the experiment is so attractive. It's so striking, when you're teaching psychology, or when you want to make people be sensitive about the powers of psychology, it's very tempting to use this experiment. To show how powerful are the forces of psychology. And to show how useful is psychology. Because we could all become a Nazi guard, under the power of the situation.

So we need psychology to protect us from ourselves and from others. Because we are all potentially evil. So we need psychology to protect us from this evil.

Julia: As demoralizing as it is to realize that no one checked this -- this data was sitting in the archive for so many years, even though the experiment was so important -- it's been more demoralizing for me to read the reactions from, not all, but some psychologists.

It's not so much that they're outright denying what happened, but they're dismissing it. And saying, just as you were alluding to a

second ago, they're saying, "Well, it's the story at the heart of the Stanford Prison Experiment that matters."

Here it is, I have a quote from an author of the textbook *Learn Psychology*. His name is Kenneth Carter. He's a professor of psychology at Emory. And he said, "Even if the science was quirky" -- that word quirky really rolled my eyes -- "Even if the science was quirky, or there was something that was wrong about the way that it was put together, I think at the end of the day, I still want students to be mindful that they may find themselves in powerful situations that could override how they might behave as an individual. That's the story that's bigger than the science."

That really... I just sank into my chair when I read that. That's just... what's the point of doing science, if it's all about the story anyway?

Thibault: Last year I came across a paper in the New York Times about this debate on the Stanford Prison Experiment. And the journalist was saying, Well maybe the Stanford Prison Experiment is not as scientific as we should expect, but it *feels* true.

Julia: No!

Thibault: So we should just accept it, because we know deep inside us that, yes, we could be evil; that yes, we could be this terrifying guard in this situation. Even though it's not scientific, we should save it, because deep inside us we have the feeling that it could be true.

And that's the New York Times.

Julia: What! I really, really hope you're exaggerating.

Thibault: I'm not.

Julia: Do you remember the name of the journalist?

Thibault: Yes, he's Benedict Carey. The title of the paper, the article is "Psychology Itself Is Under Scrutiny."

Julia: Oh man.

Thibault: Yes. The heading of the paper is, "Many famous studies of human behavior cannot be reproduced. Even so, they reveal aspects of our inner lives that feel true."

Julia: Goddamn it.

Thibault: That's the exact word.

Julia: That's my last hope dashed to pieces.

Thibault: In the paper it says the public's judgments matter to the field, meaning to the field of psychology, too.

So it's as if we should have some polls about experiments, to ask people, "Do you think we should take this experiment as true or false?" And we should make polls to know if an experiment is scientific or not. If it feels true to a lot of people, then let's say it's true, and it's scientific.

That's the kind of thing you can read in a major newspaper, like the New York Times.

So for me, as a scientist, it was very depressing to discover that most people don't care about the truth, actually. Even among scientists -- they read books or they do science to reinforce their beliefs. And people are not looking for truth. They are looking for things that make them feel better. And they are looking for things that confirm their opinions.

That's why the Stanford Prison Experiment will live forever. Because it's very convenient for a lot of people. And they don't care if it's scientific or not. That's not the point. The point is that, does it feel true to me? That's the point.

Julia: Not to depress you even further, but there was an interview with Zimbardo where they asked him about you and your book.

And his response was, "People can say whatever they want about it" -- i.e., about the experiment -- "It's the most famous study in history of psychology at this point. There's no study that people talk about 50 years later. Ordinary people know about it. If he --" i.e., you, Thibault -- "if he wants to say it was all a hoax, that's up to him, I'm not going to defend it any more. The defense is its longevity."

The defense is its longevity. That phrase really drew me up short.

Thibault: And you're right. But in a way I agree with them, in the way that the Stanford Prison Experiment will never die. And that it will live on, because it's beyond the realm of science now. Now it belongs to popular culture. You have a rock band called the Stanford Prison Experiment.

Julia: No way, really?

Thibault: You had two Hollywood movies about the experiments. So now it's part of the popular culture. So even if all the scientists claim that it's a setup, most of the people won't care about it and they will just keep on discussing it. You can type 'Stanford Prison Experiment' in Twitter and see how people discuss about it today.

Julia: Do you happen to know if there were any policies that were passed, as a result of Zimbardo's testimony? Did it have any concrete influence beyond just infecting public discourse?

Thibault: Well, one of the lieutenants of Zimbardo in the experiment became a criminologist. His name is Craig Haney. And he wrote a paper with Zimbardo about penal law reform in the US and the reform of the prison system. And they both say that the Stanford Prison Experiment had no effect whatsoever on the prison system.

Actually, in the early '70s when the experiment took place, it was a time when the prison laws and the prison system was quite more benign than today. Since then it just became worse and worse. And there are more and more people in prison, and the way they are treated is more and more individualistic.

The Stanford Prison Experiment tried to show that what is important is the situation, not the individuals. That the way people are treated within the prison system is more and more individualistic. We try to show with DNA, or with studies of character, that people are inherently evil or bad, and that it's not a matter of situation. It's not a question whether you're born in a poor neighborhood or rich neighborhood. It's your true nature that decides whether you will be a criminal or not.

So according to Zimbardo himself it had no effect on the prison system.

Julia: What about court cases? Because I know Zimbardo was called as a witness or an expert witness. Or maybe his research was just cited. Do you happen to know?

Thibault: Yeah. He testified for one of the guards in the Abu Ghraib Scandal. And the guard was nonetheless severely punished.

Julia: Oh, so Zimbardo was arguing that the guard didn't deserve to be punished, because it was all about the environmental influence?

Thibault: Yes, exactly. He was recruited by the guard's lawyer explicitly for this, to say that it's not his fault. That it's the situation that produced these misbehaviors, and that no personal responsibilities were involved.

Julia: Is it just me, or does this seem pretty far from his original mission of being a social activist out to take down oppressive systems?

Thibault: Actually the prosecutor in the Abu Ghraib Scandal wrote a book afterwards. And he wrote that Zimbardo played loose and -- I don't remember the exact quote. But that Zimbardo is using the Abu Ghraib case to promote the Stanford Experiment, and he's playing with reality just to promote his own experiment.

Julia: Wow. Do you happen to remember the title of that book?

Thibault: The author is Christopher Graveline and the name, I don't remember the name of the book.

Julia: Okay, that fine, our listeners can search for that name or I'll get the title from you later, and we'll put it up on the podcast website.

I guess one last question -- Oh, you got it?

Thibault: The title is *The Secrets of Abu Ghraib Revealed*. And the quote is page 179.

Julia: You're so organized. Great. Thank you.

Did this whole experience change your thinking in any ways, other than causing you to be depressed about the truth seeking-ness of science? I mean, that's a big one.

Thibault: Yeah, it's a big one. Because I was really believing that most people in the field of science were seeking the truth as I was. And I've been very disappointed to see that it's not the case.

And since the publication of my book, I've been very surprised to see that no one care about what's in the book. And what the truth about the experiment is.

There's been a lot of noise around Ben Blum's paper.

Julia: It could be an English versus French thing -- sorry.

Thibault: Yes, maybe. But as the book is based on material in English, that means any American journalists can assume that I'm able to speak English, and that I can write a quick summary of my main findings.

Julia: That's true.

Thibault: You're maybe the third journalist contacting me about this. And it's been a year and a half. And it's just, it looks like people don't care about this.

And they just, they have a good story with the Stanford Prison Experiment, and they just don't give it up.

Julia: Well, if it's any consolation, by far the most righteous outrage that I saw among scientists, in response to these revelations, was in the open science community on Twitter. And they're younger scientists, for the most part. And they're growing. So maybe 20 years from now that sentiment will be more the norm than it is today. Maybe.

Thibault: I hope so. I'm a bit pessimistic but... the paper is about to be published. And so I guess that the debate is now starting for real. So maybe the people will start reacting from now, so I shouldn't be this pessimistic about this.

Julia: Didn't Rutger -- I forgot his last name, the guy who made waves by speaking out at the billionaires' conference last year -- what's his name?

Thibault: Yes, Rutger Bregman.

Julia: Thank you. Not Rutger Hauer. Rutger Bregman. He linked to your paper, I think. I think that might be how I found it. And he was properly outraged. So that's something.

Thibault: He's been very helpful.

Julia: That's great. I'm so glad to hear that.

Okay, well before we wrap up -- as I mentioned, I like to close the episode by asking my guest for a, not necessarily a recommendation, but just to bring up some book or other resource that influenced their thinking or their life in some way. Were you able to think of an influential book?

Thibault: Yes, it's a book by a philosopher, an English philosopher called Michael Oakeshott, and it's a book called *On Human Conduct*. It's a

book of philosophy published in 1975. And it's really not a very widely read book.

And he's not a very widely read philosopher either. But for me, he's one of the great thinkers of the 20th century. He has a very subtle and profound understanding of the functioning of society and politics. I recommend this book to everyone.

Julia: Would it be easy for you to bring up a highlight, or a topic that he covers in the book?

Thibault: Well, basically he sees human societies as organized around two main forms. One he calls "universitas" and one he calls "sociatus." The universitas is a managerial society where everything is organized, that people are under control and the behaviors are controlled by a main authority.

And in a sociatus, it's more like the society is ruled by law. It's like you are drawing white lines on the floor. People cannot cross these lines. But within these lines they are free to do whatever they want.

He [argues] that in whole societies there's a conflict between these two ways of organizing life. And that sometimes we live more in universitas, and sometimes more in sociatus. And it's a very stimulating way of thinking.

Julia: Interesting. Reminded me the name, the title again?

Thibault: Yeah, it's Michael Oakeshott on Human Conduct.

Julia: Okay. Excellent. We'll link to that on the podcast website, as well as to your recent paper. And to your book for any of our French speaking, rationally speaking listeners out there.

And I'll put in a few links to some other parts of the debate as well, so maybe our listeners can get a feel for... Zimbardo's response, and how he's addressed some of the allegations in other interviews, although not necessarily your allegations. I think that'll give a fuller picture of what's happened, and the reaction to it.

Thibault: Yes, let's hope that the debate will unfold now.

Julia: Here's hoping. It's been wonderful talking to you. And I'm grateful for the work that you did. It's very important, even if not everyone realizes that.

Thibault: Thank you Julia.

Julia: Thank you so much for coming on Rationally Speaking.

And this concludes another episode. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.