

# Ethics and stanford prison experiment assignment

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Ethics and the Stanford Prison Experiment In 1971 Philipp Zimbardo carried out one of the most ethically controversial psychological experiments the 'Stanford Prison Experiment'. Originally he aimed to study how much our behavior is structured by the social role we occupy. Describing the study briefly 24 undergraduates with no criminal and psychological record were chosen for the research to play the roles of prisoners and guards in a mock prison situated in the basement of Stanford University Psychology Building, equipped by hidden cameras and microphones.

As the lead researcher, Zimbardo was observing the events from a different room, giving instructions to the guards. The research was supposed to last about two weeks. However, aggressive and violent behavior quickly appeared on the behalf of the group playing the role of the guards, while prisoners became depressed and passive. Ultimately some of the prisoners were subject to torture. Since the participants assimilated with their role rapidly and provided surprising psychological outcome, Dr Zimbardo shot down the research after 5 days.

The experiment meant to demonstrate the power of authority, support of the situational attribution of behavior rather than the dispositional attribution. For forty years it was criticized as well as argued when it came to the relation of ethics and psychology. If it would be carried out today it would fail to meet the Ethical Principles of the Psychologist and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association.

This paper will discuss the main unethical elements of the Stanford Prison Experiment, such as the violation of privacy and confidentiality, physical and

mental harm during an experiment and the researcher's involvement of the warden role. ' Some psychological studies produce very surprising results for the researchers and the participants. Sometimes the results are so striking that they challenge our explanations of human behavior and human motivation. ' - writes Craig Haney two years after the experiment.

Even though the ' Study of Prisoners and Guards in a Simulated Prison' only gives a detailed overview of the experiment several unethical treatment can already be observed from the beginning. According to their contract the participants were offered a fifteen-dollar daily payment and were guaranteed basic living needs. In return they were given no instructions of what they shall expect. A few days later Zimbardo obtained the police help to demonstrate the whole arrest of the prisoner group.

Participants were captured in their homes unexpectedly by a police car, being handcuffed and charged with crimes. Their pictures as well as their fingerprints were taken; afterwards they were brought to the ' mock-prison' blindfolded (p 6). The previously mentioned actions strongly violated their right to privacy. Throughout the experiment participants were put under physical and psychological harm, which strongly would violate the APA code of ethics. Prisoners were not referred by names, but only by numbers and unlike the guards they were not allowed to leave the experiment scene.

They spent their days in a 6ft x 9ft prison cell. During the first days the prisoners began to behave according to as they were required rather than using their own judgment and morals. Already on the second day the prisoners suffered humiliation, and punishment. ' The most striking result of

was that apparently normal people could act with abuse and cruelty when placed in a compelling situation. After day one all prisoner's basic rights became a privilege among them the toilet visits and they were often forced to clean the toilet with their bare hands. (Bredy, Longsdon. p705) The same writing points out how psychological harms had a great impact on the prisoners. On the third day some of the prisoners began to experience severe negative emotions, passive behavior, depression and acute anxiety. Two of them had to be released from the study early. Those prisoners who remained in the mock prison began assimilated with their role and accepted humiliation and abusive treatment, as if they deserved it (Bredy, Longson. p 706). Not only the prisoners but the guards as well lost their sense of identity.

Later Zimbardo in his writing ' Pathology of Imprisonment' mentions that the experiment ' was no longer apparent to most of the subject where reality ended and their role began'. The majority of the subjects became prisoners and guards and was no longer being able to differentiate between their roles and their personality. (Zimbardo. p. 249) All together psychologically the following were observed: the loss of personal identity on both sides; and the arbitrary control exerted by the guards made the prisoner's lives increasingly unpredictable, causing depression and anxiety.

The guards also developed a dependency on prisoners and were emasculated them to the extent that when the prisoners were debriefed they suggested that they had been assigned to be prisoners because they were smaller than the guards. In fact, there was no difference in average height between the prisoners and the guards, and the perceived difference was a <https://assignbuster.com/ethics-and-stanford-prison-experiment-assignment/>

response to the prisoners' perceptions of themselves and their power (Haney et al. p 14). The physical harm was never proven on record however many critics do predict that mental effects of the experience should have generated automatic physical reactions.

As an example that supports this idea happened on the fourth day when one guard detained prisoner 436 kept the him in a two-by-two feet closet for the night, without informing the observer researchers about the situation.

Guards were instructing other prisoners to continually keep punching the door of the closet where prisoner 436 was put in. Eventually they tried to persuade the other prisoners that the only way the closet would open and their peer will be free if they give up their blankets and slept on their mattresses. Only one of the prisoners refused to do that. (Bradey, Longsdon. p706) From this sense it shall be quickly concluded that prisoners were also under physical harassments, once guards did adopt the negative attitude towards them, their aggression increased. The other main concern is why the researchers did not end the experiment when they saw what was happening in this stimulated prison? After all these ethical and moral violation the experiment continued for six days. As Zimbardo admitted, he also became immersed with his role of his role of being the instructor, providing orders to the guards.

He could no longer objectively fulfill his role of lead researcher, (Haney et al. p. 18) still he carried on with the process, knowing that the participants did not realize that they could leave the mock-prison whenever they wanted.

When they were asked whether they wish to be released without receiving the amount on the contract, they said yes, but still returned to their cell

<https://assignbuster.com/ethics-and-stanford-prison-experiment-assignment/>

when they were ordered following this discussion. By then they lost their real identity and voluntarily continued to be carry on the with the prisoner role.

On the other hand, guards did no realize that they could leave their role either. Many of them expressed their interest to continue the experiment without payment; in fact many of them enjoyed their role of authority and were accepting more and more night shifts. Similar to the guards and to the prisoners Zimbardo also failed to recognize the ability to leave the experiment at the early stage. Simply he was not able to remain an observer in his own experiment as him became internalized. (Zimbardo, 256)

The experiment was stopped when Christina Machlack a graduate student was invited to observe the event for a short period of time and was asked to express her opinion about it. She walked around a yard and talk to a guard. When she sat down behind the hidden cameras, saw the same guard she just recently had a conversation with, she was frightened. In her memoire she writes: " This man had been transformed. He was talking in a different accent, a Southern accent, which I hadn't recalled at all.

He moved differently and the way he talked was different, not just in the accent, but in the way he was interacting with the prisoners. It was like (seeing) Jekyll and Hyde...It really took my breath away. " (Stanford Prison Experiment, Still Powerful After All These Years) Zimbardo concluded that the situation caused the behavior of the participants rather than anything inherent in their individual personality. Four out of the twelve guards were diagnosed with genuine sadistic tendencies. Still, some guards showed sympathy and even tried to help the prisoners.

Zimbardo did follow up with the participants following the experiment. All the 24 person were convinced that they have acted under the role and believed that they fulfilled the roles as they were accepted to. As for today there is no record what the experiment caused in their long-term mental health.

( Shaugnessy, p. 137) It is essential to mention that the US Office Naval Research, Marine Corps, and the US Navy provided the funds for the experiments in order to study the relationship between military guards and prisoners.

Zimbardo did not consider his experiment unethical. As he stated ' it had unethical elements'. According to him the experiment was ethically sound, since various ethic committees approved it. ' It followed the guidelines of the Stanford human subjects ethics committee that approved it. There was no deception; all subjects were told in advance that if prisoners, many of their usual rights would be suspended and they would have only minimally adequate diet and health care during the study,'- he said. Which was planned to last two weeks.

However, he did mention that: ' it was unethical because people suffered and others were allowed to inflict pain and humiliation on their fellows over an extended period of time' (Stanford Prison Experiment, Still Powerful After All These Years). Maltreatment of prisoners takes place all over the world. These unethical issues were vividly discussed in 2004 when the Guantanamo Bay prisoner torture pictures were released. Many scholars found the similarities between the Guantanamo and the Stanford Prison case event.

The only difference was that in the 21st century, no one justified the behavior of the US guards in Guantanamo. The ill treatment of the guards was clearly declared unethical worldwide. As the study of psychology grew over the years, more rules have been created regarding its research and its practice. The APA ethical guidelines were enacted in 1992, with strong ethical rules concerning physical and mental harm during an experiment in addition to respecting basic human rights.

Hence, as of today no such an experiment could take place within the Ethical Code of the American Psychologist Association. Harley's article describes the experiment as the events occurred day, by day. It started as a simple behavioral research in order to study prison behavior. The ethical issues began to be pointed out by Bradey and Longsdon who in their writing guides us through the physiological and physical harm occurred during the prison experiment, including the mental abuses of the prisoners and the guards' obsession with sudden authority.

Zimbardo in his writing of 'Pathology of Imprisonment' briefly mentions his own experience regarding the Stanford research, providing us to be able to look at the situation as subjective participant rather than an experimenter. As the paper shows, not only the prisoners or the guards, but he himself, an experienced psychologist failed to differentiate between his warden role and his personality. Shaugnessy's work is the most recent one, written in the 21st century, when the medical and psychological moral and ethical code was already given universal guidelines and rules.



It is logical that Shaughnessy is describing the failure of several ethical issues and criticizes the experiment as a whole. Last but not least, the Stanford News Service provided the interviews and small memoirs of the discussed prison study. As the articles and their topics also shows moral and ethical values were different in the medical sphere decades before. As for today, analyzing the connection of ethics and the Stanford Prison Experiment the participants were treated unethical for the people right from the beginning.

Participants were not given the opportunity nor given instructions to decide over the acceptance of all the risks involved in the experiment. They were clearly deprived from their basic rights and were subjected to mental and physical harm without realizing they can end the temporary situation. Work Cited Brady, F. Neil, & Logsdon, Jeanne M.. (1988). 'Standard Prison Experiment' And The Relevance O. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 7(9), 703. Retrieved December 12, 2011, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 572750). Zimbardo, P, 1982, ' Pathology of Imprisonment'.

In d Krebs (ed. ), *Readings in Social Psychology: Contemporary Perspectives*, Second Ed. (Harper & Row, New York, NY) p. 249-251 Haney, C. , Banks, W. C. & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review*, 30, 4-17. Shaughnessy, J. J. , Zechmeister, E. B. , & Zechmeister, J. S. (2006). ' Research Methods' in *Psychology Seventh Edition*. Boston: McGraw Hill. ' Stanford Prison Experiment Still Powerful After All These Years'. *Stanford University News Service*. August 1. 1997. Stanford. California