

Analysis of the stanford prison experiment



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The article entitled The Stanford Prison Experiment is a renowned and controversial experiment written by Philip G. Zimbardo. It was published in the New York Times Magazine on April 8, 1973. In the said experiment, the capabilities of an individual to resist roles of being obedient or authoritarian are being studied. Researchers devised a setup wherein guards and prisoners learn to become authoritative and acquiescent in a particular environment we call prison. Moreover, they want to understand the process on how prisoners lose their independence, privacy, freedom and civil rights in the same manner that guards gain power by acknowledging the responsibility of controlling or manipulating the lives of the dependent inmates.

Zimbardo placed an advertisement in a local newspaper for him to be able to find subjects for the experiment. The experiment was designed for two weeks, however since the subjects may have extremely played their role which resulted to an intense scenario, the experiment or so-called “role-playing” had to be discontinued. Summary The experiment conducted was a psychological study used to observe human responses to incarceration and its behavioral effects on both authorities and inmates in prison.

It is a role-playing experiment where undergraduate college students from the United States and Canada volunteered as subjects and provided role assignments by the researchers. The samples were selected and judged according to their emotional stability, if they appear to be physically fit and mature for the study and if these men are law-abiding citizens. In addition to that, though subjects were initially warned about what may happen

throughout the duration of experiment, every subject was confident and unhesitatingly agreed to give his informed consent to partake in the study.

The experiment took place at the basement of the Stanford psychology building, where the mock prison was built. David Jaffe, an undergraduate research assistant played the role of the warden while Zimbardo as the prison's superintendent. Zimbardo provided specific conditions amongst participants expecting that it will result to a person's perplexity and deindividuation. The students who played as "guards" were provided a khaki, military -style uniform and wooden batons. Whistles, handcuffs and keys to the cells and main gate are symbols of their power and authority.

Silver reflector sunglasses were given to them as well to prevent eye-contact. On the other hand, prisoners were to wear nylon stocking caps and smocks, which appear like dresses, are being worn without undergarments for the purpose of having restricted or limited actions and giving a feeling of discomfort to further promote their sense of disorientation. They were called or referred by their ID numbers instead of their names which were sewn unto their uniforms. Moreover, a chain around their ankles was worn by the prisoners to remind them of their condition and oppression.

The day before the experiment started, Zimbardo gave a brief orientation to the subjects who are playing as guards to the mock prison. However, these men were given no formal training or guidelines as to what the limitations are except that no physical violence will be permitted. They were told that it is their responsibility to control and manage the prison, maintain peace and

order and were also given substantial opportunity to invent and develop a method and approach of running a prison.

The idea that was imposed to the “ guards” is that they should create an environment where prisoners will have a feeling of boredom, frustration and powerlessness, that prisoners are arbitrarily manipulated by the prison’s system and that they will have no privacy. As quoted from Zimbardo’s statement, “ an atmosphere or condition that we all have the power and they have none”. (Zimbardo, S. , 1973). Consequently, prisoners were simply told that all they have to do is to wait in their homes to be called on the day that the experiment will start.

These men were startled because they were caught and arrested by the actual Palo Alto police department, who cooperated and took part in the experiment, and were charged with armed robbery. The course of being a prisoner began when these men were strip-searched, deloused, and given their new identities. The subjects quickly adapted to their roles as prisoners and guards, going beyond the limitations of what had been envisioned which then resulted to a psychologically damaging scenario. Inmates endured and suffered the brutal, shameful and degrading treatments given by the guards.

As the intensity of the situation arises, prisoner’s stress resulted from rebellion to submission and compliance. At the end of the study, many of the subjects appear to have gained emotional instability. . After an uneventful first day, everyone was surprised when a riot broke out on the second day. The guards worked together and volunteered to stay extra hours to prevent the prisoner’s revolt without the knowledge and supervision from the

research staff. In addition to that, as a result of their anger due to the inmates' rebellious behavior, the guards attacked the prisoners using fire extinguishers.

As the experiment continued, several guards became aggressively sadistic. The researchers observed that one-third of the guards appeared to have purely sadistic tendencies. Subjects who played as "guards" are surprisingly upset when the experiment has to end early. Nevertheless, the subjects who played as "prisoners" have internalized their role as well (Zimbardo, 1973). One of them said that he will be accepting the parole even if there is an agreement that the experiment-pay will be forfeited.

None of the parole applied were approved but still they stayed and did not quit the experiment. Researcher's assumption is that these men have learned to realize the role of being a prisoner and a prisoner they made themselves. The Stanford experiment ended on August 20, 1971, only 6 days after it began instead of the 14 it was supposed to have lasted. Discussion The objective of this paper is to generate a critical analysis of the experiment conducted by the researcher regarding the ability of an individual to resist compliant and authoritative role inside a penitentiary.

In addition to that, this paper also aims to make assumption, implications and generally look into the strength and weaknesses that is behind the researcher's/writer's argument. Some reviews that were made from this experiment said that this study is unethical and not scientific. Unethical, in the sense that human rights were violated. Subjects who played as prisoners were physically, mentally and emotionally harassed. Moreover, there were

no basis of choosing who will play prisoners or guards, subjects were just randomly and arbitrarily assigned by a flip of a coin.

It is said to be unscientific because since it is a field experiment, variables cannot be controlled and scientific measures may not be followed. Moreover, it is not comparable with the real-life prison condition or situation. The assumptions and conclusions drawn by the researchers are very subjective and the research design will be difficult for other researchers or experimenters to reproduce for further testing. In addition to that, the sample size is small; it cannot represent a relatively large population of individuals inside the prison, and the experiment lasted for a short period of time.

The result of the experiment showed that the situation or the participant's condition is what caused his behavior rather than being innate in their individual personalities. However, some argue that the participants based their behavior on how they were expected to behave or how they are being instructed. They know the prisoner and guard stereotypes so participants are merely engaging in role-playing. The results of the experiment support the view that 'nurture' instead of 'nature' more strongly affect the behavior of an individual.

However, there are issues that pose doubts on the validity of the experiment as mentioned previously. The small sample size, for instance, is one factor that raises such uncertainty. It may likewise be worthwhile to replicate the experiment on various cultures, as the same variables may yield different results as a direct implication of culture. Collectivist cultures vis-a-vis

individualistic cultures may garner totally different results. On a personal side note, I believe that the behaviors and personality dispositions of an individual is equally determined by genetics on the one hand, and environment on the other.

Thus, the behavior of a person is molded both by his biological make-up and the stimuli that he receives and processes within the context in which he exists. Author's Points The author's point or idea of setting up an experiment like this to study an individual's reaction and response towards being authoritative and obedient is controversial. The article that was written gave a huge impact in the field of psychology especially in studying human behavior and reaction towards forces in an environment where subjects are confined or immersed to, in this case the prison.

In the said article, the author strongly argues that responses or a person's behavior is produced or generated in a certain situation or circumstance. As what was illustrated in the article, subjects that were assigned as guards showed authority, manipulation, power and sadism. On the other hand, prisoners appeared to be dependent, compliant, obedient and rebellious to some extent. All of the said characteristics are stereotypes of guards and prisoners, and having all these misconception; the subjects seriously played the role that the researchers assigned them.

From this thought, it can be seen that behaviors that were observed inside the mock prison is not based on the subject's individual personalities but are brought about the environment. Assumptions The result that was observed in this study cannot be accounted for their innate or existing personality

differences. Moreover, the researchers had done series of sessions, follow-ups and reflections with the subjects and found out that the behavior that was showed inside the mock prison in only temporary, more specifically they said that their behavior was due to the circumstances inside the prison. Nevertheless, their knowledge remained.

Most importantly, the author stresses the idea of parallelism of a prison in our lives, which was assumed everyone can relate to. Prisons can be compared to despair, racism, sexism and the like. Some people play the role of a prisoner, some are guards and it is up to us to choose or decide what role to play. It is with the guards, how they treat the prisoners, that makes the prisoners what they are ought to be. Issues Overlooked Since the participants of the experiment are caught up in the intensity of the situation and that these men were engrossed with their role, some issues have been overlooked by the experimenters.

Unexpected things had happened, prisoners had experienced too much suffering, and guards on the other hand had too much control over the prisoners and were overwhelmed by their power and authority. The purpose is not to manipulate people but variables which are subject of the study. In this case, the hypothesis is not evaluated under scientific methods or condition. Implications of Analysis According to this article, researchers have drawn various implications from the experience in this study.

As what was stated in the article, since such results were observed in the experiment conducted, it is implied that normal, healthy and educated American men can be transformed or can quickly adapt to a prison

environment, hence they are influenced by the pressure of playing their role. However, this is only under mock prison circumstances. Also, the subject's personal and social responses are observed to be a product of their activity in an environment that may be considered as deviant in other systems but is regarded appropriate in a "prison".

Though researchers have found comparable results with a real prison environment, tendency of people to easily label someone as a prisoner or a guard thru stereotypes is inevitable which then underestimates the concept of situational forces. Own/Reader's Assumption: From a reader's point of view, the experiment can be seen as significant at some point, however since there are factors that are overlooked, the experiment may not be that reliable and valid. Though the experiment had aroused curiosity and interests among psychologists and behavioral professionals and academicians, it still is open to contention.

While it allowed them to conclude or generate various theories out of the experimental condition and result, the experiment was controversial because normal, healthy and undergraduate college students were involved, forcing themselves to play the role they are assigned to and after the study, some of them have acquired emotional disturbances. These issues pose doubts on the ethics with which the study has been carried out.