

Stanford prison experiment



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The Stanford Prison Experiment Introduction Professor Philip Zimbardo led a team of researchers in conducting an experiment on prison life at Stanford University in 1971. Zimbardo wanted to test his hypothesis that it was the prisoners and guards inherent personality trait that leads to abusive and violent behavior in the prisons. Twenty-four predominately white male middle class men agreed to participate in a 7-14 day experiment in return for \$15.00 a day, the equivalent of approximately \$90.00 today. The men underwent a diagnostic interview and personality test to ensure that none of the participants suffered from any psychological or medical problems and that there was no history of crime or drug abuse. As simple as flipping a coin the men were divided into two groups, prisoners and guards. The guards were not given any special training or instructions other than they were free, within limits, to do whatever they liked to maintain law and order, while maintaining respect from the prisoners.

The prisoners on the other hand knew they were going to get some harassment, lose some privacy and civil rights and that the food was not going to be gourmet. What happened next, in that secluded basement could not have been foreseen by researchers because the experiment was cancelled on day six of a fourteen day experiment. A mock prison was set-up in the basement of the Stanford's Psychology Department building, where the prisoners were kept in small windowless cells, no clocks and just enough room for 3 prisoners.

There was also a room called "The Hole" that was used for solitary confinement that measured about two feet by two feet and was very dark. Video cameras and intercoms were set up in order to monitor and listen to

the discussions of the prisoners. Upon arrival the prisoners were humiliated with a strip search, deloused with a spray, dressed in a numbered uniform of a smock like dress with no under wear and their hair was netted to give the appearance of being shaved.

There right ankle was shackled with a heavy chain, that was intended to be a constant reminder that they were imprisoned and that life was oppressive in jail. A brief description of the experiment and its purpose. What was learned through this experiment? After reading this experiment, it may be safe to say, that we all have a dark side depending on the conditions we are exposed to. The experiment showed that the participants easily adapted to their roles that they were playing, beyond the expectations of the researchers.

Just like in the movies, participants began to adapt similar attitudes to their characters, stereotypical of a prisoner or guard. It didn't take longer than 24 hours for the prisoners to rebel and then the anger, abuse of power and domination set in with the guards. The guards began to treat the prisoners with force, stripped some of the prisoners naked, removing their beds from the cell and forcing them to sleep on the cold concrete floor. The ring leader was separated and put into solitary confinement.

Day after day the violence and abuse escalated and began to include psychological tactics, like having a privileged cell, where three prisoners were given special treatment of sleeping on beds, eating special food, being allowed to wash and brush their teeth. It was easy to see that it didn't take long for the participants to lose sight that this was an experiment and not reality. Prisoners had lost their identity, they believed and referred to <https://assignbuster.com/stanford-prison-experiment-research-paper-samples/>

themselves as their number, that was demonstrated by prisoner #819 who completely believed he was an inmate in a prison.

The guards were enjoying the abuse of power, never being late for work and always willing to stay and work over time for no additional pay. The experiment demonstrated that our conditions start to define our identity. Our individuality and morals disappear fast depending on the social conditions. We must be very careful with the people we elect or give power to because we seem to be a Nation of followers and conformists. What was learned about the disconnect between reality and role-playing?

Based on the experiment one could conclude that within 48 hours, depending on the physical and social conditions it is possible for a person to start to lose a sense of reality, the disconnect between reality and role-playing becomes blurred. The experiment began as could be expected on the first day with each participant role-playing based on their beliefs of stereotypes of either a prisoner or guard. Within a very short period of time it quickly elevated to the participants internalizing their behavior and believing the situation to be real, that they were experiencing.

What is most alarming is that the first day it was evident that everyone was uncomfortable, unsure of their roles, not taking it too seriously but generally getting a feeling for their role playing. The next morning, 24 hours later, a rebellion broke out with the prisoners. The events that followed next by the guards was extreme, harsh, forceful, degrading and generally not necessary, to control the situation. This could be seen as the turning point in the experiment where the participant's sense of reality changed. This was no longer an experiment but a real life situation.

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Evidence of disconnect from reality by the prisoners: * Prisoners passively accepted the psychological torture and followed the instructions from the guards to harass other inmates * Prisoner #5401 fell so deeply into the role he believed and was proud of his elected leadership for Stanford County Jail Grievance Committee * Prisoner #8612 suffered acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, continuous crying and out of control rage, with 36 hours of the experiment beginning * Prisoner #819 became sick, would not eat, cried uncontrollably and was convinced he was a prisoner and was not getting out * Prisoner #416 identified himself as #416 and not Clay, he believed he was in a real prison run by psychologists, not the state * During the simulated parole hearing, prisoners said they would forfeit their pay of \$15/day in order to be paroled

Evidence of disconnect from reality by the guards: Guards viewed the prisoners as troublemakers, even believing they would do them harm * Guards controlled when the prisoners were allowed to use the washroom, let sanitary conditions become unbearable by making prisoners urinate and defecate in a bucket that was left in the cell to rot and smell * Day after day the guards escalated their harassment, humiliation and violence to the prisoners, making them clean toilet bowls with their bare hands and making them do push-ups for hours at a time * Guards degraded the prisoners by stripping them naked and demanded total obedience through physical and psychological manipulation

One can only conclude that a total disconnect between reality and role-playing took place in this experiment. Why did no one ask to quit the experiment? Simply put, it was no longer an experiment, this was very real, the prisoners were experiencing pathological disorders and the guards were growing more sadistic, with each passing day. What about peer pressure and

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its role in controlling behavior? All participants both prisoners and guards experienced peer pressure, that controlled their behavior and altered their moral beliefs.

The experiment began by defining the two different groups with a uniform that eliminated or minimized each person's individual identity and associated them with a group. Guards wore identical khaki uniforms with sunglasses and carried a billy club. Prisoners wore a smock, no under, # id, chains around their right ankle and a nylon net on their heads. When the first rebellion started, 24 hours into the experiment, the morning shift of guards blamed the night shift guards of being too lenient on the prisoners. The guards called in extra help, united they worked to control the situation with brutal force and the night time shift even volunteered to remain on duty, that day. The guards now had a common goal to control and intimidate the prisoners through psychological and physical punishment.

Peer pressure to keep the prisoners in line was evident by the increasing daily assertive violence. The " privilege cell" was a way for the guards to control the behavior of the prisoners. The three best behaved prisoners would be separated and given special privileges to break the solidarity of the prisoners. If a prisoner agreed to be an informant they could also receive special treatment but they had to be careful that none of the other prisoners found out because they would not be trusted anymore. Together the prisoners worked to rebel and in turn this created greater solidarity between the guards. What was learned about prisonculture? The experiment demonstrated how prison life can change an individual quiet quickly.

Prisoners experience a great deal of emotional pain and suffering that can produce physical illnesses like rashes and hives and also psychological effects like uncontrolled crying, rage and disorientation. Guards on the other hand enjoyed their authority and the power they had over another individual. The guards were identified into three different categories. * Tough but fair guard who followed the rules by the book * “ Good guy” guard who made life a little easier, did special favors for the prisoners and never punished them * One third of the guards were evil, sadistic, hostile men who enjoyed humiliating the prisoners After six days the experiment was cancelled when researchers observed that the guards were thoroughly enjoying the power and humiliation they were enforcing on the prisoners and that the suffering inmates were individually and as a group, disintegrated. An example of the disintegration was when the prisoners elected not to give up their blankets to get prisoner #416 out of solitary confinement but chose to leave him there all night. In the end, humanity did not win over evil but evil triumph. What sort of conclusion might be drawn from the results of this study and what are the implications of these conclusions for our prison system and for society in general? Based on how the experiment was conducted, not as much information was gathered to test the original hypothesis as was gathered on how not to conduct an experiment.

The experiment failed to be completed when 2 prisoners had to be released early and the entire experiment was cancelled prematurely after six days of the original fourteen day experiment. Within this short period of time enough information was gathered to show how quickly the participants adapted to their roles and how fast the disconnect between reality and role-playing

took. The experiment was successful in demonstrating how the power of authority can easily be abused and taken too far. It was interesting to note that the prisoners thought that the subjects were divided up between prisoners and guards based on their size and that the guards were larger, when in fact there was no difference in the average height of the two groups.

Another example that we assume people in powerful positions are smarter, larger, more worthy, more deserving of that role, than ourselves. The most alarming fact was the Zimbardo, the leading researcher took a role in the experiment as the superintendent of the prison. He allowed himself to role play, get emotionally involved and allowed abusive behavior to continue during the experiment. On the day he thought a mass escape plot was being planned, Zimbardo was so involved strategizing how to stop it, that no information was observed or gathered that day. The results from the study were mainly subjective. Little or no information was concluded from this study because still to this day, similar behaviors took place with prisoners from Iraqi who were being held at Abu Ghraib.

US soldiers abused, stripped and sexually humiliated prisoners, took pictures and posted them on the internet. An analysis of the ethics of the experiment. Was this study ethical? The Stanford prison experiment was not ethical. All of the participants had signed a consent form to take part in the study but the consent form was deceiving and did not include some of the details of the study and what was going to be expected of the participants. The experiment began with a huge invasion of privacy when the participants were surprised at their homes by local police, arrested, handcuffed and put

in a police cruiser while neighbors looked on. Next the prisoners were strip searched without consent which is a huge violation of a man's rights.

All participants were put under a great deal of stress, exposed to psychological and physical harm and the prisoners were beaten and humiliated. Was it right to subject these subjects to this kind of suffering in exchange for the information that was gained? Christine Maslach, a Stanford Ph. D student that was brought in to interview the prisoners and guards should be credited for being the only person of more than fifty highly educated individuals that was taking part in the study, who had the strength to speak up and question the morality of this experiment. What was supposed to be a safe controlled environment to conduct the experiment became increasingly dangerous, when peer pressure from the researchers and observers made it difficult to stop the experiment.

These participants endured unnecessary pain and suffering that lasted well after the experiment was over. The information that was gathered could easily have been complied through observations in real prisons. Conclusion In conclusion the Stanford prison experiment demonstrated how prisons are set up to dehumanize the incoming prisoners, degrade them and instill in them a feeling of hopelessness. One can only question our human integrity when at the end of the experiment, the guards who were inflicting pain and suffering on their fellow participants who were prisoners, were upset that the experiment was cancelled prematurely. We must find a way to rehabilitate our prisoners and create positive human values in them rather than to destroy them.