

The stanford prison experiment



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In some circles, the events surrounding the Stanford prison experiment were a reflection of heroism while in others the issues of ethics were cited as a pointer to the unacceptable nature of the participating subjects. Specifically, Maslach was seen as a hero for stopping the experiments (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973).

Palo Alto Police arrested nine young men on August, 1971. Apparently, the arresting was being captured by cameras. The hand cuffing exercise was broadcast by newsrooms. The arrested men were among roughly seventy people who were willing to participate in the experiment for a paltry fifteen dollars a day. Worse still, the Palo Alto Times contributed by publicizing the experiment. After some psychological tests and interviews, two dozens of the participants, deemed to be most appropriate for the exercise, were chosen and assigned to be either prisoners or guards. Those who were assigned prison status were booked into real jails before being blindfolded before being driven into a makeshift prison at Jordan Hall. Those assigned the role of guards were handed uniforms and given instructions not to use violence. However, they were to control the prisons.

Based on the views of the researchers, the experiment assumed an interesting twist in day two when the prisoners revolted. After successfully crushing the rebellion, the guards increased their levels of aggression against the prisoners. Similarly, they began humiliating and dehumanizing the prisoners. Nevertheless, the researchers kept reminding the guards to control their aggression. However, this did not work as the guards often forced the prisoners to wash the toilet bowls using their bare hands. The

rising levels of mistreatment forced the researchers to release five overstressed prisoners prematurely.

The research had the objective of focusing on power rules, roles, symbols, situational validation of behavior, and group identity. To achieve the goal, engaging in acts of deindividuation and dehumanizing was necessary. This leads to posing questions on what I could have done if I were a guard or prisoner.

The guards could take prisoners having their heads covered by paper bags on their way to the bathrooms. In short, the guards were mistreating the prisoners. If I were a guard in this experiment, I could have attempted to adhere to my ethical orientations which entail respecting human life.

However, the fact that I have been recruited for a fee to participate could have undermined my chances of being observant of ethical demands. Hence, I could have ended doing the same aspects as the other guards. In regards to being a prisoner, my position remains the same. As a recruited person, there is a challenge to force your views. However, I could not withstand such kind of mistreatment. Hence, I could have withdrawn from the experiment.

The issue of ethics has for a long time dominated the scientific discourse. Ethics regarding the recruitment of the young people for the experiment refuse to go away. Similarly, the ethics of dehumanizing fellow human beings pose a serious challenge.

In the experiment, the researchers made the subjects believe that they were helpful in delivering electric shocks to the strangers. The exercise had severe effects on the subject which they were not informed about. Similarly, the

public exposure of subjects was unethical since the information leaked was personal. Furthermore, the act of informing some subjects that they failed was unacceptable given the demoralizing effect such a move would have.

Despite the ethical issues raised, the idea that the experiment followed the guidelines set by the Stanford Human Subjects Ethics Committee would absolve the researchers from any wrongdoing. Hence, relying on this realization, it could be assumed that the experiment was ethical. However, the mistreatment of the subjects is indefensible. Consequently, it was unethical.

The study could not pass the scientific tenets such as the principle of replicability. For an ethical scientific approach, replicability is necessary. However, it is not possible in this exercise. From this point, the issue of generalizability also emerges. The sample was not representative since only volunteers were picked.