

Prison experiment support deprivation theory

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Prison Experiment Support Deprivation Theory Nick McCoy University of Iowa

Philip G. Zimbardo in a pursuit to analyze the results of placing society accepted "good" people in an evil place constructed an experiment which represented a simulation of prison life. Ordinary middle class males were placed in a situation to monitor activities and behavior these males displayed when subject to the harsh environments of a prison. The results of the experiment were much more detrimental than expected, in a small amount of time the guards became sadistic and the prisoners displayed signs of depression and extreme stress. This behavior demonstrated by the participants can be explained by the theory of deprivation. This essay will argue that the guards successfully used deprivations to enact severe psychological stresses on the inmates throughout the experiment, which is the reasoning this experiment was stopped early. This essay will begin by outlining the basic set-up and results of the Zimbardo experiment. This will be followed by an analysis of deprivation theory and how the deprivation theory influenced both the guards and prisoners to act uncharacteristically as individuals. Philip G. Zimbardo assembled a team and arranged the experiment to demonstrate the idea that the personality traits of prisoners and guards were keys to understanding abusive prison situations. Twenty four predominantly white middle class males out of seventy five respondents were selected, they were declared to be the most psychologically stable and healthy. Participants were told they would participate in a two-week prison simulation. The location of the experiment was the basement of Stanford's Jordan Hall; Zimbardo declared himself the "prison warden" and arranged a number of specific circumstances to encourage depersonalization, disorientation, and de-individualization. The participants selected to play the

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role of prisoners were arrested at their homes and charged with armed robbery, taken to Palo Alto police department for fingerprinting, mug shots and then strip-searched, given a identification number as their new identity. Prisoners were outfitted with very uncomfortable fitting smocks and stocking caps with their ankles chained and were identified only by their assigned numbers sewn on their uniforms to constantly remind them of their roles as prisoners. The participants selected to play the roles of guards were provided wooden batons, khaki shirt, generic pants, and mirrored sunglasses. These accessories were intended to establish their guard status to the prisoners. The guards were directed to influence the prisoners in negative ways, they were ordered by Zimbardo as quote, " You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me, and they'll have no privacy... We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. That is, in this situation we'll have all the power and they'll have none."(Zimbardo, 1999) On the second day of the experiment a riot broke out with the prisoners blockading their cell door. The guards responded with attacking the prisoners with fire extinguishers and began using psychological tactics to control the prisoners. Also on the second day one of the prisoners was released because he suffered severe rage and insecurity. Guards became increasingly cruel as they fully embraced their role and routinely used these psychological tactics to declare their superiority over the prisoners. For example, as punishment guards would not let prisoners empty the sanitation bucket or would refuse to allow prisoners to urinate or defecate, which quickly led to declined sanitary conditions for the prisoners.

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Guards would also remove the prisoner's mattresses, which were viewed as a valued item, as a form of punishment. Some prisoners were even forced to go nude as a method of degradation. Guards also used a dark closet as a form of solitary confinement for a prisoner who questioned the treatment of other prisoners. The planned two week experiment was stopped after six days because of the increasingly concerning behavior of both the guards and the prisoners. The guards and prisoners both seemingly forgot that this was only just an experiment. The prisoners had internalized their roles and continued to participate as prisoners even though their experiment-participation pay was forfeited, therefore leaving no monetary reason for continuing with the experiment. An explanation of the deprivation theory is necessary to fully understand the behavior of the prisoners in the Zimbardo experiment. The theory of deprivation is accredited to Gresham Sykes; Sykes discusses five deprivations prisons impose on prisoners during their sentences, three of which are clearly imposed on the prisoners by the guards demonstrated in the Zimbardo experiment. These deprivations of life in prison can be viewed as deliberately inflicted punishments placed on prisoners. Deprivation of liberty is the first deprivation described by Sykes, and perhaps the most apparent. Confinement to the institution and confinement within the institution are the two ways in which loss liberty is forced upon the prisoners (Sykes, 2007, p. 65). This type of deprivation leads to other things such as loneliness, boredom, and lost emotional relationships. These confinements represent a deliberate moral rejection to the criminal by the free community and the prisoner is constantly reminded that, by committing a crime, he has given up his status of a trusted member of society (Sykes, 2007, p. 65). Prisoners realize they are now viewed as not

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being anything within society, but viewed as a disgrace and a secondary member of society. This deprivation was not directly influenced by the guards, but could be seen through the experiment. The prisoners were white middle class males who most likely had negative stereotypical views for prisoners, therefore once they were treated and labeled as a criminal they subconsciously assumed those stereotypes of being rejected and a disgrace to society. They felt as though they really committed a crime and did not belong in the free community. In a very short amount of time the deprivation of liberty influenced the prisoners into a mentally altered state of mind.

Deprivation of goods and services is the second deprivation discussed by Sykes. It is acknowledged by the free community and government the basic needs of the prisoner are met; they don't go hungry, wet, or cold. Yet the standard of living is not sustainable, and the inmates become very much depressed by the lack of individuality allowed. Much of the free society is driven on the basis of performing, practicing and possessing good and services. (Sykes, 2007, p. 68). Inmates are forced to wear exactly the same uniforms, are limited daily to a certain calorie intake, hours of recreation, and cubic space. Sykes describes the inmates deprivation well, " This standard of living can be hopelessly inadequate, from the individual's viewpoint, because it bores him to death or fails to provide those subtle symbolic overtones which we invest in the world of possessions. " (Sykes, 2007, p. 68). The guards in the Zimbardo experiment clearly used the deprivation of goods and services to influence the prisoners and establish their superiority over the prisoners. For example, they deprived the prisoners of their name, clothing, sanitary conditions and mattresses to induce psychological pain on the prisoners. Stripping the prisoners of their

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individuality and possessions to cause mental pain proved successful from the view of the guards. The prisoners became severely distressed during the short period and forgot that they could actually leave the experiment at any time. This behavior can be attributed to the deprivation of goods and services experienced by the prisoners. According to Sykes a deprivation of autonomy also exists within the prison. Inmates are subjected to a vast list of commands and rules that are designed to regulate and control their behavior at every minute throughout the day. This strict regulation and guidance is viewed as insulting to the inmates and further lessens their individuality, which in turn creates great anger within the inmate towards the staff. Sykes explains the impact of depriving the inmates of autonomy with the following sentence. " The important point is that the frustration of the prisoner's ability to make choices and the frequent refusals to provide an explanation for the regulations and commands descending from the bureaucratic staff involve a profound threat to the prisoner's self image because they reduce the prisoner to the weak, helpless, dependent status of childhood" (2007, p. 73). The guards also demonstrated tactics to deprive the prisoners of their autonomy and further deplete the prisoners of their sanity by enforcing meaningless routines such as chanting the foul remarks at one of the prisoners that was placed in solitary confinement. The guards would also require cell checks or attendance checks every few hours to deprive the prisoners of an adequate sleep routine. Intentional or not the pains of imprisonment are seen as a set of threats or attacks, which are directed at the prisoner's well being resulting in a severely mentally deprived inmate that is forced to conform within the prison society to aid in overcoming these deprivations. Zimbardo's experiment clearly demonstrated the psychological

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effects of the prisoners in only six days of operation. The results were produced because of situational attribution behavior of the guards successfully enacting these deprivations on the inmates to cause enough psychological pain to the inmates to force the experiment to be stopped. Zimbard's experiment proved that most prison circumstances and the behavior of prisoners are direct consequences of the deprivation theory which led to the depersonalization, disorientation, and de-individualization of the participants selected as prisoners. References Zimbardo, P. (1999). Stanford prison experiment. Retrieved from [http://www. prisonexp. org/](http://www.prisonexp.org/) Sykes, G. (2007). The society of captives: a study of a maximum security prison. Princeton Univ Pr.