

# An analysis of the zimbardo stanford prison experiment essay sample



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The Zimbardo Stanford prison experiment involved the signing up of psychology students as participants in a role-playing experiment.

Participants were divided into two groups, some acting as prisoners and others acting as guards in a prison set-up. The participants were contained in the prison and in their roles for a projected period of two weeks. It was observed however that after a matter of days internalization of assigned roles had begun to affect the interaction of participants in the experiment. Although participant playing at being the guards were instructed not to harm the prisoners physically, inventive new methods of shame and torture were imposed on the latter.

The situation was so stressful that five of the participants designated as prisoners had to be sent home on the fifth running day of the experiment (Zimbardo, 2007). Of interest is the fact that all the participants had been ensured to be healthy both physically and psychologically upon their entrance into the experiment (Zimbardo, 2007).

The experiment had apparently taken high tolls on the participants as five initially healthy students had to be discharged after only five days and the rest that remained were so demoralized that they submitted to the guards' orders without objection. On the sixth running day or on the evening of the fifth day to be exact, the experiment was discontinued by Zimbardo because of its adverse effects on the participants and the rapid escalation of deviant behavior observed.

Deviance has been said not to be a quality of an act a person commits, but rather the consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions

given to an offender (Grills, 2004). Calhoun and Conyers (2006) define deviance as acts which are norm-violating. It is thus the characteristics of acts that go against established norms which incur sanctions and requires the imposition of rules to protect the self-same norms.

It is thus further posited that the difference in norms in given groups and situations gives rise to differing standards in labeling acts as deviant. In the study in question there has been concern whether or not the acts performed by the students posing as guards could be termed deviant behavior. There have been many studies and actual occurrences in real life which suggest that the power abuse observed in the Stanford experiment was not entirely an isolated event. In fact, it has been observed in repeated incidents occurring in several different circumstances.

Given the nature of deviance as discussed earlier, it should be kept in mind that in prison sites there are established rules regarding the manner of interaction between prisoners and guards. Included in the rules are provisions for guards not to abuse prisoners. It should also be kept in mind that guards are stationed in jails mainly to ensure that prisoners do not escape or that they harm one another or themselves during their stay in prison.

This is thus the basis of power held by guards in prison settings. It can thus be seen that it is not in accordance with the normal prescribed functions of guards to humiliate, shame, or degrade prisoners over whom they have charge. The concurrence from other prison settings does not validate the acts of the guards in the Zimbardo prison experiment. The behavior they

manifested may still be deemed deviant as may other abusive behaviors observed in other prison situations as all these behaviors warrant sanctions and are provided against in the rules given to guards.

It is observed that the basic reason why the participants in the Zimbardo experiment acted so was because of the lack of supervision on the effects of their actions (Zimbardo, 2007). Zimbardo himself acted as warden in the experiment and was presumably also affected by the role-play employed.

The lack therefore of surveillance in situations infused with power imbalances lead to deviations from set norms. The authority system established first of all in the role-playing by labeling one group as guards and the other as prisoners and secondly that established by the very nature of the setting as an experiment supposedly for scientific purposes, succeeded to constrain questions that otherwise should and would have been raised by visitors to the experiment venue.

To add to the lack of surveillance was the perceived source of power, Zimbardo. The domination exercised by the prison guards over the prisoners was appointed to them by an authority figure. Who, though failing to reprimand their acts, was present at the scene of the experiment and through his silence acceded to the acts being performed.

It has been studied that in instances of torture and prisoner abuse it becomes remarkably easy for individuals to lapse into abusive behavior as a result of the power they perceive has been sanctioned by higher authority (Wallis, August, Bacon, Billips Crittle, Rawe, Ripley, Johnson, Morrissey, & Thornburgh, 2004). In a recent actual instance similar to the Zimbardo prison <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-the-zimbardo-stanford-prison-experiment-essay-sample/>

simulation, soldiers stationed in Abu Ghraib were found to be abusive of the prisoners they were given charge over (Wallis et al., 2004). Acquaintances of the soldiers reported that it was quite uncharacteristic of the persons involved to engage in such brutal behavior. However, the matter remains that these soldiers did.

A point of similarity that may be observed in the two situations, Zimbardo experiment and Abu Ghraib military camp, was the isolation of the locations from other places of contact. The two situations were practically excluded from known society and most particularly from society that was familiar to the individuals involved. With the absence therefore of on-hand authority figures there was also observed an absence of social feedback mechanisms to reflect to the individuals the morality and normalness of their actions. By all means therefore, the participants and the soldiers respectively found themselves to be the source of their own law and the enforcers of their own views on disciplining behavior.

It should be noted that in such cases where deviant behavior is observed in correctional facilities or containment institutions the individuals involved in the behavior are often scrutinized for specific attributes that could have led to the resulting deviance. In other cases the circumstances are deconstructed in order to identify characteristics and factors that may have contributed to the reasons for which the individual or individuals performed the acts in question.

However, it has been shown by psychologists that sadism and torture go beyond the individual level and reflect more a group interaction effect (Wallis

et al., 2004). It is then more than a case of particular individual attributes rather it focuses more on group dynamics and circumstances. The pressure of conforming with a norm contributes to the acts committed by some which are considered completely uncharacteristic. More so when the group is isolated from the larger society and the dictates of social norms are slowly eroded to be replaced by group and situational norms.

From all of the above it can be concluded that deviant behavior has a greater tendency of appearing or being practiced when individuals are disconnected from society at large and isolated. Furthermore, deviance being practices that go against the grain of the norm, there must have been established norms in particular situations. There is thus an observed lack of enforcement of such norms or a lack of a figure of authority to bring home the existence and importance of such norms.

Furthermore, the prohibition of norms without applying sanctions for the disregard of the same would cause individuals or groups to consider the same inapplicable. More generalized norms and rules are also considered to be inapplicable as the specifics that are left out are then rationalized to be allowable, as long as that action which is stated explicitly is not committed.

Finally, deviant behavior is more than just the acts of an individual person caused by personal attributes and characteristics. In order to get down to the root of deviant behavior and to treat the same, there is a need to study the manner by which individuals relate to others in a group. Furthermore, there needs to be an analysis of the characteristics of situations wherein deviant behavior has been observed. But more than the particular characteristics,

there needs to be an analysis of the relationship and interaction between the situation and the group involved.

## References

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