

Stanford prison experiment

Business



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It seems almost surreal that a six-day experiment that took place more than forty years ago at Stanford University still frightens people's minds and provokes much controversy. It is true though; the experiment that was designed to investigate possible causes of conflict between the guards and the prisoners turned into a nightmare.

A research team leader, Philip Zimbardo, later said, " Although we ended the study a week earlier than planned, we did not end it soon enough" (The Stanford Prison Experiment: Still powerful after all these years, 1997).

Twenty four male students without mental health issues or criminal history took part in the experiment as either guards or prisoners of a mockery prison in the basement of one the Stanford buildings. Soon, the guards were abusing the prisoners, the prisoners were igniting riots, and the staff had no objections at all. " The first day they came there it was a little prison set up in a basement with fake cell doors and by the second day it was a real prison created in the minds of each prisoner, each guard and also of the staff," Zimbardo recalls (Leithead, 2011). How come that a mocking prison became a real one in less than a day, with all the participants falling into their roles so easily? It seems that the defining moment happened on the second day of the experiment when a prison riot was brutally quelled.

Somehow, somewhere, the line was crossed. From then on, the guards abused the prisoners, because they could. Dave Eshelman, one of the guards, said, " I was kind of running my own experiment in there by saying, " How far can I push these things and how much abuse will these people take before they say, ' knock it off'? But the other guards didn't stop me. They seemed to join in. They were taking my lead" (Alumni Stanford).

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In turn, the prisoners lost their touch with reality: they thought they were fighting for their lives, not participating in some experiment, and they acted accordingly. Craig Haney, one of the researchers, recalls, “ Real prisoners learn how to mask their pain and act like it doesn’t matter. The prison study showed what it feels like for people who have not learned how to wear that implacable mask... Even the guys who didn’t break down were hurting.”

(Ratnesar, 2011)Opinions are divided on the exact reasons of horrific changes. Was that the situation itself that made people act like that, or was it just the dark side of a man’s nature that showed itself at the opportunity? The reasons probably lie in the middle: although initially people might have acted according to well-known stereotypes, later on their actions were their own.

One has to be extremely resistant mentally not to succumb to the lure of power or to keep in touch with reality. Could you or I do that? We can only hope we could. Besides, this experiment proves that the way we see ourselves depends on how others see us. The moment the “ fake” guards saw prisoners as the real ones, the former ceased to be fake, and the latter were in for some very real abuse. Surely, initially, it is hard to escape the feeling of all of it being unreal, but the more people fall for it, the harder it is for the rest to resist, because at some point you just start to question your own sanity.

Moreover, you cannot just shake the memories off. You can call off the experiment; it is the mixture of hate, shame, fear, and other emotions that remain. Surprisingly enough, some of the guards were sad that the experiment had been canceled. But then again, this also applies to the <https://assignbuster.com/stanford-prison-experiment/>

business world. If someone mistreats me, I can forgive but not forget, and I act accordingly be it dealing with him or even simply talking to him. And people do mistreat each other in business.

Sometimes, the corporate world resembles a prison. Your boss might be guilty of abusing power while you are too afraid to stand up for yourself. Steve Jobs was an inspiring visionary, but it did not stop him from abusing his employees. Business is full of lesser evils. On the one hand, they stopped the experiment five days too late.

On the other hand, it gave us an insight into human's mind, and who knows what else could have happened had the experiment continued for another week. Maybe, six days were just enough as they gave us some important, albeit frightening, food for thought. Though, a follow-up study should be done only under close supervision of many scientists with a team of psychologists helping test subjects to deal with the aftermath. Nowadays, Stanford Prison Experiment is regarded as one of the most notorious of its kind. Though, maybe it just shows us how people tend to abuse power, how system changes a man, how certain situation can make us hurt each other and live in constant distrust and fear. And, more important, how many of us face their own Stanford basements every day without even knowing it.