

# Zimbardo prison experiment. the dynamics of attitude and behaviour



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The Dynamics of Attitude and Behaviour Imagine a person vociferously arguing against littering and then casually tossing a wrapper out of a car window. Or someone convinced that smoking is ruinous, seen doing precisely the thing he or she criticizes. These are not uncommon actions, and they demonstrate times when attitudes do not influence behaviour.

And yet, often enough attitudes do impact behaviour.

According to Myers, there is a close relationship between attitude and behaviour when outside influence is minimal; when the attitude is specifically tied in to the behaviour; and when we are consciously aware of our attitudes. Behaviour may also modify attitude, when one consciously owns responsibility for a certain action. (Rothman-Marshall, 6 Jan 99)

However, when a person performs an action contradictory to a strongly held belief or opinion, there is a jarring feeling that distresses, which psychologist Leon Festinger describes as that uncomfortable feeling one gets when one " finds oneself doing something that doesn't fit with what one knows."

This chafing sensation, known as cognitive dissonance, is glaringly visible in the Zimbardo Prison Experiment. For the two-week experiment, a group of students were paid to participate in a simulated situation where half the randomly chosen students were 'prisoners' and the other half, 'guards'. The students took to the roles they were acting, and soon the life-like 'prison' was a scene of realistic baton-wielding tyrannical uniformed guards subjugating and abusing the hapless, helpless prisoners to such an extent that few even suffered from severe trauma, and had to be replaced.

During the experiment, it was noted that decent, (presumably) law-abiding boys behaved in a manner totally contradictory to their normal attitudes. The 'guards' often abusing and manipulating the 'prisoners' who, stripped of their

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identity, debased and dehumanised, acted out the part of the oppressed 'prisoner'.

Here, both the prisoners and the guards dissociated from their personal beliefs and attitudes and assumed a role, purely for the sake of a scientific experiment - or so they convinced themselves. They felt free to behave how they imagined the prisoner/guard would have done, for weren't they just play-acting In other words, they did not need to take responsibility for their actions - a notion that freed them to behave as they did.

The role-playing further reinforced these beliefs because the participants clearly owned responsibility for their behaviour, and thereby modified their attitude. In the words of Leon Festinger, " If you change a person's behavior, his thoughts and feelings will change to minimize the dissonance" (Jean, Spring 1999)

According to research associate Haney, the study demonstrated, that " good people are not enough" to prevent abusive excess. " Individual differences matter very little in the face of an extreme situation. . . . Institutional settings develop a life of their own independent of the wishes and intentions and purposes of those who run them." (O'Toole, 1 Aug 97)

After researching the Zimbardo experiment, and reading through all the relevant material, I would like to believe that I'd react like Christina Maslach, Professor Zimbardo's girlfriend and an associate researcher who violently objected to the dehumanization and objectification of human beings and was instrumental in stopping the experiment.

If I was more closely involved, as a subject, perhaps as a guard, I think I too might be carried away by the power and authority invested in me to 'guard' the 'prisoners'. I like to think I would be firm and fair - a tough proposition if <https://assignbuster.com/zimbardo-prison-experiment-the-dynamics-of-attitude-and-behaviour/>

fellow guards got carried away and acted in the brutal way the experiment described.

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