

# The stanford prison experiment essay sample



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## Research Design

To examine the psychological disposition of becoming a prisoner and a prison guard, Psychology Professor Philip Zimbardo conducted the Stanford Prison experiment, which basically simulates a correctional facility built at the basement of psychology building in Stanford. Three small mock cells with no windows were built, each containing three bed cots for three prisoners. A special smaller cell was also built that can accommodate a single prisoner in solitary confinement, which is used as additional cruel punishment for recalcitrant prisoners. Quarters for the guards were also built, an interview room and a bedroom for the warden.

24 students, who do not know each other, participated in the experiment from among 12 were randomly selected as guards and the remaining 12 as prisoners for 2 weeks. The guards wore the proper uniform and sunglasses to inhibit eye contact and armed with batons to intimidate the prisoners. The prisoners on the other hand, wear a dress and were not permitted to wear underwear. They were assigned numbers for identification to which they are called by and were compelled to wear locked chain around their ankles. Without their knowledge, all participant prisoners were arrested for armed robbery at their homes by the real local police (i. e. the Palo Alto Police department), to start the experiment. Just like in the real world, they were given their Miranda rights. After mug photos and fingerprints were taken, prisoners were stripped, searched, and then placed in their jails. Professor Zimbardo conducts the observation and analysis of the whole experiment as the warden of mock correctional facility

## Hypothesis

The Stanford prison experiment attempts to test that the belligerence and cruelty in prisons can be attributed to the innate personality traits of both the guards and the prisoners. People who are sadistic and unsympathetic have the penchant to become guards and people who are hostile and reckless have the proclivity of becoming criminals. The interaction of these two kinds of people results to the sadism and brutality in the prison system. Instead of this dispositional attribution, Zimbardo adhered in situational attribution in which the belligerence and cruelty in prisons are influenced or shaped by the roles that guards and inmates are to play as expected by society.

Using generally good and law abiding people, the experiment will see the psychological effect of being assigned to a prison guard and prisoner which will provide how the social role and environments will transform these people. More specifically, "What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph?" (Zimbardo, 2006)

## Important variables and how they are operationalized

In research experiments, a variable refers to components in the experiment that can be changed which in turn have a significant effect on the outcomes i. e. gender, racial ethnicity, educational background, psychological disposition. One significant variable in the experiment is the use of "good" people, which was evaluated through a questionnaire. All 24 participants were physically and mentally fit, college students, males, from middle class

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of the economy, predominantly white have not manifested themselves to not have antisocial predilections. This is crucial in the study because at the core of the experiment is to see transformation caused by social roles that are perceived as malevolent.

Another significant variable in the experiment pertains to the particular condition that is promoted in the mock prison particularly, the “dehumanization” of the prisoners which was implemented to a series of degradation and humiliation. At the start, they were blindfolded when taken to their jails. The prisoners were stripped naked, deloused with a spray as if they are dirty objects. They wore a smock with no under wears. They wore a stocking cap. They were identified and called by their prison ID number. They wore a heavy chain in their ankles. As prisoners, they were made to lose their privacy, individuality, freedom and human dignity.

On the part of the guards on the other hand, the mock prison system allowed them to assert their authority excessively in order to promote sadism.

Initially, they use push-ups to impose physical punishment against intractable prisoners. This was later aggravated by stepping on or sitting on prisoners' backs while they do the push-ups. Soon after, the guards start to assert their independence from the experiment and act on their own. They used a fire extinguisher to quell a rebellion. They use psychological tactics like taking away the rights of the prisoners e. g. beds, hygiene and food. The leaders of the rebellion were placed in solitary confinement.

Independent and dependent variables

In experimental research, independent variable refers to that which the research wants to measure or test (the cause). The dependent variable is the result (effect) that depends on the independent variable. In this study, the independent variables pertain to the conditions to which the participants (both the prisoners and guards) are subject to i. e. dehumanization and authority to abuse power. The dependent variable is the behavior that results from these conditions.

The independent variable of dehumanization and degradation to which the prisoners were subjected initially resulted to rebellious characteristics of prisoners. Having numbers as names, and being subjected to uniformed conditions and treatment, prisoners lost their personal identity. Two prisoner participants had been sent home earlier because they suffer from desperation and emotional distress. Moreover, the growing dependence of the prisoners to the guards for ordinary human personal necessities, their loss of a sense of masculinity have engendered a sense of apathy, impassivity among them. Because of a state of indifference and helplessness, some prisoners may have forgotten that they can quit the experiment anytime they want to. On the other hand, the capricious control and authority conferred to the guards have generated genuine sadistic and aggressive tendencies.

### The Process of Subject Selection

A newspaper advertisement asking for male volunteers for the said the experiment was made. Respondents were asked to answer a questionnaire to discern their family background, health, criminal record and psychological

propensity to delinquent behavior. Twenty four college students were selected fit based on the standards set by the experiment as “ good” (i. e. physically and mentally stable and have demonstrated least antisocial tendencies).

The selection of who will be guards and prisoners were random using a coin toss. The guards and prisoners therefore were taken from the same pool of participants, which is incorrect considering that the guards and criminals do not necessarily share the same psychological disposition based on race, economics, educational and family background among others. Participants with criminal tendencies should have been considered for prisoners should have been considered to simulate a real prison. For one, the prisoners in the experiment lack the sense of guilt for their sins (because they really are not criminals) and may feel “ absolute oppression” to the system. On the other hand, the guards have no formal training and were relatively “ free”, to do what is necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners” (Zimbardo, 2006). Hence, the people in the experiment do not accurately reflect or represent prisoners and guards. The use of good people however in both guards and prisoners more accurately applies to the concept of prison as used as a form of oppression or tyranny and not as a tool for attaining justice.

### Threats to Validity

The simulated prison does not entirely capture the essence of a real correctional facility. The participants do not correctly represent real guards and criminals. The authenticity of the repulsive components in prison is

missing. For instance there is no genuine threat to life experienced by the prisoners. The prisoners do not manifest real prisoner feelings, but focused more about the experiment as revealed by the fact that 90% of the prisoners' conversations were about prison conditions not about the life they missed. Participants were role playing like actors in a movie and do not exhibit real feelings or emotions. Participants basically acted based on the direction of Zimbardo, which is unnatural. The internalization of their roles may have been based on the books they have read or movies they have seen. Moreover, the simulated prison may have exaggerated the prison system i. e. blindfold, no underclothes, no windows, no beds, and chains, among others. Finally, the experiment also fails to simulate real prison in terms of population size (only 24 including prisoners and guards) and duration (2 weeks).

### The Role of the Observer

Being a simulation, the Stanford prison experiment requires an outside observer who must be independent of the situation to maintain objectivity and impartiality of observation and analysis. The experiment is deficient of conventional scientific controls as Zimbardo himself was a major element in the experiment. Acting as the warden in the simulation, Zimbardo lose credibility and capacity to be a neutral observer of the experiment. As the director of the simulation, he therefore has a direct influence on what will happen and can have the power to manipulate the results. Ethnography or participant observation does not apply to a simulation. Instead of recreating a prison, he could have instead submerged himself in prison system by being a prisoner or a guard himself in order to better understand and analyze the

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life of prison. This allows the researcher a practical first hand experience of the psychological implications of being a prisoner or guard.

### Conclusions

The Stanford experiment only lasted for 6 days instead of 14 days till it was cancelled. Despite its deficiencies, it was not able to clearly establish situational attributions of behavior or that actions are shaped by the social roles expected of us. Instead, it further supported the power of authority and cognitive dissonance. For the first, the experiment demonstrated the manipulability and blind conformity of people even in committing to do abusive and vicious acts when given legitimate authority and institutional support. (Milgram, 1974) This explains why the Nazi's never felt responsible or remorse for mass murdering the Jews because they were given legitimate authority to do so by Hitler. On the other hand, cognitive dissonance refers to the state of uncomfortable tension felt or experienced by a person when two contradictory thoughts are simultaneously entertained in one's mind resulting to indecisiveness to an issue. (Festinger, 2003) Dissonance transpired among guards to commit the cruel acts against the prisoners because there is a perceived personal inconsistency in ones thoughts which translates to anxiety, guilt and emotional states.

### Cause and effect

The sadistic behavior (effect) of the guards was ultimately caused by the sense of legitimacy and authority of their acts provided by the warden and experimenter (Milgram experiment). Initially, it caused cognitive dissonance among guards to continue. To liberate themselves from the tension, the <https://assignbuster.com/the-stanford-prison-experiment-essay-sample/>



guards pass on the responsibility of their actions to the person who gave them such authority namely Zimbardo. They do not actually take accountability for their abusive actions but believes that Zimbardo is accountable to them.

On the other hand, the depression and despair on the part of the prisoners is caused by the dehumanization of prisoners. The maltreatment, repression of their rights, and their reduction to objects creates disorientation in their sense of being humans which either could lead to rebellious acts or apathy and indifference.

### Policy Implications

The greatest achievement of the experiment is the ethical implications involved in conducting researches. In particular, it is important that the participants be informed fully about the experiment before they give their consent. In the case of the Stanford experiment, the participants (especially the prisoners) were not fully informed or oriented about the harsh conditions to which they will be subjected to. The Stanford experiment was cancelled because some of the participants manifested real signs of emotional stress and psychological injury. As such, the experiment raised the issue of just how far should science go in search for the knowledge. In this case, this experiment may have gone way far for seeking scientific truths at the expense of causing harm to the participants.

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