

Stanford prison experiment



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Role Playing and its Toll In “ The Stanford Prison Experiment,” psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo describes his study of how placing average, male, college students in a prison like environment proved that their roles dehumanized them as individuals by radically changing their perceptions and behaviors. Before the experiment, the subjects were “ emotionally stable, physically healthy, mature, law-abiding citizens” (734). With the flip of a coin ten men were chosen to be prisoners and eleven men guards.

The participants were placed in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford University. In order to create a prison like atmosphere, the rooms were transformed into cells, subjects were issued uniforms, and “ guards” were issued the appropriate guard-life accessories. The simulation was set up to minimize each prisoner’s individuality, including taking a radical step of requiring that they be addressed by numbers in place of their names. Zimbardo reports how quickly the participants adjusted to their roles, taking on a persona of a prisoner or guard.

Instantly, the participants started to take part in their roles, acting as if they were criminals or had the power of actual guards. The guards would become bored and would “ find ways to amuse themselves, ridiculing recalcitrant prisoners, enforcing arbitrary rules, and openly exaggerating any dissension among the prisoners” (735). Over time the guards began to torment the prisoners becoming more aggressive and developed a disturbing relationship among them. Furthermore, the participants who were subjected to being “ prisoners” struggled with deprivation inherent to their roles.

Because the first day went smoothly, the observers and guards were astounded at the rebellion the prisoners showed the next morning. The prisoners removed their numbers and hats and put their beds in front of the bar doors. The guards then decided they might as well play along, taunting the prisoners, barging into their cells, and encouraging extensive cursing and even placing some in solitary confinement. After extraneous torture the prisoners began to come to realization of their fate, and acted in ways that justified their dehumanization of the study.

After only 36 hours, the “ guards” were forced to release one of the “ prisoners” due to the subject manifesting “ extreme depression, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and fits of rage” (738). This was only the beginning of the psychological fallout. Finally, the study had to be shut down after only six days, due to the impact on the subjects. Zimbardo not only claims his hypothesis, that once someone gets labeled with a role of some sort, it transforms their reality and drastically changes what defines them and their actions; but it also applies to life itself.

There is a parallel between what occurred in the mock prison and events that occur in our daily lives. The mock trial not only dealt with imprisonment of the participants but it also contributes to racism, sexism despair and shyness that society faces. Being stuck in a prison simulates being imprisoned in life, because once stuck in that role it’s hard to switch back.

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