

Probation, Parole & Penitentiary Law Class 6

The Stanford Prison Experiment



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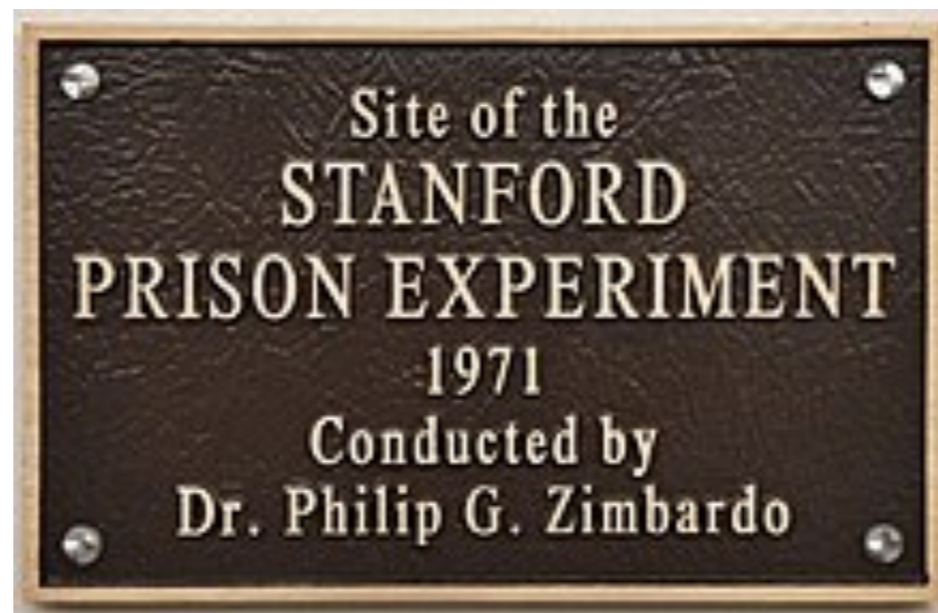
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The Stanford Prison Experiment

- ▶ **The Stanford prison experiment (SPE)** was a controversial psychological experiment that was conducted in the summer of 1971.
- ▶ It was a two-week simulation of a prison environment that examined the effects of situation (playing specific roles) on participants' reactions and behaviors.
- ▶ [Stanford University](#) psychology professor [Philip Zimbardo](#) led the research team who administered the study



Sign at the location of the Stanford prison experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment

- ▶ **In 1973 Zimbardo and his colleagues** were interested in finding out whether the brutality reported among guards in American prisons was due to the sadistic personalities of the guards (i.e., dispositional) or had more to do with the prison environment (i.e., situational/ because of power they was given).



Inspiration from the Milgram experiment

- ▶ Zimbardo was a former classmate of the psychologist [Stanley Milgram](#).
- ▶ Milgram is best known for his famous [obedience experiment](#) (electric shock experiment)
- ▶ Milgram (1963) was interested in researching how far people would go in obeying an instruction if it involved harming another person. Stanley Milgram was interested in how easily ordinary people could be influenced into committing atrocities, for example, Germans in WWII.

Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?” (Milgram, 1974).



Milgram obedience experiment

He conducted an experiment focusing on the conflict between obedience to authority and personal conscience.

- ▶ Milgram selected participants for his experiment by newspaper advertising for male participants to take part in a study of learning at Yale University.
- ▶ The procedure was that the participant was paired with another person and they drew lots to find out who would be the 'learner' and who would be the 'teacher.' It was prepared in that way so the participant was always „the teacher” and „the learner” was one of Milgram’s hired actors (pretending to be a real participant).

At the beginning of the experiment, „teachers” were introduced to another participant „learners” - actor workers of the experimenter (Milgram).



Milgram obedience experiment

- ▶ This experiment involved instructing study participants to deliver increasingly high-voltage shocks to an actor in another room, who would scream and eventually go silent as the shocks became stronger.

The teachers were told to administer an electric shock every time the learner makes a mistake, increasing the level of shock each time. There were 30 switches on the shock generator marked from 15 volts (slight shock) to 450 (danger – severe shock).

- ▶ The shocks weren't real, but study participants were made to believe that they were.
- ▶ 65% (two-thirds) of participants (teachers) continued to the highest level of 450 volts.
- ▶ All the participants continued to 300 volts.



What Was the Experiment About?

- ▶ Zimbardo was interested in expanding upon Milgram's research. He wanted to further investigate the impact of situational variables on human behavior.
- ▶ The researchers wanted to know how the participants would react when placed in a simulated prison environment.
- ▶ The researchers wondered if physically and psychologically healthy people who knew they were participating in an experiment would change their behavior in a prison-like setting.²



Procedure

- ▶ To study the roles people play in prison situations, Zimbardo converted a basement of the Stanford University psychology building into a mock prison.
- ▶ He advertised asking for volunteers to participate in a study of the psychological effects of prison life.
- ▶ Participants were recruited from the local community with an ad in the newspapers that was placed by the research team offering male participants \$15 per day to whoever wanted to participate in a "psychological study of prison life."
- ▶ Volunteers were chosen after assessments of psychological stability, and then randomly were assigned the roles of being prisoners or prison guards. The 75 applicants who answered the ad were given diagnostic interviews and personality tests to eliminate candidates with psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse.



Participants

They chose 24 men judged to be the most physically & mentally stable, the most mature, & the least involved in antisocial behaviors were chosen to participate. The participants did not know each other prior to the study and were paid \$15 per day to take part in the experiment.



- ▶ Participants were randomly assigned to either the role of prisoner or guard in a simulated prison environment.
- ▶ Those volunteers selected to be "guards" were given uniforms
- ▶ The "guards" were instructed to prevent prisoners from escaping but they were not given any rules or any training on how they were supposed to act or treat the "prisoners".

Arriving to prison

The experiment officially started when "prisoners" were arrested by real Palo Alto police
(to make the experiment feel more realistic)

- ▶ Prisoners were treated like every other criminal, being arrested at their own homes, without warning, and taken to the local police station. They were fingerprinted and photographed
- ▶ Then they were blindfolded and driven to the psychology department of Stanford University, where Zimbardo had had the basement set out as a prison, with barred doors and windows, bare walls and small cells.



Arriving to prison

When the prisoners arrived at the prison they were stripped naked, had all their personal possessions removed and locked away, and were given prison clothes and bedding.

- ▶ They were given a uniform, and they were named by their number only.
- ▶ The use of ID numbers was a way to make prisoners feel anonymous.
- ▶ Each prisoner had to be called only by his ID number and could only refer to himself and the other prisoners by number.



Prisoners lineup

Guards

- ▶ All guards were dressed in identical uniforms of khaki, and they carried a whistle around their neck and a billy club borrowed from the police.
- ▶ Guards also wore special sunglasses, to make eye contact with prisoners impossible.
- ▶ Three guards worked shifts of eight hours each (the other guards remained on call). Guards were instructed to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners.
- ▶ No physical violence was permitted.

Zimbardo observed the behavior of the prisoners and guards (as a researcher), and also acted as a prison guard



Guards walking in SPE yard

Findings

Within a very short time both guards and prisoners were settling into their new roles, with the guards adopting theirs quickly and easily.

- ▶ Within hours of beginning the experiment some guards began to bully prisoners. At 2:30 A.M. prisoners were awakened from sleep by blasting whistles for the first of many „counts”.



Asserting Authority

- ▶ The prisoners soon adopted prisoner-like behavior too. They talked about prison issues a great deal of the time. They ‘told tales’ on each other to the guards.
- ▶ They started taking the prison rules very seriously. Some even began siding with the guards against prisoners who did not obey the rules.



Physical Punishment

- ▶ The prisoners were mocked and they were given pointless and boring tasks to accomplish. They were generally dehumanized.
- ▶ Push-ups were a common form of physical punishment imposed by the guards. One of the guards stepped on the prisoners' backs while they did push-ups, or made other prisoners sit on the backs of fellow prisoners doing their push-ups.



Rebellion

- ▶ Because the first day passed without incident, the guards were surprised and totally unprepared for the rebellion which broke out on the morning of the second day.
- ▶ Prisoners who were waken up by the guards refused to leave their cells,
- ▶ They wanted to eat in the yard, so they ripped off their inmate number tags, took off their stocking caps and insulted the guards.
- ▶ In response, guards sprayed fire extinguishers at the prisoners to reassert control. The three back-up guards were called in to help regain control of the prison. Next, the guards broke into each cell and removed all of the prisoners' clothes, removed mattresses and sentenced the main instigators of rebellion to time in the „bad cell”



- ▶ So, the leaders of the prisoner rebellion were placed into solitary confinement. After this, the guards generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.
- ▶ In order to restrict further acts of disobedience, the guards separated and rewarded prisoners who had minor roles in the rebellion.

Special Privileges

- ▶ One of the three cells was designated as a "privilege cell." The three prisoners least involved in the rebellion were given special privileges. The guards gave them back their uniforms and beds and allowed them to wash their hair and brush their teeth. They received clothing, beds, and food denied to the rest of the jail population. After an estimated 12 hours, the three returned to their old cells that lacked beds.
- ▶ Privileged prisoners also got to eat special food in the presence of the other prisoners who had temporarily lost the privilege of eating. The effect was to break the solidarity among prisoners.



Consequences of the Rebellion

- ▶ Over the next few days, the relationships between the guards and the prisoners changed - guards were in control and the prisoners were totally dependent on them.
- ▶ As the prisoners became more submissive, the guards became more aggressive and assertive. They demanded ever greater obedience from the prisoners. The prisoners were dependent on the guards for everything so tried to find ways to please the guards, such as telling tales on fellow prisoners.



Consequences of the Rebellion

- ▶ Less than 36 hours into the experiment, Prisoner #8612 began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage.
- ▶ He “began to act ‘crazy,’ to scream, to curse, to go into a rage that seemed out of control.” It wasn’t until this point that the psychologists realized they had to let him out.



Prisoner breaks down

- ▶ He yelled, "*Jesus Christ, I'm burning up inside*" and "*I can't stand another night! I just can't take it anymore!*"
- ▶ However, in a 2017 interview, that prisoner stated that his breakdown had been fake, and that he did it only so that he could leave and return to studying for his Graduate Record Exam.

An End to the Experiment in the prison population

- ▶ Zimbardo planned that the experiment should run for two weeks, but it ended on the sixth day - due to the emotional breakdowns of prisoners, and excessive aggression of the guards.

Zimbardo in 2008 noted, "It wasn't until much later that I realized how far into my prison role I was at that point -- that I was thinking like a prison superintendent rather than a research psychologist."

Conclusion

- ▶ According to Zimbardo and his colleagues, the Stanford Prison Experiment revealed how people will easily conform to the social roles they are expected to play, especially if the roles are as strongly stereotyped as those of the prison guards.
- ▶ Because the guards were placed in a position of authority, they began to act in ways they would not usually behave in their normal lives.

The guards may have been so sadistic because they did not feel what happened was down to them personally – it was a group norm. They also may have lost their sense of personal identity because of the uniform they wore.

Also, learned helplessness could explain the prisoner's submission to the guards. The prisoners learned that whatever they did had little effect on what happened to them. In the mock prison the unpredictable decisions of the guards led the prisoners to give up responding.

Conclusion

- ▶ The “prison” environment was an important factor in creating the guards’ brutal behavior (none of the participants who acted as guards showed sadistic tendencies before the study).
- ▶ Therefore, the findings support the situational explanation of behavior rather than the dispositional one.
- ▶ Conclusions and observations drawn by the experimenters were largely subjective, and the experiment is practically impossible for other researchers to accurately reproduce

Deindividuation may explain the behavior of the participants; especially the guards.

This is a state when you become so immersed in the norms of the group that you lose your sense of identity and personal responsibility.

Legacy

- ▶ Participants' behavior may have been shaped by knowing that they were watched. Instead of being restrained by fear of an observer, guards may have behaved more aggressively when supervisors observing them did not step in to restrain them.
- ▶ In both the Milgram and the Zimbardo studies, it clearly shows that participants conform to social pressures. It is only strengthened by allowing some participants to feel more or less powerful than others.
- ▶ In both experiments, the people's behavior are altered to match the group stereotypes and shows that people can conform to others passively.
- ▶ It is clear that people desire to be a good subject of research it much more important than to be a subject that does good things.



Legacy

- ▶ The positive result of the study is that it has altered the way US prisons are run.
- ▶ For example, juveniles accused of federal crimes are no longer housed before trial with adult prisoners, due to the risk of violence against them.