

The Stanford Prison Experiment: A Psychological Study on Authority and Human Behavior

Introduction

The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted in the summer of 1971 under the leadership of psychologist Philip Zimbardo, is one of the most controversial studies in psychology. It sought to investigate the psychological effects of perceived power, focusing on the conflict between prisoners and prison guards. The study involved college students who, despite having no criminal background, were randomly assigned roles as prisoners or guards in a simulated prison environment at Stanford University.

Background on Philip Zimbardo

- Born March 23, 1933, in New York City.
- Experienced early discrimination, fueling his interest in human behavior and psychology.
- Education:
 - B.A. in psychology, sociology, and anthropology from Brooklyn College.
 - M.A. and Ph.D. in psychology from Yale University by 1959.
- Academic career included appointments at Yale, New York University, Columbia University, and ultimately Stanford University where he became a tenured professor in 1971.
- His personal life included marriage and divorce to Rose Abdelnour, an accomplished English literature academic.

Purpose and Hypothesis of the Experiment

Zimbardo aimed to understand whether the intense hatred and conflict in prison environments were due to the inherent nature of prisoners and guards or created by the prison situation itself. He hypothesized that roles imposed by environment rather than personality traits drove behavior, inspired by concerns like recidivism and the dysfunction of U.S. and UK prison systems.

Experiment Design and Methodology

Recruitment and Participants

- A newspaper ad in the "help wanted" section called for male college students to partake in a \$15/day psychological study of prison life.
- 75 responded; 24 were selected after screening for mental health, criminal history, and medical conditions.
- Participants were predominantly white, middle-class, and psychologically healthy.

Role Assignment

- 24 participants randomly assigned to:
 - 9 Prisoners
 - 9 Guards
 - 3 Substitutes
- Prisoners were informed they would lose civil liberties for 1-2 weeks but no physical abuse would occur.
- Guards received uniforms, mirrored sunglasses, and wooden batons, with vague instructions to maintain order without specific guidelines.

Setting

- The mock prison was constructed in the basement of Jordan Hall at Stanford.
- Features included:
 - Cells (9x6 feet) holding three prisoners each, with minimal daylight and no clocks.
 - Solitary confinement ("The Hole") measuring 2x2x7 feet.
 - Observation screens and intercom systems.
 - Blindfolds used during prisoner transport to induce disorientation.
- Guards had separate facilities for rest and changing.

Procedures

- Prisoners were arrested at their homes by real Palo Alto police, fingerprinted, and taken to a mock police station before transfer.
- Upon arrival, prisoners were stripped, deloused (sprayed with deodorant), given uniforms, assigned ID numbers, and confined.
- Strict prison rules were imposed including memorization of ID numbers, silence directives, and daily roll calls with multiple testing.
- Prisoners' privileges included compensation, scheduled work, exercise, movies, and limited visitation.
- Data was collected through continuous filming, audio, rating scales, and personality assessments.

Key Events During the Experiment

Day 1: Rebellion and Control

- Prisoners rebelled during a 2:30 a.m. count by barricading cells and refusing orders.
- Guards responded by using fire extinguishers, removing bedding and clothing, and solitary confinement for instigators.
- Reserve guards were called to assist with control.

Early Psychological Impact

- One prisoner exhibited a mental breakdown within 36 hours and was released.
- Privileged prisoner cells were created to foster mistrust and weaken prisoner solidarity.

- Hygiene and toilet usage restrictions heightened discomfort.

Rule Enforcement and Visitation

- Visiting hours introduced on Day 3 to reduce complaints.
- Prisoners' complaints were diverted to the experiment superintendent rather than guards.
- Guards intensified control after a rumored mass breakout attempt by a released prisoner, leading to prisoners being blindfolded and relocated within the prison.
- Guards resumed and increased punitive and degrading behaviors, including prolonged counts and physical exertion demands.

Prisoners' Psychological Decline

- A Catholic priest and former corrections chaplain interviewed prisoners, revealing acceptance of the grim situation and loss of hope for release without legal assistance.
- Prisoner 819 suffered a mental and emotional breakdown, refusing to leave the experiment initially.
- Guards increasingly used cruel punishments like bags over prisoners' heads.
- Hunger strikes, solitary confinement, and peer pressure were used against dissenting prisoners, exemplified by Prisoner 416's experience.

Guard Behavior Categorization

- Zimbardo observed:
 - Sympathetic "good" guards.
 - Tough but fair guards.
 - Sadistic guards who inflicted arbitrary punishment.
- The social dynamics of prisoners and guards mirrored real prison hierarchies, encouraging cruelty and submission.

Ethical Controversies and Termination

Ethical Concerns

- The experiment exposed subjects to psychological harm, including anxiety, depression, and emotional breakdown.
- Zimbardo himself became entrenched in the role of prison superintendent, blurring researcher neutrality.
- Guards were explicitly encouraged by a research assistant (warden David Jaffe) to exert dominance.
- The study's chaotic and unregulated nature raised questions about consent and oversight.

External Intervention and Study End

- Christina Maslach, a doctoral student and future wife of Zimbardo, visited and condemned the experiment's ethical breaches and conditions.
- Her criticism prompted Zimbardo to end the experiment early on Day 6 (five days after commencement).

- Debriefings allowed all participants to express emotions and post-experiment reflections.
- Despite the cut-short duration, participants received full payment.

Findings and Conclusions

Behavioral Insights

- Situational factors and role adoption strongly influenced behavior more than individual personalities.
- Participants conformed quickly to assigned roles, exhibiting behaviors consistent with authority and submission.
- The environment fostered deindividuation and dehumanization.

Comparisons

- Similarities drawn to Stanley Milgram's obedience studies, emphasizing authority influence over moral judgment.

Replications and Criticism

- Attempts to replicate results failed to produce similar extremes.
- Selection bias due to volunteer recruitment was noted.
- Demand characteristics (subconscious acting out of expected role behaviors prompted by researcher cues) implicated in results.

Legacy and Aftermath

Zimbardo's Later Work

- Published influential psychology textbooks and books like:
 - *The Lucifer Effect*
 - *The Time Paradox*
 - *The Time Cure*
- Maintains that no participant experienced long-term harm.

Ethical Rating

- Experiment rated 6 on a scale of 1 (ethically sound) to 9 (pure evil) due to environmental discomfort and methodology issues.

Popular Culture and Media

- BBC recreated a milder version in 2002 for *The Experiment*, which ended early for opposite reasons: both guards and prisoners wanted a harsher regime.

Conclusion

The Stanford Prison Experiment remains a landmark study illustrating the powerful impact of

situational factors over individual disposition in shaping human behavior in hierarchical and authoritative contexts. Despite significant ethical shortcomings and controversy, it continues to influence psychological research, prison reform discussions, and understanding of social roles and authority dynamics.

References

- Stanford University special collections narration transcript.
- Stanford Prison Experiment original journal paper, *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* (1973).
- Additional interviews and retrospectives from Stanford University.

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