Short essay on the ethical issues in Stanford Prison Experiment (Movie)

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The Stanford Prison Experiment was run by Doctor Philip Zimbardo in the 1970s in the United States. During this time period civil activists and movements have been shining the spotlight upon taboo issues which were still present in America and other parts of the world, such as state-run education and prison systems. The movie is based on a real-life experiment aimed at studying the psychological factors of authority and the abuse of power. The experiment covers many ethical issues such as: homelessness and poverty, inequality, the crooked prison system, sexism (emasculation and feminization), police and guard brutality, and the subtle symbolism of corporate experiments and tactics run on real people every day.

At the very first minutes of the movie we see the first ethical issue tackled by it, which was wages and the unbearable financial conditions of some students. The experiment was voluntary and many students applied due to different reasons, some were simply interested and may have been financially well off, while others were financially dependent on student loans or were practically homeless. The interviewers asked future participants which roles they would like to take to which most replied – prisoners, since to some being a prisoner seemed like less work or the fact that “Nobody likes guards”. Despite the fact that the interviewers asked for their preferred positions they have assigned the roles at random. This fact might be interpreted as a metaphor as to how some employers will seek to exploit the employee’s notion of self-worth by systematically lying and giving dishonest feedback. This issue is later on fortified by the fact that the interviewers lied once again, claiming that the guards were picked according to their “qualities”, pandering to them and gaining their trust.

The biggest symbolic parallel in the movie is the American prison system which is condemned worldwide for its unfairness and cruelty, and the lack of basic rights of prisoners. While the prisoners were physically and symbolically stripped of their individuality by the Guards and had their names replaced as numbers, the Guards themselves got to enjoy full privileges and authority granted to them. The rules were simple: Do not disobey the guards, follow basic rules or else you will get thrown into “The hole”. The hole in this case is much like solitary confinement, it drove many prisoners such as 8612 crazy. At other times when guard abused their power they were called “fascist” by the prisoners, which also signifies the magnitude of their abuse of power.

In conclusion, the Stanford Prison Experiment was conducted to try and understand how institutions affect behavior. It was about struggle and how human nature adapts in different environments to different roles which it can be assigned to. The movie depicted a clear image of what it was like and how harsh the warp of identity and reality can be for prisoners in America, even to this day.

P.S

Amazing movie, thanks for introducing it to me ☺