

Zimbardo *et al.* (1973)

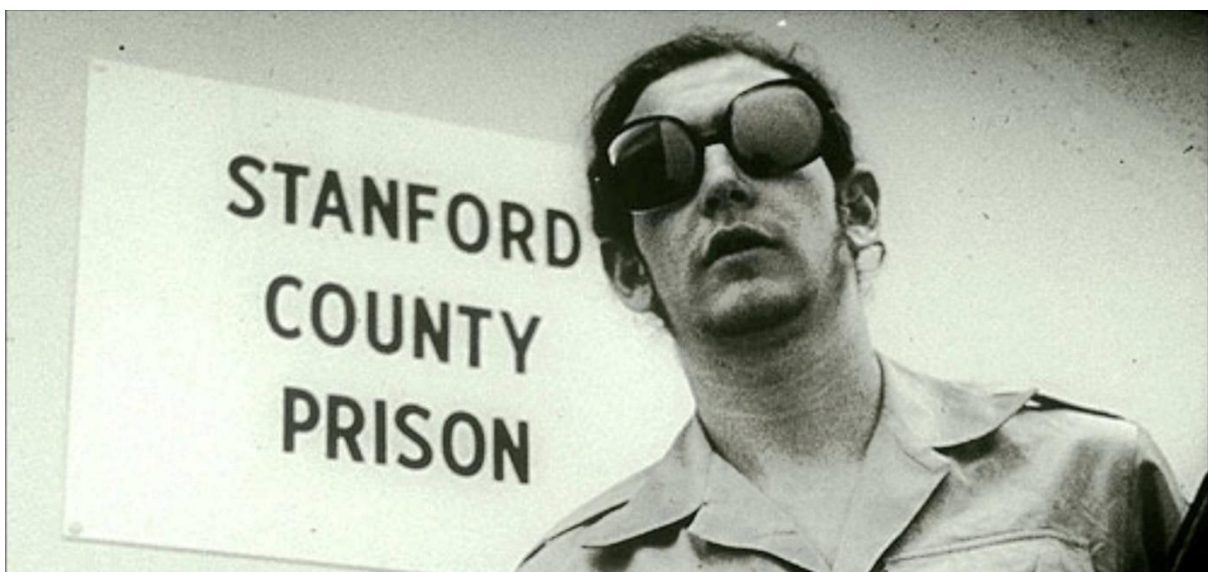
Stanford Prison Experiment

This study is used to answer questions on:

Social Identity Theory
Prejudice/Discrimination
Group Dynamics
Cooperation
Competition
Research Methods: Ethics

Abstract

This study examined the effect of social roles on behaviour. 22 male American students were recruited and divided into two groups: guards and prisoners. Guards were placed in charge of a mock prison and told to manage the prisoners whilst maintaining their rights. The guards quickly adopted a role of aggression and verbal attacks on the prisoners who fell into a submissive and powerless mentality. As the experiment progressed over days, the guards adopted stronger tactics to control the prisoners who became more and more subdued. 5 prisoners were released from the experiment due to extreme depression behaviour such as crying, yelling, screaming and begging to be released. The researcher also became too involved in the study and sought to continue it beyond what was ethically acceptable. After 6 days (of a scheduled 2 weeks), the study was shut down. In interviewing the participants after the study, both prisoners and guards expressed their shock and surprise at so quickly adopting the social roles and acting in a way that was contrary to their normal behaviour. The researchers concluded that individuals can lose their sense of identity in situations and follow expected social roles even if their actions go against their personal beliefs.



Aim

- To investigate the effect of identifying with a role can have on behaviour
- To investigate social identity theory
- To test the effect of environment on behaviour

Method

Participants

22 participants (all male) were recruited via advertising in a local newspaper (volunteer sampling). 75 participants applied and each filled in a questionnaire and took an interview with one of the researchers. The participants selected for the study were deemed to be physically and psychologically robust. On the day before the experiment began, all participants were given a series of psychological tests. They were then divided equally into prisoners and guards. None of the participants had met before and each was paid \$15 per day.

Procedure

A mock prison was constructed in the basement of Stanford University. The prison consisted of three cells and a solitary cell (a cupboard with no lighting) for the prisoners. The guards had a guard's quarters for rest and relaxation and an interview room was created to talk to prisoners. There was a superintendent's office and an observation room which was used to house hidden cameras to film the experiment.

Before beginning the experiment, the participants were told their role and given instructions on how to act in the role. Prisoners were informed that they would have some of their basic civil rights removed (freedom, minimum quality food, lack of stimulation). They were given no other instructions.

Guards were introduced to the superintendent (Zimbardo) the day before the prisoners arrived. They were told to maintain order within the prison and keep it functioning but given no specific details on how to do so. They were told to prepare for all eventualities such as prison escapes and protests. They were also told that physical punishment or aggression was not allowed. They then assisted in completing the building of the prison to help them become even more involved in their roles.

Both guards and prisoners were given uniforms to wear. The guards were given a military style of dress – night stick, khaki coloured and sunglasses to hide their eyes. The prisoners were given a smock with a number on it, a toothbrush, soap, toothpaste and bed linen. They were allowed no personal objects.

On the first day of the experiment, the local police department went to the house of the prisoner and arrested them. They were booked through the normal police procedures of fingerprinting, interview and being placed in a detention cell. They were then driven by a participant guard and a researcher to the mock prison. They were blindfolded during the trip.

Once they reached the prison, they were placed into a cell and told their rights as prisoners and that they would be referred to only as numbers, not by their names.

Results

Three times a day, the guards were supposed to count the prisoners. This should only take a short time, but the guards changed the routine quickly in order to make it longer and more difficult for the prisoners. The guards started using antagonistic and derogatory language towards the prisoners who accepted the treatment even though they had not been instructed to do so.

The prisoners began by being rebellious and trying to fight against the guards. However, their perceived lack of power caused them to slowly give in to the guard's orders and to accept their perceived powerlessness. As the guards began to abuse their power and prisoners accepted their status, the division between the groups grew. Prisoners spent most of their time discussing the prison and its rules and how they needed to obey. They tried to gain favour with the guards by telling stories about the other prisoners. The guards in turn increased their power by making the prisoners sing, chant and do menial tasks. One person was put in solitary confinement for an extended period. It was found after the study (by interviewing the participants), that the guards had attempted to be even more punishing to the prisoners than the researchers had permitted. They tried to hide their brutal behaviour when they thought the cameras could not see them.

Five prisoners had to be released from the study due to depression, crying, rage and extreme anxiety. Both guards and prisoners quickly feel into the role they were assigned to and felt that they needed to work within that role.

During a parole hearing, the prisoners were asked if they wished to leave to which they all replied that they did. When asked if they would forfeit their pay to leave the study, three out of the five prisoners in the room stated that they would. If the prisoners felt in this way, they were free to leave at any time without being paid but had become so used to their roles that they did not take that option to simply walk away.

The guards also conformed to their created stereotypes. Any guard who was not strict and aggressive towards the prisoners was considered weak by other guards and encouraged to join in.

Zimbardo (the superintendent and main researcher) also became too involved in his role. He attempted to persuade some prisoners to remain in the study when they requested to leave and did not wish to stop the experiment when it was clear that there were severe ethical issues.

The experiment had been scheduled for 2 weeks but was called to a halt after just 6 days due to the increased danger of violence and harm to the prisoners. Most guards felt little remorse about their actions as thought that they were just playing a role and not responsible for their actions. The prisoners were also shocked when interviewed after the experiment at how they had become accepting of the situation instead of refusing to obey.

Conclusion

The researchers concluded that deindividuation had occurred – that both guards and prisoners conformed to the expectations of the role assigned to them and lost their own personal identity. People tend to conform to their social roles, even if those roles are contrary to their personal beliefs.



Evaluation



Generalisability

- The sample was American college males so the sample cannot be applied to females or non-Americans.
- There were only 22 participants (and only 21 went to the prison) which is a very small sample.

Reliability

- Zimbardo himself took the role of the superintendent. This meant that he was actively participating in the study and introduced researcher bias. He later admitted that he became lost in the role and sought to maintain the experiment rather than considering the ethical issues it was raising.

Application to life

- Knowledge that people can be strongly influenced by the environment around them has had far reaching implications from explaining war crimes to gang violence. Understanding that people can fall into roles and act according to them demonstrates the power of social situations as influences on behaviour.
- The short length of the study demonstrated the willingness of people to adopt expected social roles. The effects of this pressure over years should be considered.

Validity

- The participants were paid for their time which suggests they may have wanted to keep the experiment running as long as possible to keep being paid
- One guard was quoted as saying that he decided that he would be as mean as possible because he thought the experimenters wanted to see what would happen. He modelled his 'character' on a brutal prison guard from a popular film of the time (Cool Hand Luke)

Ethics

- The right to withdraw was not properly given as participants felt they could not leave
- The prisoners were caused both mental and physical harm
- The participants gave informed consent, but could not know the extent to which the experiment would go
- Zimbardo gave a lengthy debrief and interview to all the participants