

Stanford Prison Experiment | Was it **REALLY** controversial?



In 1973 Phillip Zimbardo and his colleagues sought out to find if the brutality of prison guards toward prisoners in the American Penal System were due to the guards themselves or the environment they were in. In order to do, Zimbardo set up prison simulation in the basement of the Psychology department at Stanford University. 24 mentally and physically able men were chosen to take part in the experiment. After randomly assigning roles to participants and one participant dropping out, there were 10 prisoners and 11 guards.

As the experiment began, prisoners would come in and were stripped naked, searched and assigned numbers which was their identity for the duration of the experiment. The guards were told to enforce the law whenever they saw necessary but no physical violence was to occur. After a few days the guards adapted quickly to their roles and exerted their power freely, commanding prisoners to do meaningless and humiliating tasks that brought down the moral of prisoners and dehumanised them.

In turn this led to a riot from the prisoners. The guards then proceeded to strip prisoners naked and remove their beds. 3 prisoners were placed in a 'privileged cell' where they were given their clothes and beds back. After a few days, prisoner 8612 started to experience cognitive and physical breakdown. 2 other prisoners experienced similar breakdowns. When a priest came to visit the prisoners half the prisoners introduced themselves by their number instead of their name. After 6 days the experiment was terminated when Zimbardo realised the overly aggressive nature of guards and the retaliation and dehumanization the prisoners were facing. Only one colleague questioned Zimbardo's experiment and the ethics behind it. ¹In an interview Zimbardo said "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."



It is clear that what Zimbardo did was unethical and wrong. Not only did he psychologically and emotionally scar prisoners and guards, but he went against the

field of Psychology. But did he really go against the research and development of the human psyche in context with penal systems? I don't think so, allow me break it down.

First, it is important to acknowledge that in recent time many Psychologists have called for Zimbardo's work to be removed from the history of psychology. ² This is due to new information coming out from

¹ (Konnikova, 2015)

² (Resnick, 2018)

participants who were told they were told to act a certain way, and in the unethical way the experiment was carried out in. However, Zimbardo and his colleagues set up an environment that encouraged the behaviour of prisoner and guard. Shortly after the experiment was over, Zimbardo testified in front of congress over his experiment. Zimbardo told them during the process that ³“the mere act of assigning labels to people, calling some people prisoners and others guards, is sufficient to elicit pathological behavior”, he went on to say that “majority of participants found themselves no longer able to clearly



differentiate between role-playing and self”. Because of the manipulated environment there will come a point where there the role you play becomes autonomous over a six day period, regardless of what guards and prisoners may have said afterward. ⁴

Zimbardo gave participants and the world a glimpse into the reality of prisons around the world. He risked his license and credibility to prove his research. To the public eye, his actions appear impulsive,

³ (Resnick, 2018)

⁴ (*Herhold: The Stanford Prison Experiment Evokes Memories*, 2015)

intrusive and unethical on multiple accounts. While this may hold some truth. There was significance that came out of it. The experiment has internal reliability due to having control over multiple variables in his experiment including the place where it took place. Therefore this increases the reliability of his research. In short Zimbaros research show that when we are conformed to roles in an environment where multiple variables can be controlled, human beings are likely to conform to their role or rebel against conformity. This is commonly seen in institutions of learning, work places, and penal systems. What will you do? Conform or rebel?

Sources:

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