

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

PHILIP ZIMBARDO (1973)

AIM

Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues (Haney et al. 1973) set up a mock prison in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford University to test whether the brutality of prison guards was the result of sadistic personalities or whether it was created by the situation.



PROCEDURE

They recruited 24 'emotionally stable' students determined by psychological testing – randomly assigned roles of guards or prisoners.

To increase realism, 'prisoners' were arrested in their homes and delivered to the 'prison' – blindfolded, strip-searched, deloused and issued a uniform and number.

The prisoners' daily routines were heavily regulated. There were 16 rules to follow, enforced by guards working in shifts, three at a time.

Deindividuation (losing a sense of personal identity):

- Prisoners' names were never used, only their numbers.
- Guards had their own uniform – wooden club, handcuffs, keys and mirror shades. They were told they had complete power over the prisoners, for instance deciding when they could go to the toilet.

FINDINGS

Within two days, the prisoners rebelled against their treatment. They ripped their uniforms and shouted and swore at the guards, who retaliated with fire extinguishers.

Guards harassed the prisoners constantly by conducting frequent headcounts, sometimes in the middle of the night. Guards highlighted the differences in social roles by creating opportunities to enforce the rules and punish slight misdemeanours.

The guards took up their roles with enthusiasm. Their behaviour threatened the prisoners' psychological and physical health.

For example:

1. After the rebellion was put down, the prisoners became subdued, anxious and depressed.
2. Three prisoners were released early because they showed signs of psychological disturbance.
3. One prisoner went on hunger strike; the guards attempted to forcefeed him and punished him by putting him in 'the hole', a tiny dark closet.

The study was stopped after six days instead of the planned 14 days.

CONCLUSIONS

The simulation revealed the power of the situation to influence people's behaviour. Guards, prisoners and researchers all conformed to their social roles within the prison.

The more the guards identified with their roles, the more brutal and aggressive their behaviour became.

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