

Introducing Psychological Research

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This document reproduces one of the summaries of key papers that are included in *Introducing Psychological Research*:

Haney, C., Banks, W.C. & Zimbardo, P.G. (1973). A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review*, 30, 4-17.

The Prison Simulation

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Introduction

Some psychological studies produce very surprising results for the researchers and the participants. Sometimes the results are so striking that they challenge our explanations of human behaviour and human motivation. One such study is the Milgram study described in chapter 1. Another one is the work of Zimbardo and his associates.

The central question in the study concerns how much of our behaviour is structured by the social roles that we occupy. One of the famous 'soundbites' from Shakespeare is, "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players" (As You Like It). The 'life is drama' metaphor is developed in role theory and the work of, among other, Erving Goffman. This approach to human behaviour and experience suggests that we are what we play, and a limited sense of selfhood and identity is shaped by the demands of the situation we are in.

The study

Twenty-four subjects were selected from an initial pool of 75 respondents to a newspaper advertisement which had asked for male volunteers to participate in a psychological study of prison life. The volunteers completed a questionnaire and interview to screen subjects, and the selected people were described as 'normal' healthy male college students who were predominantly middle class and White.

The simulated prison was created in the basement of the Psychology Department at Stanford

University. It was made up of three cells (each 6ft x 9ft) with three prisoners to a cell. A broom cupboard (2ft x 2ft x 7ft) was converted into a 'solitary confinement room'. Several rooms in an adjacent wing of the building were used as guards' rooms, interview rooms and a bedroom for the 'warden' (Zimbardo). There was also a small enclosed room used as a 'prison yard' in which there was an observation window behind which was video equipment, and room for several observers.

The subjects were randomly assigned their roles of either 'prisoner' or 'guard', and signed contracts on that basis. The contract offered \$15 a day and guaranteed basic living needs, though it was made explicit to the prisoners that some basic civil rights (for example, privacy) would be suspended. The prisoners were given no information about what to expect and no instructions on how to behave. The guards were told to "maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning" (p. 6), though they were explicitly prohibited from using physical aggression.

The prisoner subjects remained in the mock-prison 24 hours a day for the duration of the study. Nine were arbitrarily assigned three to each cell and the remaining three were on stand-by at home. The 'guard' subjects worked on three-man eight-hour shifts, and went home after their shifts.

Both sets of subjects were given uniforms to promote feelings of anonymity. The guards uniform (plain khaki shirt and trousers, whistle, baton, and reflecting sun glasses) was intended to convey a military attitude and to give symbols of power. The prisoners uniform (loose fitting smock, number on front and back, no underwear, light chain and lock around ankle, rubber sandals and a cap made from nylon stocking) was intended to be uncomfortable, humiliating and to create symbols of subservience and dependence.

Zimbardo obtained the help of the local police department to unexpectedly 'arrest' the 'prisoner' subjects. A police officer charged them with suspicion of burglary or armed robbery, advised them of their rights, handcuffed them, thoroughly searched them (often in full view of the neighbours!) and drove them to the police station. Here they had their fingerprints and picture taken and were put in a detention cell. They were then blindfolded and driven to the 'mock prison'. During the induction period the arresting officers did not tell the subjects that this was part of the study. When they arrived at the 'mock-prison', the prisoner-subjects were stripped, deloused, made to stand alone and naked in the 'yard' and then given their uniform and cell and told to remain silent.

The prisoners were then greeted by the warden who read them the rules which had to be memorised. After this they were referred to only by their number. The prisoners were to be given three meals a day, allowed three supervised toilet visits, two hours privilege time for reading and letter writing, two visiting periods a week, exercise periods, and film rights. They were also required to conduct work assignments and line up for a 'count' on each new guard shift. The initial purpose of the count was to check that all the prisoners were present, and to test their knowledge of the rules and their I.D. numbers. The first counts took around 10 minutes but as conditions in the prison deteriorated, they increased in length until some lasted for several hours.

Results

The prison had a much more dramatic effect on all the players in the drama than had been anticipated.

The mood of the prisoners and guards became increasingly negative. The prison was internalised by prisoners and guards and they adopted very contrasting behaviours, which were appropriate for their respective roles. Five prisoners were released early due to extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety, and the simulation was brought to an end after six days rather than the projected 14 days.

One question that arises from simulations is 'were the behaviours shown by the subjects merely some very good acting or had the situation become real to them?' One answer to this comes from the private conversation of prisoners which were monitored by the researchers. These conversations were 90 per cent on the prison, which shows that even when they were able to get out of their mental prisons they actually reinforced the experience. The prisoners also adopted the guards' negative attitude towards them, and referred to each other in deprecating ways. When the prisoners were introduced to a priest, they referred to themselves by number, asked for a lawyer to help get them out, and asked for immediate bail and a parole board.

Guard aggression showed a steady increase throughout the study, even after resistance had ceased. They attempted to 'hide' one prisoner in the broom cupboard overnight because the experimenters were being 'too soft'.

The most dramatic demonstration of the reality of the prison came with the mock parole board. The five remaining prisoners were asked by Zimbardo in turn whether they would forfeit the money they had earned as a prisoner if they could be paroled (released from the study). Three of the five said 'yes', which meant they were effectively terminating their contract to take part in the study. Yet when they were told to return to their cells while it was considered they did so rather than just walk out.

Discussion

Zimbardo suggested that the reason for the deterioration in guard behaviour was power. The guards were able to exert control over the lives of other human beings and they did not have to justify their displays of power as they would have to in their daily lives. After day one, all prisoner rights became redefined as privileges, and all privileges were cancelled.

Zimbardo describes the social deterioration of the prisoners as the pathological prisoner syndrome. To start with the prisoners rebelled against their conditions, but every attempt was undermined by the guards, and social cohesion collapsed among the prisoners. Half of the prisoners responded by becoming sick, and eventually had to be released before the study was finally brought to a conclusion. For those who remained, the model prisoner reaction that developed was passivity, dependence, and flattened affect (emotions). Zimbardo suggested that there were a number of processes that contributed to the deterioration of the prisoners including:

- (a) The loss of personal identity;
- (b) The arbitrary control exerted by the guards. This made the prisoner's lives increasingly unpredictable and their treatment increasingly unfair. Their behaviour showed the signs of learned helplessness (see the study by Seligman & Maier, 1967, Chapter 4 of this volume);
- (c) Dependency and emasculation. The guards created a dependency in the prisoners which

emasculated them to the extent that when the prisoners were debriefed they suggested that they had been assigned to be prisoners because they were smaller than the guards. In fact, there was no difference in average height between the prisoners and the guards, and the perceived difference was a response to the prisoners' perceptions of themselves and their power.

What does all this mean? Zimbardo describes it as a simulation of prison life, but that is not quite the case. None of the subjects had any experience of prison life before the study, and their roles were played from the social perceptions of how prison life should be. It is, in fact, a simulation of what we expect prison life to be, rather than what it is. However, the study still gives a powerful demonstration of the effect of social roles, and also the power of the social psychological experiment to make us behave in ways we did not think possible (see Orne, 1962, Chapter 18 of this volume).

Not altogether surprisingly, there were numerous ethical objections to the study, though like Milgram, Zimbardo made a robust defence (Zimbardo, 1973 and MacDermott 1993). He argued that the studies provide a special insight into human behaviour and experience, and illuminate 'a dark side'. His personal criticism of the study concerns his own role as both researcher and warden. He became as trapped in his warden role as the other players in the simulation, and that prevented him responding appropriately as the lead researcher. It is also important to note that the study received the approval of the American Navy (who sponsored the research), the Psychology Department at Stanford, and also the University Committee of Human Experimentation before it was carried out. None had predicted the outcome, but then why should they? If researchers already knew what was going to happen in their research then there would not be much point in carrying it out.

Questions

[Questions appear at the end of each summary]

1. What are the main features of the prisoners' behaviour?
2. What ethical objections can be made to this study?
3. Was the study justified even if it was unethical?
4. Why do you think the researchers chose the subjects they did? And what would be the differences in the outcome of the study if the subjects had not been predominantly young students?

Suggested Answers

[Suggested answers appear at the back of the book]

1. The prisoners became immersed in their roles so that the prison became very real to them, they became passive and dependent and they behaved in degrading ways towards each other.
2. One argument says that the study was ethically sound because it went through various ethics committees, but the luxury of hindsight suggests that there were a number of ethical violations including the deception about the arrest, the distress to the prisoners and their failure to realise that they could leave the study whenever they wanted.
3. Your choice, but we would suggest the 'Milgram Defense' which is that the results illuminate

our understanding of human behaviour and the distress caused in the study is justified by this outcome.

4. Students were chosen because of their availability and their willingness to carry out something like this for a relatively small amount of money. However, as the study by Sears (see Chapter 18 of this volume) suggests, students may behave in very different ways to other adults.

References

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