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Stanford prison experiment

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The Stanford prison experiment was a study of the [psychological](#) effects of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. The experiment was conducted from August 14th to 20th^[*citation needed*], 1971 by a team of researchers led by Psychology professor [Philip Zimbardo](#) at [Stanford University](#). Twenty-four students were selected out of 75 to play the prisoners and live in a mock prison in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. Roles were assigned randomly. The participants adapted to their roles well beyond what even Zimbardo himself expected, leading the "Officers" to display authoritarian measures and ultimately to subject some of the prisoners to [torture](#). In turn, many of the prisoners developed passive attitudes and accepted physical abuse, and, at the request of the guards, readily inflicted punishment on other prisoners who attempted to stop it. The experiment even affected Zimbardo himself, who, in his capacity as "Prison Superintendent," lost sight of his role as psychologist and permitted the abuse to continue as though it were a real prison. Five of the prisoners were upset enough by the process to quit the experiment early, and the entire experiment was abruptly stopped after only six days. The experimental process and the results remain controversial. The entire experiment was filmed, with excerpts made publicly available.

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Goals and methods

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Zimbardo and his team set out to test the idea that the inherent personality traits of prisoners and guards were summarily key to understanding abusive prison situations. Participants were recruited and told they would participate in a two-week prison simulation. Out of 75 respondents, Zimbardo and his team selected the 24 males whom they deemed to be the most psychologically stable and

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healthy. These participants were predominantly white and [middle-class](#).^[1]

The "prison" itself was in the basement of Stanford's Jordan Hall, which had been converted into a mock jail. An [undergraduate research assistant](#) was the "warden" and Zimbardo the "superintendent." Zimbardo set up a number of specific conditions on the participants which he hoped would promote [disorientation](#), [depersonalisation](#) and [deindividualisation](#).

The researchers provided weapons—wooden [batons](#) which could not be used to punish the prisoners, meant only to establish their status—and clothing that simulated that of a prison guard—khaki shirt and pants from a local [military surplus store](#). They were also given [mirrored sunglasses](#) to prevent [eye contact](#).

Prisoners wore ill-fitting smocks and stocking caps, rendering them constantly uncomfortable. Guards called prisoners by their assigned numbers, sewn on their uniforms, instead of by name. A chain around their ankles reminded them of their roles as prisoners.

The researchers held an orientation session for guards the day before the experiment, during which they were told that they could not physically harm the prisoners. In The Stanford Prison Study video Zimbardo is seen telling the guards, "You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, me, and they'll have no privacy... We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. That is, in this situation we'll have all the power and they'll have none."^[2]

The participants chosen to play the part of prisoners were arrested at their homes and charged with armed robbery. The local Palo Alto police department assisted Zimbardo with the arrests and conducted full booking procedures on the prisoners, which included [fingerprinting](#) and taking [mug shots](#). At the police station, they were transported to the mock prison where they were strip-searched and given their new identities.

Results

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After a relatively uneventful first day, a riot broke out on the second day. The prisoners in cell 1 blockaded their cell door with their beds and took off their stocking caps. They refused to come out or do anything the guards told them to do. The guards realized they needed more of them to handle the riot. The guards from other shifts volunteered to work extra hours and worked together to break the prisoner revolt, attacking the prisoners with fire extinguishers without supervision from the research staff. The guards realized they could handle the 9 cell mates with 9 guards, but were unsure how they were to do so by use of only 3 guards per shift. One then suggested that they use psychological tactics to control them instead. They set up a "privilege cell" in which prisoners who were not involved in the riot were treated with special rewards such as a good meal instead of their normal bland portions. The "privilege cell" inmates chose not to eat the meal in order to stay uniform with their fellow prisoners.

After only 36 hours, one prisoner began to act "crazy," Zimbardo says; "#8612 then began to act crazy, to scream, to curse, to go into a rage that seemed out of control. It took quite a while before we became convinced that he was really suffering and that we had to release him."

Guards forced the prisoners to count off repeatedly as a way to learn their prison numbers, and to reinforce the idea that this was their new identity. Guards soon used these prisoner counts as another method to harass the prisoners, using physical punishment such as protracted exercise for errors in the prisoner count. Sanitary conditions declined rapidly, made worse by the guards refusing

to allow some prisoners to urinate or defecate. As punishment, the guards would not let the prisoners empty the sanitation bucket. Mattresses were a valued item in the prison, so the guards would punish prisoners by removing their mattresses, leaving them to sleep on concrete. Some prisoners were forced to go nude as a method of degradation.

Zimbardo cited his own absorption in the experiment he guided, and in which he actively participated as Prison Superintendent. On the fourth day, some prisoners were talking about trying to escape. Zimbardo and the guards attempted to move the prisoners to the more secure local police station, but officials there said they could no longer participate in Zimbardo's experiment.

Several guards became increasingly cruel as the experiment continued. Experimenters said that approximately one-third of the guards exhibited genuine sadistic tendencies. Most of the guards were upset when the experiment concluded after only 6 days.

Zimbardo argued that the prisoner participants had [internalized](#) their roles, based on the fact that some had stated that they would accept parole even with the attached condition of forfeiting all of their experiment-participation pay. Yet, when their parole applications were all denied, none of the prisoner participants quit the experiment. Zimbardo argued they had no reason for continued participation in the experiment after having lost all monetary compensation, yet they did, because they had internalized the prisoner identity, they thought themselves prisoners, hence, they stayed.

Prisoner No. 416, a newly admitted stand-by prisoner, expressed concern over the treatment of the other prisoners. The guards responded with more abuse. When he refused to eat his sausages, saying he was on a hunger strike, guards confined him to a closet without a lightbulb and called it "[solitary confinement](#)"; the guards then instructed the other prisoners to repeatedly punch on the door while shouting at 416. ^[3] The guards used this incident to turn the other prisoners against No. 416, saying the only way he would be released from solitary confinement was if they gave up their blankets and slept on their bare mattresses, which all but one refused to do.

Zimbardo aborted the experiment early when Christina Maslach, a graduate student he was then dating (and later married), objected to the appalling conditions of the prison after she was introduced to the experiment to conduct interviews. Zimbardo noted that of more than fifty outside persons who had seen the prison, Maslach was the only one who questioned its morality. After only six days of a planned two weeks' duration, the Stanford Prison experiment was shut down.^[4]

Conclusions

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The Stanford experiment ended on August 20, 1971, only six days after it began instead of the fourteen it was supposed to have lasted. That day, Zimbardo called both the guards and inmates to a meeting and announced that the 'prison' was closing down. The experiment's result has been argued to demonstrate the impressionability and obedience of people when provided with a legitimizing [ideology](#) and social and institutional support. It is also used to illustrate [cognitive dissonance theory](#) and the power of [authority](#).

The results of the experiment are said to support [situational attribution](#) of behavior rather than [dispositional attribution](#). In other words, it seemed the situation caused the participants' behavior, rather than anything inherent in their individual [personalities](#). In this way, it is compatible with the results of the also-famous [Milgram experiment](#), in which ordinary people fulfilled orders to administer what appeared to be agonizing and dangerous [electric shocks](#) to a confederate of the experimenter.

Shortly after the study had been completed, there were bloody revolts at both the [San Quentin](#) and [Attica](#) prison facilities, and Zimbardo reported his findings on the experiment to the [U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary](#).

Criticism of the experiment

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The guards and prisoners adapted to their roles more completely than expected, as Zimbardo himself also did, stepping beyond the boundaries of what had been predicted and leading to dangerous and psychologically damaging situations. One-third of the guards were judged to have exhibited "genuine sadistic tendencies," while many prisoners were emotionally traumatized—five of them had to be removed from the experiment early. After being confronted by Christina Maslach, a graduate student in psychology whom he was dating,^[5] and realizing that he had been passively allowing unethical acts to be performed under his direct supervision, Zimbardo concluded that both prisoners and guards had become too grossly absorbed in their roles and terminated the experiment after six days.^[6] Ethical concerns surrounding the [famous experiment](#) often draw comparisons to the [Milgram experiment](#), which was conducted in 1961 at [Yale University](#) by [Stanley Milgram](#), Zimbardo's former college friend. [Tom Peters](#) and [Robert H. Waterman Jr](#) wrote in 1981 that the Milgram experiment and the Stanford prison experiment were frightening in their implications about the danger which lurks in the darker side of human nature.^[7]

Ethical criticisms

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This study was cleared by the Ethics Code of the American Psychological Association, showing that experiments on paper can look very different than the way that they play out in reality. The experiment was criticized as being [unethical](#) and [unscientific](#). Subsequently-adopted ethical standards of psychology would make it a breach of ethics to conduct such a study in more modern times. The study would violate the [Ethics Code of the American Psychological Association](#), the Canadian Code of Conduct for Research Involving Humans, and the [Belmont Report](#).

Peer-review criticisms

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Because it was a [field experiment](#), Dr. Zimbardo found it impossible to keep traditional [scientific controls](#) in place. He was unable to remain merely a [neutral observer](#), instead influencing the direction of the experiment as its "superintendent." Conclusions and observations drawn by the experimenters were largely [subjective](#) and [anecdotal](#), and the experiment would be difficult for other researchers to [reproduce](#).

Critics including [Erich Fromm](#) challenged how readily the results of the experiment could be generalized. Fromm specifically wrote about how the personality of an individual does in fact affect behavior when imprisoned, using historical examples from the [Nazi concentration camps](#). This ran counter to the study's conclusion that the prison situation itself controls the individual's behavior. Fromm also argued that the amount of sadism in the "normal" subjects could not be determined with the methods employed to screen them.^[8]

Biases

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Some of the experiment's critics argued that participants based their behavior on how they were expected to behave, or modelled it after [stereotypes](#) they already had about the behavior of prisoners and guards. In other words, the participants were merely engaging in [role-playing](#). In response, Zimbardo claimed that even if there was role-playing initially, participants [internalized](#) these roles as the experiment continued.

More directly, though, it has been pointed out that, in contrast to Zimbardo's claim that participants were given no instructions about how to behave, his briefing of the guards gave them a clear sense that they should oppress the prisoners. In this sense the study was an exploration of the effects of tyrannical leadership. In line with this, certain guards, such as one known as "John Wayne", changed their behavior because of wanting to conform to the behavior that Zimbardo was trying to elicit.

Other criticisms

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Additionally, the study has been criticized on the basis of [ecological validity](#). Many of the conditions imposed in the experiment were arbitrary and may not have correlated with actual prison conditions,

including blindfolding incoming prisoners, not allowing them to wear underwear, not allowing them to look out of windows and not allowing them to use their names. Zimbardo argued that prison is a confusing and dehumanizing experience and that it was necessary to enact these procedures to put the prisoners in the proper frame of mind; however, it is difficult to know how similar the effects were to an actual prison, and the experiment's methods would be difficult to reproduce exactly so that others could test them.^[*citation needed*]

Some said that the study was too **deterministic**: reports described significant differences in the cruelty of the guards, the worst of whom came to be nicknamed John Wayne. (This guard alleges he started the escalation of events between guards and prisoners after he began to emulate a character from the **Paul Newman** film *Cool Hand Luke*. He further intensified his actions because he was nicknamed "John Wayne," even though he was trying to mimic actor **Strother Martin**, who had played the role of the sadistic Captain in the movie.^[9]) Most of the other guards were kinder and often did favors for prisoners.^[*citation needed*]

Also, it has been argued that **selection bias** may have played a role in the results. Researchers from Western Kentucky University recruited students for a study using an advertisement similar to the one used in the Stanford Prison Experiment, with and without the words "prison life." It was found that students volunteering for a prison life study possessed **dispositions** toward abusive behavior.^[*citation needed*]

Comparisons to Abu Ghraib

[edit]

When the **Abu Ghraib military prisoner torture and abuse scandal** was publicized in March 2004, many observers immediately were struck by its similarities to the Stanford Prison experiment—among them, **Philip Zimbardo**, who paid close attention to the details of the story. He was dismayed by official military and government efforts shifting the blame for the torture and abuses in the **Abu Ghraib** American military prison on to "**a few bad apples**" rather than acknowledging it as possibly systemic problems of a formally established military incarceration system.

Eventually, Zimbardo became involved with the defense team of lawyers representing Abu Ghraib prison guard Staff Sergeant **Ivan "Chip" Frederick**. He had full access to all investigation and background reports, testifying as an **expert witness** in SSG Frederick's **court martial**, which resulted in an eight-year prison sentence for Frederick in October 2004.

Zimbardo drew on the knowledge he gained from participating in the Frederick case to write the book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, which Random House published in 2007, dealing with the striking similarities between the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Abu Ghraib abuses.^[3]

Similar studies

[edit]

BBC prison study

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Alex Haslam and **Steve Reicher**, psychologists from the **University of Exeter** and **University of St Andrews**, conducted the BBC Prison Study in 2002.^[10] This was a partial replication of the SPE conducted with the assistance of the **BBC**, who broadcast events in the study in a documentary series called *The Experiment*. Their results and conclusions differed from Zimbardo's and led to a number of publications on tyranny, **stress** and leadership. Moreover, unlike results from the SPE, these were published in leading academic journals such as *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and *Social Psychology Quarterly*. The BBC Prison Study is now taught as a core study on the UK A-level Psychology OCR syllabus.

While Haslam and Reicher's procedure was not a direct replication of Zimbardo's, their study does cast further doubt on the generality of his conclusions. Specifically, it questions the notion that people slip mindlessly into role and the idea that the dynamics of evil are in any way banal. Their research

also points to the importance of leadership in the emergence of tyranny of the form displayed by Zimbardo when briefing guards in the Stanford experiment.^{[11][12]}

Experiments in the United States

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The Third Wave was a 1967 recreation of **Nazi Party** dynamics by high school teacher **Ron Jones** in **Palo Alto, California**. Although the veracity of Jones' accounts has been questioned by some,^[13] several participants in the study have gone on record to confirm the events.^[14]

In April 2007, it was reported that **high school** students in **Waxahachie, Texas**, who were participating in a role-playing exercise fell into a similar abusive pattern of behavior as exhibited in the original Stanford experiment.^[15]

In multimedia

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This "**In popular culture**" section may contain minor or trivial references. Please **reorganize this content** to explain the subject's impact on popular culture rather than simply listing appearances, and remove trivial references. *(June 2010)*

- In 1992, *Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Experiment*, a **documentary** about the experiment, was made available via the Stanford Prison Experiment website. The documentary was written by Zimbardo and directed and produced by Ken Musen.^[16]
- In 1977, Italian director **Carlo Tuzii** adapted the story of the experiment to an Italian environment, and Italian students and made a film out of his adaptation, called *La Gabbia*, or *The Cage*. In the film, "prisoners" and "guards" were all together in a huge room, parted in two halves by a row of iron bars in the middle, and with a small window in each half.
- The novel *Black Box*, written by **Mario Giordano** and inspired by the experiment, was adapted to cinema in 2001 by German director **Oliver Hirschbiegel** into the movie *Das Experiment*, which starred Moritz Bleibtreu and Christian Berkel.
- In 2001 German director Oliver Hirschbiegel created a German film, *Das Experiment*, which is based on the Stanford prison experiment. However, Dr. Thon (or in actuality Dr. Zimbardo) leaves the facilities and in his absence the guards play out what might be expected if Zimbardo wouldn't have called off the experiment for the remaining days.
- A 30 minute 2002 **BBC** documentary produced and directed by **Kim Duke**.
- In the episode "**My Big Fat Greek Rush Week**" of the TV series *Veronica Mars*, Wallace and Logan take part in an experiment that is similar to the Stanford Prison Experiment.
- "Not for Nothing", Episode 4 of Season 2 of the fictional US television series *Life*, was loosely based on the Stanford prison experiment.
- In 2010, Inferno Distribution released film *The Experiment*, which is based on the 2001 film *Das Experiment*, with **Paul Scheuring** directing. The film stars **Adrien Brody**, **Forest Whitaker**, **Clifton Collins Jr.**, and **Fisher Stevens**. Although, originally made for theaters, it went straight to DVD in the US and most other territories. When the film was still shooting, the film's North American distribution rights was acquired by Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisitions Group
- A film about the experiment, entitled *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, is in production by **Maverick Films**. It was written by **Christopher McQuarrie** and **Tim Talbott**. It is said to feature actors **Channing Tatum**, **Cam Gigandet**, **Paul Dano**, **Ryan Phillippe**, **Giovanni Ribisi**, **Benjamin McKenzie**, **Charlie Hunnam**, **Kieran Culkin**, **Jesse Eisenberg**, and **Dylan Purcell**, and is slotted for release in 2011.
- A band called 'Stanford Prison Experiment'

See also

[[edit](#)]

- [Unethical human experimentation in the United States](#)
- The [Milgram experiment](#) on obedience to authority.
- [The Third Wave](#), an experiment to demonstrate the appeal of fascism.
- [Peer pressure](#).
- [Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse](#).
- [Banality of Evil](#)
- [Trier Social Stress Test \(TSST\)](#)



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Footnotes

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- ↑ [Slideshow on official site](#)
- ↑ [C82SAD L07 Social Influence II The BBC Prison Experiment \(handout\).doc](#)
- ↑ **^a** **^b** [The Lucifer Effect website](#)
- ↑ Zimbardo, P.G. (2007). *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House.
- ↑ [Stanford University News Service - The Standard Prison Experiment](#)
- ↑ [Stanford Prison Experiment - Conclusion](#)
- ↑ Peters, Thomas, J., Waterman, Robert. H., "In Search of Excellence," 1981. Cf. p.78 and onward.
- ↑ <http://www.angelfire.com/or/sociologyshop/frozim.html>
- ↑ "John Wayne" (name withheld). Interview. "The Science of Evil." Primetime. Basic Instincts. KATU. 3 Jan. 2007.
- ↑ [The BBC Prison Study](#)
- ↑ [Interview](#) at *The Guardian*
- ↑ [Interview](#) at OffTheTelly
- ↑ "The Third Wave, Evidence from the people who were there."
- ↑ "A Look at the Original Students of The Third Wave and Their Teacher Ron Jones, 40 Years Later"
- ↑ "Holocaust Lesson Gets Out Of Hand" , *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 11, 2007.
- ↑ [Justice videos](#)

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- [Zimbardo, P. G \(2007\) Understanding How Good People Turn Evil](#). Interview transcript. "Democracy Now!", March 30, 2007. Accessed March 31, 2007.

External links

[[edit](#)]

- [Official website](#)
- [Summary of the experiment](#)
- [Zimbardo, P. \(2007\). From Heavens to Hells to Heroes](#). In-Mind Magazine.
- [Fromm's criticism of the experiment](#)
- [The official website of the BBC Prison Study](#)
- [The Experiment \(IMDb\)](#) — German movie (Das Experiment) from 2001 inspired by the Stanford Experiment
- [The Lie of the Stanford Prison Experiment](#) — Criticism from Carlo Prescott, ex-con and consultant/assistant for the experiment
- [The Artificial Prison of the Human Mind](#) Article with Comments.
- [Philip Zimbardo on Democracy Now! March 30 2007](#)
- [Philip Zimbardo on The Daily Show, March, 2007](#)

Abu Ghraib and the experiment:

- [BBC News: Is it in anyone to abuse a captive?](#)
- [BBC News: Why everyone's not a torturer](#)
- [Ronald Hilton: US soldiers' bad behavior and Stanford Prison Experiment](#)
- [Slate.com: Situationist Ethics: The Stanford Prison Experiment doesn't explain Abu Ghraib](#), by William Saletan
- [IMDb: Untitled Stanford Prison Experiment Project](#)
- [VIDEO: Talk to MIT re: new book: The Lucifer Effect](#)

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