

Stanford Prison Experiment

THE METHOD: Creating a Simulated Prison

THE SETUP

Location: Stanford University Psychology Dept. basement

Participants:

- 24 male college students (screened for stability)
- Paid \$15/day (~\$100 today)
- Psychologically healthy, no criminal records

Random Assignment:

- COIN FLIP determined roles (eliminate pre-existing differences)
- 12 Guards | 12 Prisoners (9 active, 3 on call)

Duration: Planned: 14 days | Actual: 6 days (stopped early)

Research Question:

Does prison brutality stem from "bad people" (dispositional) or "bad situations" (situational)?

Zimbardo's hypothesis: SITUATIONS transform normal people

THE ROLES

GUARDS

Equipment:

- Khaki uniforms
- Whistles
- Billy clubs
- Mirrored sunglasses
(prevent eye contact)

Instructions:

- Maintain order
- No physical violence
- Freedom to create rules
- 8-hour shifts

Goal: Exercise authority

PRISONERS

"Arrest" Process:

- Surprise arrests by police
- Handcuffed, transported
- Fingerprinted, photographed
- Strip searched
- Delousing spray

Uniform:

- Smock with number
- No underwear
- Ankle chains
- Stocking cap
- Referred to by NUMBER only

Goal: Strip identity, create powerlessness

THE RESULTS: What Happened Day by Day

DAYS 1-2: Initial Reactions

- Prisoners laughed, didn't take it seriously at first
- Guards uncertain about authority, gradually escalated
- First signs of resistance from prisoners
- Guards discovered they enjoyed exercising power

DAY 2: The Rebellion

- Prisoners removed caps, ripped numbers, barricaded doors
- Guards attacked with fire extinguishers
- Stripped prisoners, removed beds, created "privilege cell"
- Psychological tactics to divide prisoners

DAYS 3-5: Escalating Abuse

- Guards: Push-ups as punishment, prolonged counts, toilet cleaning
- Sleep deprivation, food/bathroom privileges denied
- Sexual humiliation, psychological degradation
- Prisoners: Emotional breakdowns, crying, psychosomatic illness

DAY 6: Termination

- Christina Maslach (Zimbardo's girlfriend) objected strongly
- First outsider to effectively challenge continuation
- Zimbardo realized he'd lost objectivity
- Experiment terminated 8 days early



KEY STATISTICS

5 out of 12 prisoners released early due to extreme emotional distress (42% couldn't complete even 6 days)
Guard behaviors: ~1/3 sadistic | ~1/3 tough but fair | ~1/3 "good guards" (but didn't intervene)

KEY FINDINGS: What Zimbardo Claimed

1. Power of Situations:

Normal, healthy people transformed by roles and institutional context within days

2. Role Conformity:

Random assignment meant differences came from ROLES not personality - guards became authoritarian, prisoners submissive

3. Deindividuation:

Uniforms and anonymity (mirrored sunglasses, numbers) stripped identity and enabled cruelty

4. Pathology of Power:

Power corrupts quickly - even ordinary people abuse authority without accountability

5. Learned Helplessness:

Prisoners gave up resistance, accepted guard control, lost sense of personal identity (requested "parole" not withdrawal)

➔ **Conclusion:** *Prison violence stems from SITUATIONS not individual pathology. Abu Ghraib later cited as real-world example.*

However, Zimbardo played dual role (researcher + superintendent), interfered extensively, potentially coached behaviors.

⚠ **SERIOUS ETHICAL PROBLEMS: Psychological harm, lack of informed consent, inadequate oversight, compromised right to withdraw**