

## Stanford Prison Experiment

### A Quiet Sunday Morning...

On a quiet Sunday morning in August, a Palo Alto, California, police car swept through the town picking up college students as part of a mass arrest for violation of Penal Codes 211, Armed Robbery, and Burglary, a 459 PC. The suspect was picked up at his home, charged, warned of his legal rights, spread-eagled against the police car, searched, and handcuffed -- often as surprised and curious neighbours looked on.



The suspect was then put in the rear of the police car and carried off to the police station, the sirens wailing.

The car arrived at the station, the suspect was brought inside, formally booked, again warned of his Miranda rights, finger printed, and a complete identification was made. The suspect was then taken to a holding cell where he was left blindfolded to ponder his fate and wonder what he had done to get himself into this mess.

### Discussion

Consider the police procedures which make arrestees feel confused, fearful, and dehumanized. Note that this policeman is wearing sunglasses just like those we had our "guards" wear and as did the head of the National Guards at Attica Prison during its bloody 1971 riot!

## Social Influence

### Volunteers

What suspects had done was to answer a local newspaper ad calling for volunteers in a study of the psychological effects of prison life. We wanted to see what the psychological effects were of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. To do this, we decided to set up a simulated a prison and then carefully note the effects of this institution on the behaviour of all those within its walls.

More than 70 applicants answered our ad and were given diagnostic interviews and personality tests to eliminate candidates with psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse. Ultimately, we were left with a sample of 24 college students from the U.S. and Canada who happened to be in the Stanford area and wanted to earn \$15/day by participating in a study. On all dimensions that we were able to test or observe, they reacted normally.

Our study of prison life began, then, with an average group of healthy, intelligent, middle-class males. These boys were arbitrarily divided into two groups by a flip of the coin. Half were randomly assigned to be guards, the other to be prisoners. It is important to remember that at the beginning of our experiment there were no differences between boys assigned to be a prisoner and boys assigned to be a guard.

## Social Influence

### Constructing the Experiment

To help us closely simulate a prison environment, we called upon the services of experienced consultants. Foremost among them was a former prisoner who had served nearly seventeen years behind bars. This consultant made us aware of what it was like to be a prisoner. He also introduced us to a number of other ex-convicts and correctional personnel during an earlier Stanford summer school class we co-taught on "The Psychology of Imprisonment."

Our prison was constructed by boarding up each end of a corridor in the basement of Stanford's Psychology Department building. That corridor was "The Yard" and was the only outside place where prisoners were allowed to walk, eat, or exercise, except to go to the toilet down the hallway (which prisoners did blindfolded so as not to know the way out of the prison).

To create prison cells, we took the doors off some laboratory rooms and replaced them with specially made doors with steel bars and cell numbers.

At one end of the hall was a small opening through which we could videotape and record the events that occurred. On the side of the corridor opposite the cells was a small closet which became "The Hole," or solitary confinement. It was dark and very confining, about two feet wide and two feet deep, but tall enough that a "bad prisoner" could stand up.

An intercom system allowed us to secretly bug the cells to monitor what the prisoners discussed, and also to make public announcements to the prisoners. There were no windows or clocks to judge the passage of time, which later resulted in some time-distorting experiences.

With these features in place, our jail was ready to receive its first prisoners, who were waiting in the detention cells of the Palo Alto Police Department.

### Discussion

What are the effects of living in an environment with no clocks, no view of the outside world, and minimal sensory stimulation?

## Social Influence

### A State of Mild Shock...

Blindfolded and in a state of mild shock over their surprise arrest by the city police, our prisoners were put into a car and driven to the "Stanford County Jail" for further processing. The prisoners were then brought into our jail one at a time and greeted by the warden, who conveyed the seriousness of their offence and their new status as prisoners.

### Humiliation

Each prisoner was systematically searched and stripped naked. He was then deloused with a spray, to convey our belief that he may have germs or lice -- as can be seen in this series of photos.



A degradation procedure was designed in part to humiliate prisoners and in part to be sure they weren't bringing in any germs to contaminate our jail. This procedure was similar to the scenes captured by Danny Lyons in these Texas prison photos.

### Discussion

Consider the psychological consequences of stripping, delousing, and shaving the heads of prisoners or members of the military. What transformations take place when people go through an experience like this?

### Humiliation Continued

The prisoner was then issued a uniform. The main part of this uniform was a dress, or smock, which each prisoner wore at all times with no underclothes. On the smock, in front and in back, was his prison ID number. On each prisoner's right ankle was a heavy chain, bolted on and worn at all times. Rubber sandals were the footwear, and each prisoner covered his hair with a stocking cap made from a woman's nylon stocking.

The use of ID numbers was a way to make prisoner feel anonymous. Each prisoner had to be called only by his ID number and could only refer to himself and the other prisoners by number.

## Social Influence

### Enforcing Law

The guards were given no specific training on how to be guards. Instead they were free, within limits, to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners. The guards made up their own set of rules, which they then carried into effect under the supervision of Warden David Jaffe, an undergraduate from Stanford University. They were warned, however, of the potential seriousness of their mission and of the possible dangers in the situation they were about to enter, as, of course, are real guards who voluntarily take such a dangerous job.

As with real prisoners, our prisoners expected some harassment, to have their privacy and some of their other civil rights violated while they were in prison, and to get a minimally adequate diet -- all part of their informed consent agreement when they volunteered.

We began with nine guards and nine prisoners in our jail. Three guards worked each of three eight-hour shifts, while three prisoners occupied each of the three barren cells around the clock. The remaining guards and prisoners from our sample of 24 were on call in case they were needed. The cells were so small that there was room for only three cots on which the prisoners slept or sat, with room for little else.

## Social Influence

### Asserting Authority

At 2:30 A.M. the prisoners were rudely awakened from sleep by blasting whistles for the first of many "counts." The counts served the purpose of familiarizing the prisoners with their numbers (counts took place several times each shift and often at night). But more importantly, these events provided a regular occasion for the guards to exercise control over the prisoners.



At first, the prisoners were not completely into their roles and did not take the counts too seriously. They were still trying to assert their independence. The guards, too, were feeling out their new roles and were not yet sure how to assert authority over their prisoners. This was the beginning of a series of direct confrontations between the guards and prisoners.

Push-ups were a common form of physical punishment imposed by the guards to punish infractions of the rules or displays of improper attitudes toward the guards or institution. When we saw the guards demand push-ups from the prisoners, we initially thought this was an inappropriate kind of punishment for a prison -- a rather juvenile and minimal form of punishment. However, we later learned that push-ups were often used as a form of punishment in Nazi concentration camps, as can be seen in this drawing by a former concentration camp inmate, Alfred Kantor. It's noteworthy that one of our guards also stepped on the prisoners' backs while they did push-ups, or made other prisoners sit or step on the backs of fellow prisoners doing their push-ups.

### Discussion

At first push-ups were not a very aversive form of punishment, but they became more so as the study wore on. Why the change?

## Social Influence

### Asserting Independence

Because the first day passed without incident, we were surprised and totally unprepared for the rebellion which broke out on the morning of the second day. The prisoners removed their stocking caps, ripped off their numbers, and barricaded themselves inside the cells by putting their beds against the door. And now the problem was, what were we going to do about this rebellion? The guards were very much angered and frustrated because the prisoners also began to taunt and curse them. When the morning shift of guards came on, they became upset at the night shift who, they felt, must have been too lenient. The guards had to handle the rebellion themselves, and what they did was fascinating for the staff to behold.

At first they insisted that reinforcements be called in. The three guards who were waiting on stand-by call at home came in and the night shift of guards voluntarily remained on duty to bolster the morning shift. The guards met and decided to treat force with force.

They got a fire extinguisher which shot a stream of skin-chilling carbon dioxide, and they forced the prisoners away from the doors. (The fire extinguishers were present in compliance with the requirement by the Stanford Human Subjects Research Panel, which was concerned about potential fire threats).

The guards broke into each cell, stripped the prisoners naked, took the beds out, forced the ringleaders of the prisoner rebellion into solitary confinement, and generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.



## Social Influence

### Special Privileges

The rebellion had been temporarily crushed, but now a new problem faced the guards. Sure, nine guards with clubs could put down a rebellion by nine prisoners, but you couldn't have nine guards on duty at all times. It's obvious that our prison budget could not support such a ratio of staff to inmates. So what were they going to do? One of the guards came up a solution. "Let's use psychological tactics instead of physical ones." Psychological tactics amounted to setting up a privilege cell.

One of the three cells was designated as a "privilege cell." The three prisoners least involved in the rebellion were given special privileges. They got their uniforms back, got their beds back, and were allowed to wash and brush their teeth. The others were not. Privileged prisoners also got to eat



special food in the presence of the other prisoners who had temporarily lost the privilege of eating. The effect was to break the solidarity among prisoners.

### Discussion

How do you think *you* would have behaved if you were a prisoner in this situation? Would you have rejected these privileges in order to maintain prisoner solidarity?

## Social Influence

### Special Privileges

After half a day of this treatment, the guards then took some of these "good" prisoners and put them into the "bad" cells, and took some of the "bad" prisoners and put them into the "good" cell, thoroughly confusing all the prisoners. Some of the prisoners who were the ringleaders now thought that the prisoners from the privileged cell must be informers, and suddenly, the prisoners became distrustful of each other. Our ex-convict consultants later informed us that a similar tactic is used by real guards in real prisons to break prisoner alliances. For example, racism is used to pit Blacks, Chicanos, and Anglos against each other. In fact, in a real prison the greatest threat to any prisoner's life comes from fellow prisoners. By dividing and conquering in this way, guards promote aggression among inmates, thereby deflecting it from themselves.

The prisoners' rebellion also played an important role in producing greater solidarity among the guards. Now, suddenly, it was no longer just an experiment, no longer a simple simulation. Instead, the guards saw the prisoners as troublemakers who were out to get them, who might really cause them some harm. In response to this threat, the guards began stepping up their control, surveillance, and aggression.



## Social Influence

### The First Prisoner Released

Less than 36 hours into the experiment, Prisoner #8612 began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage. In spite of all of this, we had already come to think so much like prison authorities that we thought he was trying to "con" us -- to fool us into releasing him.

When our primary prison consultant interviewed Prisoner #8612, the consultant chided him for being so weak, and told him what kind of abuse he could expect from the guards and the prisoners if he were in San Quentin Prison. #8612 was then given the offer of becoming an informant in exchange for no further guard harassment. He was told to think it over.

During the next count, Prisoner #8612 told other prisoners, "You can't leave. You can't quit." That sent a chilling message and heightened their sense of really being imprisoned. #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.



## Social Influence

### Types of Guards

By the fifth day, a new relationship had emerged between prisoners and guards. The guards now fell into their job more easily -- a job which at times was boring and at times was interesting.

There were three types of guards. First, there were tough but fair guards who followed prison rules. Second, there were "good guys" who did little favours for the prisoners and never punished them. And finally, about a third of the guards were hostile, arbitrary, and inventive in their forms of prisoner humiliation. These guards appeared to thoroughly enjoy the power they wielded, yet none of our preliminary personality tests were able to predict this behaviour. The only link between personality and prison behaviour was a finding that prisoners with a high degree of authoritarianism endured our authoritarian prison environment longer than did other prisoners.

### Discussion

Most prisoners believed that the subjects selected to be guards were chosen because they were bigger than those who were made prisoners, but actually, there was no difference in the average height of the two groups. What do you think caused this misperception?

## Social Influence

### An End to the Experiment

On the fifth night, some visiting parents asked me to contact a lawyer in order to get their son out of prison. I called the lawyer as requested, and he came the next day to interview the prisoners with a standard set of legal questions, even though he, too, knew it was just an experiment.

At this point it became clear that we had to end the study. We had created an overwhelmingly powerful situation -- a situation in which prisoners were withdrawing and behaving in pathological ways, and in which some of the guards were behaving sadistically. Even the "good" guards felt helpless to intervene, and none of the guards quit while the study was in progress. Indeed, it should be noted that no guard ever came late for his shift, called in sick, left early, or demanded extra pay for overtime work. I ended the study prematurely for two reasons. First, we had learned through videotapes that the guards were escalating their abuse of prisoners in the middle of the night when they thought no researchers were watching and the experiment was "off." Their boredom had driven them to ever more pornographic and degrading abuse of the prisoners.

Second, Christina Maslach, a recent Stanford Ph.D. brought in to conduct interviews with the guards and prisoners, strongly objected when she saw our prisoners being marched on a toilet run, bags over their heads, legs chained together, hands on each other's shoulders. Filled with outrage, she said, "It's terrible what you are doing to these boys!" Out of 50 or more outsiders who had seen our prison, she was the only one who ever questioned its morality. Once she countered the power of the situation, however, it became clear that the study should be ended.

And so, after only six days, our planned two-week prison simulation was called off.

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