Reading 37: A PRISON BY ANY OTHER NAME . . .

Zimbardo, P. G. (1972). The pathology of imprisonment. *Society, 9*(6), 4–8.
Haney, C., Banks, W. C., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison. *International Journal of Criminology & Penology,* 1, 69–97.

Have you ever been imprisoned? Let's assume your answer (and mine) is "no." Do you know anyone who has spent time incarcerated? Maybe. Regardless, most of us know very little about the psychological effects of spending time in prison. You may have read articles, stories, or novels about prisons, and almost certainly you've seen prison life portrayed in movies and on TV. From this exposure, most people's only certainty is that prison is not a place we ever want to wind up! We know it is a horrific experience and it surely must produce strong reactions and even pathological behaviors among inmates. Most of us also believe that those who choose to be prison employees, such as guards and wardens, probably possess certain unique, personal characteristics. But how can behavioral scientists study systematically the psychological and emotional effects of the prison experience, for either the inmates or the employees?

As for most complex real-life situations, studying the psychology of prison life is at best a difficult challenge for researchers because the methods used must be correlational—that is, we can observe the prison environment, interview inmates and guards, gather information about prisoners after they are released, and then try to make assumptions based on these accounts. But we cannot scientifically control the prison environment to draw clear, valid conclusions about the real causes of the behaviors that we observe. Does prison change people, or were the people in the prison system already "different" going in? One way around this research dilemma might be to create a simulated "research prison" and place people into it either as "prisoners" or "guards." Sound impossible? Perhaps this would be a difficult study to do today, but one famous psychologist, Philip Zimbardo, and his associates Craig Haney, Curtis Banks, and Dave Jaffe did just that over 30 years ago at Stanford University (the two articles listed at the beginning of this reading are the earliest discussions of their study). They wanted to create a simulated prison with randomly assigned, typical college students in the roles of "guards" and "prisoners." Their "prison" (which will be described in greater detail) was constructed in the basement of the psychology building on the Stanford campus.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Zimbardo was testing his belief that the environment around you, the situation, often determines how you behave more strongly than who you are—that is, your internal, dispositional nature. He contends that, although we may have certain inherent or internal behavioral *tendencies,* powerful situations can overcome those tendencies and lead us to engage in behaviors that are very

different from our usual selves. Zimbardo and his associates set out to discover what happens to normal people who are placed into a situation that exerts great power over individuals: prison.

Except for their initial belief that the situation exerts strong effects over our behavior, the researchers did not formulate any specific hypotheses. To test the impact of situational forces, they randomly assigned each participant to be either a "guard" or a "prisoner." The believed that random assignment to either the role of guard or prisoner would result in significantly different reactions in the mock prison environment on behavioral measures of interaction, emotional measures of mood and pathology, attitudes toward self, as well as other indices of coping and adaptation to this novel situation (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

METHOD

Setting

Zimbardo's goal was to create a situation that would resemble a prison or jail as closely as possible; he brought in a consultant: an ex-convict who had been incarcerated for 17 years. Although for this study the prison would not be real and participants in the study would know this, Zimbardo wanted to be sure to *simulate* a real prison experience.

Using space in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University, Zimbardo supervised a crew as it transformed various rooms and hallways into a "prison." The prison had to be well-built because the study was planned to last for 2 weeks. Each end of a corridor was boarded up and the laboratory rooms became prison cells. To enhance realism, special cell doors were constructed with vertical bars for door windows and individual jail-cell numbers (see Figure 37-1). The enclosed hallway that ran along the cell

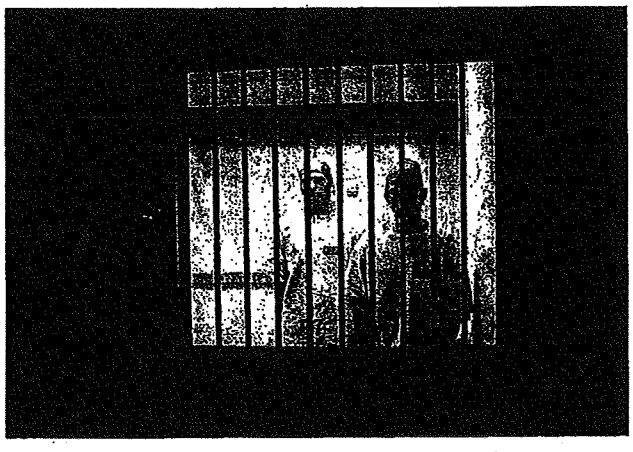

FIGURE 37-1 A typical "cell" at the "Stanford Prison." (Chuck Painter / Stanford News Service)

rooms was the "prison yard" where prisoner-participants would be allowed out of their cells to eat and move around. At the end of the hall was a small closet that would eventually be designated as solitary confinement for prisoners who were troublemakers, rebellious, disrespectful to the guards, or otherwise uncooperative. The bathroom was down the hall, but the guards would lead prisoners there blindfolded so they would not become aware of their location (Zimbardo, 2007b). The "prison" was equipped with a hidden observation camera and an intercom system that allowed the experimenters to maintain supervision of the guards' and prisoners' behavior.

Participants

If you are not already familiar with this famous study, what you are about to read may surprise or even shock you. As you read on, try to put yourselves into the mind-set of the participants. First, the researchers placed ads in local papers near Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, offering $15 per day (that would be about $75 today) for individuals to volunteer to participate in a research study about prison life. To ensure participants gave informed consent, volunteers were told about the general nature of the study and that during the study they might experience some violations of their personal privacy and civil rights and that the food they would receive might be minimal, although it would meet their basic nutritional needs. They all agreed to these provisions.

After extensive testing to screen out anyone with psychological problems or criminal backgrounds, 24 normal college-age men were selected from a group of nearly a hundred volunteers. Then, at random (by the flip of a coin), the men were divided into two groups of "prisoners" and "guards." Remember, Zimbardo's goal here was to separate internal, personality factors from the influence of the situation in determining behavior. Therefore, it was imperative for each group of participants, at the outset, to be as identical, on average, as possible (Zimbardo, 2005). Then all the participants went home, having received no instructions, no training, no preparation at all for what lay ahead.

Procedure

The goal of the study was to observe, record, and analyze the behavior of the prisoners and the guards. As mentioned, Zimbardo and his associates were looking for signs that the situations and roles into which these young men were placed would be strong enough to overcome their personal characteristics and behavioral tendencies as individuals.

The "Prisoners" Several days after the initial screening and selection, the participants assigned to the prisoner group were surprised at their homes on a Sunday morning by a knock on their door from an officer from the (real) Palo Alto Police Department. Each participant was "arrested" for armed robbery, searched, handcuffed, and whisked off to the station, sirens, lights, and all. Each prisoner was booked, fingerprinted, and thrown blindfolded into a

holding cell. Later, they were told that they were to be transported, still blindfolded, to the "Stanford County Jail" (this was the mock prison built in the psychology building basement).

When the prisoners arrived at the jail, the participants who were assigned to be guards proceeded to search (see Figure 37-2), strip, delouse (using an aerosol spray), and give each "inmate" a prison uniform consisting of a dress-like smock, each with a different four-digit number (these numbers would become the prisoners' names for the duration of the study), rubber sandals, a nylon stocking to wear over his hair at all times (to simulate head shaving, which occurs in most real prisons), and a chain wrapped around his ankle and padlocked (this was not attached to anything but was intended to serve as a reminder of prisoner status). Zimbardo pointed out that although these procedures varied from actual, real-life prison procedures, the idea behind them was to *simulate* the humiliation, repression, and entrapment inmates experience routinely in real prisons. The prisoners were assigned three to each small cell; each inmate had a cot with a thin mattress and one blanket. The three cots filled the space and there was virtually no extra room in the small cells.

The "Guards" Unlike the prisoners who were required to be in the prison 24/7 (they were incarcerated, after all), the guards worked 8-hour shifts, three men to a shift, and lived their normal lives when not on duty. They were given identical prison guard–style uniforms, nightsticks (although they were not allowed to strike prisoners), and reflective sunglasses designed to give them a menacing and anonymous appearance. Zimbardo explained that his idea for the mirrored sunglasses came from the 1967 film *Cool Hand Luke,* starring Paul Newman (Zimbardo, 2007). The guards received no

FIGURE 37-2 Stanford Prison "Guard" frisking new "Prisoner." (Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment)

specific training for their roles, and were merely charged with the responsibility of keeping the prisoners in line and maintaining order in the prison.

RESULTS

This is one of the most researched, discussed, and analyzed studies in the history of psychology. The personality and behavioral changes that occurred in the guards and the prisoners were profound and alarming. To summarize the complex findings in the limited space available here, specific, representative behaviors of the participants are condensed in Table 37-1. More generally, however, here is what happened over the next several days in the "Stanford Prison."

Faster than anyone would have predicted, the true identities and personalities of the prisoners and guards seemed to vanish, and the roles they were being asked to play took over. Within a day the line between "play" and real life became disturbingly blurred. As Zimbardo wrote of the participants in his original study (1972):

> The majority had indeed become "prisoners" and "guards," no longer able to clearly differentiate between role playing and self. . . . In less than a week, the experience of imprisonment undid (temporarily) a lifetime of learning; human values were suspended, self-concepts were challenged and the ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced. We were horrified because we saw some boys (guards) treat others as if they were despicable animals, taking pleasure in cruelty, while other boys (prisoners) became servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival and of their mounting hatred for the guards (p. 4).

Remember, this was a scientific study conducted by highly qualified, professional researchers, and it was rapidly taking on a life of its own. The participants, especially those given the role of prisoners, seemed to forget that they were college students with free will; they could have simply quit the study at any time, but they did not. After several days, many were pleading to be paroled, to be released, but when release was denied, they simply returned to their cells, dejected but obedient. The emotional breakdown and stress reactions of 5 of the prisoner-participants were so extreme that they became depressed, were unable to think clearly, and stopped eating, They had to be released from the study (or perhaps, more appropriately, from *the prison*) within the study's first several days.

Some of the guards took to tormenting the prisoners, apparently enjoying the power of their positions. Some of the guards were less strict and tried to be fair, but they never interfered with the more tyrannical guards and, more importantly, never went to the experimenters to suggest that the other guards might be "over the top" in their roles. Even Zimbardo himself forgot, at times, that he was in charge of a scientific study and found himself slipping into the role of "prison superintendent."

TABLE 37-1 "Prisoner" and "Guard" Behaviors and Reactions During the "Stanford Prison" Study

THE "GUARDS"	THE "PRISONERS"
Used demeaning, degrading language with prisoners; harassed and intimidated them	Quickly became docile, subservient, and conformed to the rules set by the guards
Made humiliating comments to prisoners (e.g., "Prisoner 2354, go over and tell prisoner 2578 that you love him.")	Showed clear and early signs of trauma and depression, including crying and profound depression
Raucously awakened all prisoners in the middle of the night (every night) for "inmate counts"	Begged to be paroled
Frequently used push-ups as punishment for minor offenses (One guard stepped on a prisoner's back as he was attempting to carry out the push-up punishment.) Appeared to enjoy their sadistic control over the prisoners	Agreed to forfeit all payment in exchange for release
Shot a fire extinguisher (ice-cold CO_2) at prisoners to quell a rebellion	Experienced uncontrollable crying and rage and disorganized thinking
Placed prisoners in solitary confinement for entire nights Made visiting the bathroom a privilege, at times denying visits and placing a waste bucket in their cell	Planned and staged a "rebellion" that involved removing stocking caps, tearing off uniform numbers, barricading the cells with beds, and cursing and taunting the guards
Positioned an informant (a confederate of the experimenters) in the cells to spy on prisoners for signs of escape or rebellion plans	Designed an elaborate escape plan that never materialized
Stripped prisoners naked to achieve order following exposed escape plan; removed prisoners' beds and forced prisoners to give up blankets	Eventually gave up all attempts at rebellion and solidarity.
Allowed "privileges" (better food, teeth brushing, washing, etc.) to prisoners at random in an effort to divide and conquer and to break prisoner camaraderie, trust, and solidarity	Assumed an every-man-for-himself attitude, abandoning solidarity with other prisoners
Forced prisoners to clean toilets with their bare hands, extended "night counts" to several hours long, increased number of push-ups: all as punishment for the attempted escape	Docilely accepted with increasing hopelessness the guards' degrading and sadistic treatment of them as the study progressed
Were creative and inventive in finding ways of breaking the prisoners' spirit	After 6 days, all became completely passive and dehumanized, robotlike

(Haney et al., 1973; Zimbardo, 1972; Zimbardo, 2005; Zimbardo, 2007b.)

RECENT APPLICATIONS

As is true of Milgram's study of obedience (see Reading 40) Zimbardo's prison study has generated sweeping social and political effects over the 30-plus intervening years. It is difficult if not impossible to discuss Zimbardo's findings without

acknowledging the political nature of the research. One of the most controversial and heated issues facing the United States, and most countries worldwide, is prison reform. Throughout history, the systematic abuse of prisoners has been well documented and continues to this day. The headline history in the United States of prison riots, uprisings, rebellions, kidnappings, and murders from the time of Zimbardo's study to the present is filled with parallels, on a larger scale, to the events in that basement at Stanford. To aggravate further the potential for prisoner abuse, the number of inmates in U.S. prisons and jails grew from approximately 500,000 in 1980 to over 2.2 million in 2006 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007). This is the highest prisoner population of any country in the world. Moreover, since the mid-1970s the goal of rehabilitation in prisons has been generally abandoned (although the phrase *correctional facilities* is still in wide use) and replaced with the goals of punishment and removing offenders from the public (referred to as *incapacitation*). In 1998, Zimbardo and Haney analyzed how the prison system had changed since their study at Stanford. Here, in Zimbardo's words are their conclusion at that time:

> Prisons continue to be failed social experiments using a dispositional [internal] model of punishment, and isolation of offenders rather than any basic rehabilitation practices that might reduce persistently high rates of recidivism. What our analysis revealed was that prison conditions had significantly worsened in the decades since our study as a consequence of the politicization of prisons, with politicians, prosecutors, DAs, and other officials taking a hard line on crime as a means of currying favor of an electorate made fearful of crime by media exaggerations. (Zimbardo, 2005)

As you have been reading this, you may have been thinking about the possible links between Zimbardo's prison study and the events that have occurred, and are occurring, in the war in Iraq and the subsequent U.S. occupation of that country. Several highly publicized events, especially the prisoner abuse scandals at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq and the reports of detainee abuse at the Guantanamo detention camp in Cuba (see Hooks & Mosher, 2005; Keller, 200), have brought the "Stanford Prison Study" back into the spotlight. Zimbardo, in his recent book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007a), has revisited the prison study and expanded his research and commentary on prisoner abuse beyond prisons to the larger concept of human evil. We are disbelieving that events such as Abu Ghraib could ever truly happen—that anyone, especially citizens of a free, democratic society, could have engaged in such sadistic treatment of other humans. How could this be? Psychologists, such as Zimbardo, and other social scientists, have tried to help us understand; as the authors of one study about these abuses stated:

> Journalists have looked to social scientific research to understand the abuse in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world. These accounts move away from an emphasis on a few "bad apples" and call into question an emphasis on punishing the lowest ranking soldiers. Zimbardo's (1972) research figures prominently in these accounts. He rejects out of hand the "bad apple" thesis, suggesting instead that the barrel is bad. Zimbardo faulted the Bush administration with a

> "failure of leadership" and emphasized that the abusive interrogation techniques and harsh treatment of prisoners were "authorized from the top down" by military commanders and by the highest-ranking officials in the Bush administration. (Hooks & Mosher, 2005, pp. 1632–1633)

In report after report from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo, we have heard about and seen in graphic detail the horrendous abuses and torture of prisoners carried out by guards and interrogators, who, like Zimbardo's prison participants are not, by all accounts, sadistic, brutal people. They are essentially normal people, perhaps not so different from you and me, who are drastically transformed by what may ultimately be the most powerful situational force of all for evil: war.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, Zimbardo had planned for a 2-week study, yet he decided to call it off after only 6 days because the mock prison situation was so powerful that it had morphed, in alarming ways, into reality. These were no longer randomly assigned university students and experimenters; they had become their roles, had transformed into prisoners, guards, and wardens. These roles were so powerful that individual identities dissolved to the point that the participants, and even the experimenters, had difficulty realizing just how dangerous the behaviors in the "Stanford Prison" had become. Zimbardo wrote about his decision to halt the study as follows:

> I terminated the experiment not only because of the escalating level of violence and degradation by the "guards" against the "prisoners" . . . but also because I was made aware of the personal transformation that I was undergoing personally. . . . I had become a Prison Superintendent, the second role I played in addition to that of Principal Investigator. I began to talk, walk and act like a rigid institutional authority figure more concerned about the security of "my prison" than the needs of the young men entrusted to my care as a psychological researcher. In a sense, I consider that the most profound measure of the power of this situation was the extent to which it transformed me. (Zimbardo, 2005, p. 40; see also, Zimbardo, Maslach, & Haney, 1999).

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