

STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

The Stanford Prison Experiment was a social psychology study in which college students became prisoners or guards in a simulated prison environment. It took place at Stanford University in August 1971. It was intended to measure the effect of role-playing, labeling, and social expectations on behavior over a period of two weeks. The principal investigator was American psychologist Philip Zimbardo. He advertised his experiment as a “psychological study of prison.”

More than 70 men responded to the advertisement. 24 were chosen based on their physical and mental health. They were paid \$15 a day. The experiment was designed to study the behavior of individuals when assigned the role of prisoner or guard.

Zimbardo’s method was to randomly divide the participants into equal numbers of guards and prisoners who would interact in a mock prison created in the basement of a campus building. The experiment was designed with researchers videotaping all the participants.

At the start, the guards were given uniforms. To prevent eye contact, they also were issued mirrored sunglasses. The prisoners, on the other hand, were sent home, only to be “arrested” the next morning by real police officers. They were then booked at a real police station and taken to “prison.”

The participants who were assigned as guards were given no specific instructions except not to physically abuse prisoners. Despite this, after only a few days, they began to treat “prisoners” like they were in a real-life prison environment: they prevented prisoners from eating, took away their bedding, forced them to remove their clothes, and even punished them with chores such as cleaning dirty toilets.

Very quickly, the prisoners began to submit to the guards. They were shown cowering and shaking when the guards appeared. Videotape confirmed that within only 36 hours, one prisoner had become so distressed he began to cry uncontrollably and to act out in fits of rage.

The experiment was canceled after only six days because of the troubling signs of prisoners breaking down mentally.

Although the Stanford Prison Experiment was unethical, Zimbardo’s findings became famous. He showed how human behavior is situational and that people will conform to certain roles if the conditions are right. The experiment indicated, in Dr. Zimbardo’s words, how “ordinary college students could do terrible things.” The experiment has become one of the most widely cited in the field of psychology.

Sources:

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