

Revisiting the Stanford Prison Experiment.

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ABSTRACT

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) is one of the most infamous psychology experiments and is frequently mentioned in textbooks. Conducted in 1971 by Philip Zimbardo, the SPE aimed to explore and understand how individuals conform when given orders by an authority figure, as well as to demonstrate how being given power can lead to abuse. However, the experiment was riddled with methodological flaws and has been debunked by many modern researchers and psychologists. Despite this, the SPE continues to captivate the public and is often cited as evidence that ordinary, good people can commit harmful and violent acts when placed in positions of power. Nevertheless, due to its deeply flawed methodology and numerous ethical violations, it can be argued that the primary lesson of the SPE is not about human behavior but about what not to do in psychological research.

1. Methodology

When doing a deep dive into the SPE, the true purpose of its design can be questioned. The stated goal was to replicate a prison environment and observe how participants behaved based on their assigned roles. While the experiment does address this, there are striking parallels between the prisoners' arrival in the SPE and the treatment of Jewish people upon arriving at Nazi concentration camps. In *The Lucifer Effect* (TLE), Zimbardo frequently references some of history's darkest events, including the Holocaust (Zimbardo, 2007). In the mock prison, participants were stripped, hosed down, made to wear nylon caps to simulate shaved heads, given clogs, and identified only by numbers sewn onto their smocks (Zimbardo, 2007). Similarly, Jewish prisoners arriving at Nazi concentration

camps were stripped, shaved, assigned identification numbers, and given clogs (The Wiener Holocaust Library, n.d.). Additional similarities between the two include the use of buckets for human waste, mandatory roll calls that happened multiple times a day, and abusive treatment. This raises the question: Was Zimbardo consciously or unconsciously attempting to replicate a concentration camp environment in addition to a prison? Given that Zimbardo was an educated social psychologist whose primary interest was darker human behavior, it seems unlikely he was unaware of these similarities.

Not many people know TSPE wasn't entirely Zimbardo's original idea. Researcher Thibault Le Texier uncovered that a smaller-scale version of the SPE, known as the Toyon Hall Experiment, was conducted just four months earlier by David Jaffe, an undergraduate student of

Zimbardo's. As part of a class assignment for Zimbardo, Jaffe and the other students were given several topics to choose from, one of which was about prison life. He chose this topic and carried out the experiment in his dormitory over a weekend with six guards and six prisoners. The results showed that, after some mild resistance, the prisoners became submissive to the guard's authority except for one female prisoner who fought the orders. It could be argued that since she was female, she felt safe from experiencing the same level of abuse that the rest of the prisoners were experiencing. Zimbardo was reportedly intrigued by Jaffe's findings and decided to expand on to Jaffe's idea, which led to the SPE. Since Zimbardo was a well-respected professor and psychologist, he would have access to funding and could create a more realistic mock prison. Interestingly, Jaffe also participated in the SPE, playing the role of the warden (Le Texier, 2019). This is relevant to issues with the methodology because assigning Jaffe as the warden raises significant concerns about the credibility of the experiment. Jaffe had prior knowledge and expectations about the experiment, having conducted a similar study beforehand. This prior involvement may suggest that the abusive actions of the guards were not only situational, as the study claimed to demonstrate, but were potentially influenced by Jaffe's presence and input. His prior understanding of the dynamics and potential outcomes may have shaped or reinforced the behavior of the guards, especially since he was warden.

While reading TLE, it becomes clear that Zimbardo was too involved in the experiment. He was frequently consulting with the guards and even making them believe they were not part of the study. Zimbardo recounts praising a guard after he was particularly harsh toward the prisoners,

saying, "Right on. Way to go!" (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 45). This is troubling as it's clear positive reinforcement for the behavior Zimbardo seemed to encourage. Although it's unclear how often reinforcement was used in the experiment, it's possible that even a single instance could have significantly influenced the results, as it may have made the guards more aware of the expectations and the behavior Zimbardo was seeking. Another example of Zimbardo's excessive involvement is his decision to give himself the title of superintendent. This not only made it clear to participants where which side he was on, but it also placed him in the highest level of authority (Zimbardo, 2007). In Milgram's obedience experiment, the results showed that people tend to conform and obey requests from perceived authority figures (McLeod, 2024). Given that Zimbardo was both the experimenter and perceived as the highest authority, it's likely that participants were more likely to conform to his expectations, especially if reinforcement was being applied.

Another problem with the methodology of the SPE is how participants were selected, as well as the participants themselves. It can be known from reading TLE that the SPE did not use a random sample that would accurately represent a prison population. The only thing that was random was the coin toss used to determine whether participants would be assigned the roles of guards or prisoners. Except for one Asian participant, all the participants were white college students. The lack of diversity is unrealistic because a real prison would have individuals of all races. Since they were all college students, they were also likely close in age, which is another flaw. Prisons have individuals of all ages, so this is not a realistic representation. In terms of age, the participants were likely between 19-25 years old, as most were college students. A study

found that men aged 15-25 have the highest levels of aggression, with aggression peaking around age 25 (Kim et al., 2008). While the exact ages of the participants are not known, it can be assumed that most were within this age range. Keeping in mind the study by Kim et al., we know that this age group typically has the most aggression, which could explain some of the aggressive behavior seen in the experiment.

Participants being paid \$15 per day (Le Texier, 2019) can be seen as another issue with the methodology, especially when considering the time period. In the 1970s, \$15 was a decent amount of money, and for college students, it may have been especially appealing. Students are less financially stable and the money being offered to participate could help them buy groceries, textbooks or aid in paying bills. This payment could have made participants more likely to stay in the experiment, even if they wanted to leave. It's been revealed that participants believed they would only receive payment at the end of the experiment, which could have led them to think that dropping out would mean forfeiting their compensation (Le Texier, 2019). This financial aspect of TSPE could have encouraged the participants to stay, even if they were feeling distressed.

2. Ethics

This section of the essay will discuss the horrendous events that transpired during the SPE to support the argument that the experiment was fundamentally unethical. Morals were nearly non-existent throughout the study and its questionable how the experiment was not rejected by the ethics committee. From the very beginning, there was a lack of preparation and care. For instance, Zimbardo writes in TLE about the first day of the study, where prisoners were

not given lunch simply because he forgot (Zimbardo, 2007). This reflects his irresponsibility and unpreparedness at the very beginning of the experiment.

Additionally, in order to participate, the students assigned as prisoners had to agree to inhumane terms, such as not having access to their medications or eyeglasses (Zimbardo, 2007). It's possible that these terms were only agreed to because of the financial compensation being offered, highlighting another ethical issue regarding informed consent. Participants may have prioritized money over their personal well-being, which could have pressured them into agreeing to conditions they might not have otherwise accepted. In TLE, Zimbardo recounts how one prisoner had to leave the experiment after developing a severe rash that required medical treatment. This raises the question of whether this participant was supposed to be taking daily medication and if his health was compromised due to the lack of access to it.

The mock cells where prisoners were kept lacked basic human necessities. The cells did not include essential facilities such as toilets, and only one cell had a sink to access to water. This sink, was under the control of the guards, allowing them to restrict access at will (Zimbardo, 2007). Denying participants access to drinking water violates a basic human right and shows the unethical nature of the experiment. The limited accesses to water is even more troubling when considering the excessive physical exercises forced on the prisoners as punishments. These exercises likely increased the need for hydration, and the lack of available water could have put the participants at severe risk of dehydration.

Punishments in the SPE varied significantly in severity, with physical exercise surprisingly being the least extreme method. One of the most degrading incidents

mentioned in TLE involved a guard, named "Hellman," who ordered prisoners to play a degrading game of leapfrog. The prisoners that were only dressed in smocks without underwear, were ordered to leap over each other, exposing their genitals during the process. The dehumanization escalated when Hellmann ordered only two prisoners to continue the game and mocked them by saying, "That's the way dogs do it. Isn't it?... Why don't you make like a dog?" (Zimbardo, 2007, p.120). This incident is deeply troubling as it enters the realm of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can be defined as "when a person knowingly causes another person to engage in a sex act by threatening or placing the other person in fear" (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, n.d.). The guards ordering of the prisoners to engage in this degrading act, combined with their position of authority and the prisoners fear of further punishments, aligns with this definition. The experience of sexual abuse often leaves long-lasting psychological scars, contributing to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Zimbardo's decision to allow events in TSPE to escalate to a level that could be classified as sexual abuse represents a severe breach of trust and ethical responsibility. By failing to intervene and prevent such dehumanizing acts, Zimbardo not only compromised the well-being of the participants but also violated ethical standards that guide psychological research.

3. Conclusion

The Stanford Prison Experiment received too much praise from the psychological field after its publication. The widespread response to its findings made the experiment infamous, and it continues to be widely discussed today. However, given its deeply

flawed methodology and severe ethical violations, it can be argued that this experiment should no longer be taught to students or included in textbooks, except as an example of what not to do. Zimbardo's active involvement in the study went well beyond simply overseeing it. His significant bias of what he believed would happen directly influenced the behaviors of both guards and prisoners. The main guard (Jaffe) already had expectations of the experiment's outcome, and the lack of diversity in the participant selection further undermines the study's scientific validity, as it failed to reflect a realistic prison population. Furthermore, Zimbardo's neglected the oath to do no harm, by allowing excessive abuse to escalate unchecked, highlights his failure to respect basic ethical standards. The prisoners were deprived of basic human rights, including access to toilets and water, and were subjected to severe psychological harm, including sexual abuse. The disregard for ethical guidelines, alongside a questionable methodology, means the Stanford Prison Experiment should no longer be revered in the field of psychology, and its involvement in academic textbooks should be reconsidered.

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