

## MILLENNIAL STUDENTS MEET THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

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One of classic experiments in sociology is remembered as a fiasco with disastrous results. In the late summer of 1971, the Stanford Prison Experiment had to be halted because of the bizarre behavior of the research subjects. In a mock prison established at Stanford University, the designated student "guards" had become sadistic, abusive, unreasonable, even subhuman. The designated student "prisoners," meanwhile, had begun to act like real prisoners, forfeiting their right to simply quit or resign from the experiment, and asking for friends, family or lawyers to intervene on their behalf. Due to the depression and the psychological stress of the experiment on the prisoners, the planned two-week experiment had to be aborted after six days. Though the experiment occurred long ago, I thought that it would be an interesting topic for today's students to explore. This paper is the story of the experiment itself, the lessons learned from it, and what several cohorts of introductory sociology students at a teaching institution of the millennial era got out of their exploration of the experiment.

### BACKGROUND OF THE EXPERIMENT

Technically, the experiment was a psychological experiment, as it was conducted by the Psychology Department at Stanford University under the direction of Philip Zimbardo. However, the experiment was important to the closely related fields of criminology and sociology, and became a classic in both fields despite the negative outcome.

Research experimentation in psychology showed promise and yielded prolific results. However, some attempts to expand the research to larger social groups proved troublesome. For example, social psychologist Muzafer Sherif (1961) conducted a field experiment with 12 year old boys at a summer camp, and the final stages of the experiment had to be curtailed because the boys were in danger of being seriously hurt. The boys in the study were divided into two groups. Then, through the manipulations of the researchers, the groups were brought into competition and conflict. For a number of days the conflict was limited to apple-throw-

ing fights and to raids on each other's cabins. But in a final severe confrontation in the dining hall, the two groups of boys faced off and the situation became dangerous. Some of the boys started to throw silverware and plates. The researchers quickly stepped in and stopped the hostilities, and also concluded that phase of the experiment. The Stanley Milgram (1964, 1975) experiments on obedience were also controversial in that some of the subjects were lead to believe that they had administered potentially lethal electronic shocks to selected subjects in the study. Critics wondered about the psychological pain inflicted upon these subjects, who were harboring thoughts that they had just killed someone during a psychological experiment. Was the "naïve" subject necessary, or could such data be collected using alternative research designs such as role playing? (O'Leary, Willis and Tomich 1970; Mixon 1972; Patten 1977). Furthermore, ethical discussions ensued about how to better inform research subjects about the nature of their participation in experiments (Baumrind 1964).

The research questions asked at the beginning of the Stanford experiment appeared to be more philosophical than experimental. What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph? Absent in the experiment was the kind of experimental rigor one might expect from a study conducted at an elite school: the hypotheses were not clearly stated, there appeared to be no independent or dependent variable, and there was no control group. The "experiment" was basically exploratory research on the psychology of prison life. Despite that, Zimbardo went ahead with his unusual study in August of 1971. Much of the information summarized below is presented at the prison experiment's web page (Zimbardo 2005), and is presented here as contextual background information about the experiment.

Potential recruits for the study were invited to answer an ad in a local newspaper calling for people to volunteer in a study of the psychological effects of prison life. The research design called for setting up a simu-

lated prison and then carefully noting the effects of this institution on the behavior of all those within its walls, including prisoners, guards, administration, and support staff.

Diagnostic interviews and personality tests were given to more than 70 applicants who had answered the ad. This process eliminated candidates that might not fare well in the mock prison setting, such as those with psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse. After this screening, a sample of 24 college students remained. They were from the U.S. and Canada, they happened to be in the Stanford area, and wanted to earn \$15 per day by participating in the study. On all dimensions that could be tested or observed by the research staff, they reacted normally.

By flip of a coin, the healthy, intelligent, middle-class males were divided into two groups. One was randomly assigned to be the prison guards while the other group became prisoners. At the beginning, the researchers could see no difference at all between the young men in the two groups.

In an effort to make the experiment as real as possible, the Stanford psychologists called upon the knowledge and experience of special consultants, including a former inmate who had served nearly seventeen years in prison. This person in turn was able to introduce the research staff to a number of other ex-convicts and correctional personnel.

The mock 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 use the bathroom down the hallway. To create prison cells, the researchers took the doors off some laboratory rooms and replaced them with specially made doors with steel bars and cell numbers.

Through a small opening at one end of the hall, researchers 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. Additionally, an intercom system allowed the researchers 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, the Stanford "jail" was ready to receive its first prisoners.

### **THE EXPERIMENT BEGINS**

This very realistic experiment got under way on a Sunday morning in August 1971 when a Palo Alto police car swept through the town picking up the soon to be student prisoners for violations of the Armed Robbery and Burglary penal codes. Each 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 neighbors looked on. The suspect was then put in the rear of the police car and carried off to the police station, sirens wailing. After 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 to wonder what he had done to get himself into this mess. Later, the prisoners were put into a car and driven to the "Stanford County Jail" for further processing. The prisoners were brought into the experimental prison one at a time and greeted by the warden, who conveyed the seriousness of their offense and their new status as prisoners.

Next, the prisoners went through a "degradation procedure" (Garfinkel 1956) that was designed in part to humiliate prisoners and to strip them of their identity, and in part to be sure they weren't bringing in any germs to contaminate the jail. (This procedure was similar to the real life experiences of ex-inmates in the state of Texas' prison system). Each prisoner was systematically searched and stripped naked. He was then deloused with a spray, to convey the belief of the research staff that he may have germs or lice.

Prisoners then received 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 foot-wear, and each prisoner covered his hair with a stocking cap

made from a woman's nylon stocking.

The psychologists were trying to create a functional simulation of a prison and not a literal prison. As noted on the Stanford Prison Experiment web site, real male prisoners don't wear dresses, but real male prisoners do feel humiliated and do feel emasculated. The goal was to produce similar effects quickly by putting men in a dress without any underclothes. As soon as some of the prisoners were put in these uniforms they began to walk and to sit differently, and to hold themselves differently, more like a woman than like a man.

It is also uncommon in most prisons for the prisoners to have chains on their feet. Here, the chains were used to remind prisoners of the oppressiveness of their environment. Even when prisoners were asleep, they could not escape the atmosphere of oppression. When a prisoner turned over, the chain would hit his other foot, waking him up and reminding him that he was still in prison, unable to escape even by dreaming about being somewhere else.

Prisoners were made to feel anonymous by use of ID numbers. Each prisoner had to be called only by his ID number and could only refer to himself and the other prisoners by number.

Instead of shaving each prisoner's head, they were issued stocking caps to wear. Again, the idea here is to approximate the conditions of a functional prison and not to create the actual conditions of a real prison. The process of having one's head shaved, which takes place in most prisons as well as in the military, is designed in part to minimize each person's individuality, since some people show their individuality through hair style or length. It is also a way of getting people to begin complying with the arbitrary, coercive rules of the institution.

The guards received no training on how to be guards. They had freedom within reasonable 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 a Stanford undergraduate. The situation was similar in some aspects to that in the Abu Ghraib scandal, where national guardsmen found themselves supervising an Iraqi prisoner with minimal guidance or training. The student guards at Stan-

ford were warned, however, of the potential seriousness of their mission and of the possible dangers in the situation they were about to enter. Real guards who voluntarily take such a dangerous job receive similar warnings, whether it be at Abu Ghraib or at any other correctional facility.

The experimental 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. This was not a surprise to them; it was part of the informed consent agreement they signed when they volunteered.

All guards were dressed in identical uniforms of khaki, and they carried a whistle around their neck and a billy club borrowed from the police. Guards also wore special sun-glasses, mirrored ones that prevented anyone from seeing their eyes or reading their emotions, and thus helped to further promote their anonymity. The research design called for studying not only the prisoners but also the guards, who found themselves in a new power-laden role.

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

Early in the morning, at 2:30 A.M., the prisoners were awakened by blasting whistles for the first of many "counts." The counts served the purpose of familiarizing the prisoners with their numbers as counts took place several times each shift and often at night. More importantly, these staged events provided a regular occasion for the guards to exercise control over the prisoners. Initially at least, 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 were also getting acquainted with their new roles and were not yet sure how to assert authority or control over their prisoners. This turned out to be the start of several direct confrontations between the guards and prisoners.

To punish infractions of the rules or displays of improper attitudes toward the guards

or institution, push-ups became a common form of punishment. When the guards demanded push-ups from the prisoners, the researchers at first thought this was an inappropriate kind of punishment for a prison (real or simulated), a rather juvenile and minimal form of punishment, similar to frat-house hazing. But, the staff was surprised to learn later that push-ups were often used as a form of punishment in Nazi concentration camps, as discovered in the drawing of a former concentration camp inmate.

## REBELLION

As there were no incidents on the first day, the staff was caught off guard by the rebellion that swept the prison 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. What would the guards do about this situation? They were quite angry 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 the staff was intrigued by what happened next.

To begin, the guards 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 cold carbon dioxide, and they forced the prisoners away from the doors.

Each cell was broken into by the guards, each prisoner stripped naked, the beds were taken out, and the ringleaders of the prisoner rebellion were put into solitary confinement. The guards generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.

The rebellion was snuffed, but a new problem arose quickly to take its place. Nine guards with clubs could subdue the nine prisoners, but the study had been structured in such a way that nine guards could not be on duty all at the same time – there would be no way for any break time or any time off, for that matter. Moreover, the budget of the experiment did not allow for hiring more guards, or even for having them all work together at once.

One of the guards came up with a solution. He urged his peers to use psychological tactics instead of physical ones. The psychological tactics amounted to setting up a privilege cell.

The staff decided to designate one of the three cells 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. This went on for about a half a day before tactics were changed.

To confuse the prisoners as much as they could, 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. 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. The ex-convict consultants later informed the staff that a similar tactic is used by real guards in real prisons to break prisoner alliances. By dividing and conquering in this way, guards broke the solidarity among the prisoners and promoted aggression among inmates, thereby deflecting it from themselves.

Another unexpected outcome of the rebellion was the producing of greater solidarity among the guards. The guards no longer perceived the prison as an experiment or a simple simulation. Now, 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.

At this point, just about every aspect of the prisoners' behavior fell under the total and arbitrary control of the guards. Even going to the toilet became a privilege which a guard could grant or deny at his whim. After each night's 10:00 P.M. lights out "lock-up," prisoners were often forced to urinate or defecate in a bucket that was left in their cell. On occasion the guards would not allow prisoners to empty these buckets. Soon the prison began to smell of urine and feces, further adding to the degrading quality of the environment.

The ringleader of the rebellion was

singled out for especially harsh treatment. He was a heavy smoker, and they controlled him by regulating his opportunity to smoke. Later the staff learned, while censoring the prisoners' mail, that he was a self-styled radical activist. He had volunteered in order to "expose" the experiment, which he mistakenly thought was an establishment tool to find ways to control student radicals. In fact, he had planned to sell the story to an underground newspaper when the experiment was over. However, even he fell so completely into the role of prisoner that he was proud to be elected leader of the Stanford County Jail Grievance Committee, as revealed in a letter to his girlfriend.

Not yet into the third day, one of the prisoners began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, crying, and rage. In spite of all of this, the staff had already come to think so much like prison authorities that they thought the prisoner was trying to "con" them in an attempt to gain his release. When a prison consultant interviewed this particular prisoner, 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. The prisoner was then given the offer of becoming an informant in exchange for no further guard harassment.

This prisoner told other prisoners at the next count, "You can't leave. You can't quit." That sent a chilling message and heightened their sense of really being imprisoned. The prisoner 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 the staff became convinced that he was really suffering and that he needed to be released.

### **PUBLIC SCRUTINY**

The following day, the staff held a visiting hour for parents and friends. Dr. Zimbardo and associates were worried that when the parents saw the state of the mock jail, they might insist on taking their sons home. To counter this, Zimbardo manipulated both the situation and the visitors by making the "front stage" of the prison environment seem pleasant and benign (Goffman 1959). As he notes on the web site, the prisoners were washed, shaved, and groomed; they cleaned and polished their cells; and, they were fed a big dinner. Music was played on the inter-

com, and a former Stanford cheerleader was recruited to greet the visitors at the registration desk.

As the visitors arrived, the staff manipulated their behavior and brought it under the staff's situational control, essentially "framing" the mock prison environment (Goffman 1974). Visitors had to register, were made to wait half an hour, were told that only two visitors could see any one prisoner, were limited to only ten minutes of visiting time, and had to be under the surveillance of a guard during the visit. Before any parents could enter the visiting area, they also had to discuss their son's case with the Warden. Parents complained about these arbitrary rules, but remarkably, they complied with them.

Observing how fatigued and stressed their sons looked, a few parents got upset with the staff. Amazingly, their reaction was to work within the system to appeal privately to the Superintendent to make conditions better for their boy. When one mother told me she had never seen her son looking so bad, Zimbardo responded by shifting the blame from the situation to her son. "What's the matter with your boy? Doesn't he sleep well?" Then he asked the father, "Don't you think your boy can handle this?" The father replied, "Of course he can — he's a real tough kid, a leader."

### **THE ESCAPE PLOT**

The next major event that the staff had to contend with was a rumored mass escape plot. One of the guards overheard the prisoners talking about an escape that would take place immediately after visiting hours. The rumor that circulated went like this: the prisoner showing the signs of extreme stress that had been released the night before, was going to round up a bunch of his friends and break in to free the prisoners.

The staff showed evidence of having adopted the "prison staff mode" and were not really thinking or acting like experimental social psychologists. Instead of recording the pattern of rumor transmission and preparing to observe the impending escape, the staff reacted with concern about the security of the prison. The staff held a strategy session with the Warden, the Superintendent, and one of the chief lieutenants, to plan how to foil the escape.

Afterwards, the staff decided to put an informant (an experimental confederate) in the

cell that #8612 (the stressed prisoner that was released) had occupied. The job of the informant would be to give information about the escape plot. Meanwhile, Dr. Zimbardo asked the Palo Alto Police Department if inmates could be transferred from the mock jail to one of the city's old jails. The request was turned down because the Palo Alto Police would not be covered by their insurance carrier if prisoners were moved into their jail. Zimbardo, now totally into the role of prison administrator, left angry and disgusted at this lack of cooperation from the city.

Then the staff formulated a second plan. The plan was to dismantle the mock jail after the visitors left, call in more guards, chain the prisoners together, put bags over their heads, and transport them to a fifth floor storage room until after the anticipated break in. When the conspirators came, Dr. Zimbardo would be sitting there alone. He would tell them that the experiment was over and he had sent all of their friends home, that there was nothing left to liberate. After they left, the prisoners come back and security is redoubled at the prison. Zimbardo's notes say that he even thought of luring #8612 back on some pretext and then imprisoning him again because he was released on false pretenses.

The prison break turned out to be just a rumor. It never materialized. The reaction showed just how deeply internalized their mock prison roles had become. The staff had spent an entire day planning to foil the escape, begging the police department for help, moving the prisoners to another location, and dismantling most of the prison. They were so busy that they collected no data at all. An opportunity to study the social psychological processes in rumor development and transmission was tragically lost, but instead the staff was more frustrated about the fact that they had lost control of the prisoners, had allowed the prisoners to fool them, and had been unable to "even the score" in this situation. As Dr. Zimbardo writes on the web site, the staff was very angry, and someone was going to pay for this.

The prisoners ended up paying the price. The guards again escalated very noticeably their level of harassment, increasing the humiliation they made the prisoners suffer, forcing them to do menial, repetitive work such as cleaning out toilet bowls with their bare hands. The guards had prisoners do push-

ups, jumping jacks, whatever the guards could think up, and they increased the length of the counts to several hours each.

### **NEARING THE END**

Philip Zimbardo invited a Catholic priest who had been a prison chaplain to evaluate how realistic the prison situation was, and the result was truly astonishing or "Kafkaesque" as the principal investigator wrote in his notes. The chaplain interviewed each prisoner individually, and Dr. Zimbardo watched in amazement as half the prisoners introduced themselves by number rather than name. After some small talk, he (the chaplain) popped the key question:

Son, what are you doing to get out of here?

When the prisoners responded with puzzlement, he explained that the only way to get out of prison was with the help of a lawyer. He then volunteered to contact their parents to get legal aid if they wanted him to, and some of the prisoners accepted his offer. There was no discussion of negotiating a release or of simply resigning the study; hopes of that had faded long ago.

Only one prisoner did not want to speak to the priest - prisoner #819, who was feeling sick, had refused to eat, and wanted to see a doctor. Eventually he was persuaded to come out of his cell and talk to the priest and superintendent so Zimbardo could see for himself what kind of a doctor he needed. While talking to the staff, he broke down and began to cry hysterically, just as had the other two boys released earlier. Dr. Zimbardo took the chain off his foot, the cap off his head, and told him to go and rest in a room that was adjacent to the prison yard. Zimbardo promised that he would get the prisoner some food and then take him to see a doctor. In the meantime, he heard fellow prisoners mocking him and shouting insults. Zimbardo returned quickly to the room where he had left the prisoner, and found the boy sobbing uncontrollably while in the background his fellow prisoners were yelling that he was a bad prisoner. No longer was the chanting disorganized and full of fun, as it had been on the first day. Now it was marked by strict conformity and compliance, as if a single voice was saying, "#819 is bad."

Dr. Zimbardo suggested that the prisoner exit the study now, but the prisoner refused.

He said that he could not leave because the others had labeled him a bad prisoner. Even though he was feeling sick, he wanted to go back and prove to his peers that he was not a bad prisoner.

At that point Zimbardo said,

Listen, you are not #819. You are [his name], and my name is Dr. Zimbardo. I am a psychologist, not a prison superintendent, and this is not a real prison. This is just an experiment, and those are students, not prisoners, just like you. Let's go.

Zimbardo's notes said:

He stopped crying suddenly, looked up at me like a small child awakened from a nightmare, and replied, 'Okay, let's go.'

The following day, all prisoners who thought they had grounds for being paroled were chained together and individually brought before the Parole Board. The Board was composed mainly of people who were strangers to the prisoners (departmental secretaries and graduate students) and was headed by one of the prison consultants.

The parole hearings produced anomalous results. First, when the prisoners were asked whether they would forfeit the money they had earned up to that time if we were to parole them, most said that "yes," they would. Then, when the hearing was over and prisoners were ordered back to their cells while the staff considered their requests, every prisoner obeyed, even though they could have achieved the same result by simply quitting the experiment. Why did they obey? Zimbardo believed that it was because they were powerless to resist. The prisoners' sense of reality had shifted, and they no longer perceived their imprisonment as an experiment. In the psychological prison that had been created, only the correctional staff had the power to grant paroles.

By day five, the staff could identify three types of guards. First, there were tough but fair guards who followed prison rules. Second, there were "good guys" who did little favors for the prisoners and never punished them. And then, 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 the preliminary person-

ality tests were able to predict this behavior. The only link between personality and prison behavior was a finding that prisoners with a high degree of authoritarianism endured our authoritarian prison environment longer than did other prisoners. How could intelligent, mentally healthy, "ordinary" men become perpetrators of evil so quickly? These were questions that the staff was forced to ask.

Prisoners felt feelings of frustration and powerlessness, and expressed this in a variety of ways. At first, some prisoners rebelled or fought with the guards. Four prisoners reacted by breaking down emotionally as a way to escape the situation. One prisoner developed a psychosomatic rash over his entire body when he learned that his parole request had been turned down. Others tried to cope by being good prisoners, doing everything the guards wanted them to do. One of them was even nicknamed "Sarge," because he was so military-like in executing all commands.

#### THE END OF THE EXPERIMENT

As the final hours of the experiment approached, the prisoners were disintegrated, both as a group and as individuals. Group unity vanished; what was left was a bunch of isolated individuals hanging on, much like prisoners of war or hospitalized mental patients. The guards had won total control of the prison, and they commanded the blind obedience of each prisoner. The mock prison had become a total institution, not far removed from what prisons are in real life.

The prisoners were withdrawing and behaving in pathological ways, and the guards were behaving sadistically. Even the "good" guards felt helpless to do anything to rectify the situation, and none of the guards quit while the study was in progress. No guard ever came late for his shift, called in sick, left early, or demanded extra pay for overtime work.

The situation had become so realistic that some visiting parents asked Zimbardo to contact a lawyer in order to get their son out of prison on the fifth night. They said a Catholic priest had called to tell them they should get a lawyer or public defender if they wanted to bail their son out. Zimbardo 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.

Dr. Zimbardo and his staff ended the study prematurely for two reasons. First, the group of researchers 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, a recent Stanford Ph.D. brought in to conduct interviews with the guards and prisoners strongly objected when she saw 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 outsiders who had seen the prison, she was the only one who ever questioned its morality. The staff took her objection seriously, and after only six days, the planned two-week prison simulation was called off.

#### **LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EXPERIMENT**

The study was terminated on August 20, 1971. The next day, there was an alleged escape attempt at San Quentin State Prison in California. Prisoners in the Maximum Adjustment Center were released from their cells by George Jackson, who had smuggled a gun into the prison. Several guards and some informant prisoners were tortured and murdered during the attempt, but the escape was prevented after the leader was allegedly gunned down while trying to scale the 30-foot high prison walls (Jackson 1972).

Soon afterward, less than one month later, prisons made more news when a riot erupted at Attica Prison in New York. After weeks of negotiations with prisoners who held guards hostage while demanding basic human rights, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered the National Guard to take back the prison by full force. A great many guards and prisoners were killed and injured by that ill-advised decision (Rothman 1972).

An important demand of the prisoners at Attica was that they be treated like human beings. After observing the simulated prison for only six days, Zimbardo's staff could understand how prisons dehumanize people, turning them into objects and instilling in them feelings of hopelessness. As for the

guards, they realized how ordinary people could be readily transformed from "the good Dr. Jekyll to the evil Mr. Hyde."

As Zimbardo points out at the web site, in the decades since the experiment took place, prison conditions and correctional policies in the United States became even more punitive and destructive. He is convinced that the worsening of conditions has been a result of the politicization of corrections, with politicians vying for who is toughest on crime, along with the racialization of arrests and sentencing, with African-Americans and Hispanics overrepresented. The media has also contributed to the problem by generating "moral panics" that heightened fear of violent crimes even as statistics show that violent crimes have decreased.

Zimbardo also pointed out that there are more Americans in prisons than ever before. According to a Justice Department survey, the number of jailed Americans more than doubled during the past 12 years, with over 1.8 million people in jail or prison by the late 1990s.

The study also brought up a number of questions unique to such exploratory social research. Because the purpose was to study a very broad question, the psychology of prison life, it is very difficult to define specifically what the data are, or what the data are supposed to be. It seems that just about everything that was happening was "data" to be later studied from the videotapes. Then there is the issue of opportunities for study that were tragically lost, mostly because the staff had adopted the mode of real prison employees and had forgotten about the research. This leads to the further question of what could have been done to minimize the effects of experimenter bias on the outcome of the study. Having more outside monitors would have appeared to be the answer, but who is to say that they too would not have been caught up in the action? And what were the dangers of the principal investigator assuming the role of prison superintendent? You could also make the suggestion that this role should have been assumed by an off site researcher far removed from the day to day workings of the mock prison.

In the summer of 2004, the Stanford Prison Experiment made the news again. In Iraq, a poorly supervised group of national guardsmen had taken charge of the supervision of Iraqi prisoners, some suspected to

be terrorists. With a nod and a wink from military intelligence, the guardsmen appeared to have total control of the process of how intelligence information was gathered, with an apparent emphasis on the final result, and not so much how the result was obtained. People who remembered the Stanford experiment remembered how quickly the whole experiment had degenerated into chaos, and wondered if the same dynamic was at work in the Abu Ghraib prison (Stanford 2004). Did evil triumph over good once again, just as it had 23 years ago in Palo Alto? For many the answer was yes, and was a reminder of what can happen when supervision is minimal, and individuals are suddenly given power beyond their capacity to absorb.

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Beginning in 2000, I began to search for an assignment for introductory sociology students, one that they would find memorable, and one from which they might take away some valuable lessons in life. I settled on the Stanford Prison Experiment because the age of the students involved in the study was about the same as the average age of the students in my introductory class; and, the experiment did deal with some of the issues that students face in daily life on campus - the occasional triumph of evil over good (or the unfair over the fair), peer pressure, the development of personal identity and roles, and rapid social change that leaves confusion in its wake. I thought that by putting each student in the shoes of the students in the Stanford Prison Experiment, these millennial students might learn something about themselves as they contemplate how they might have reacted to the experiment, if time and unforeseen circumstances had managed to put them in such a situation. Among other things, the experiment probably made them very pessimistic about taking part in any ongoing psychology experiments that were underway on their campus.

Beginning in 2001, I suspended my introductory sociology classes for a day, and asked the students to spend time outside of class to work on an "Internet assignment" about the Stanford Prison Experiment. I asked them to visit the Experiment's web site at [www.prisonexp.org](http://www.prisonexp.org) and to read the introductory page. After that, they were invited to go

through the slide show in its entirety. That show essentially tells the story of the experiment that I've summarized above, and includes still photos and video clips from the experiment, adding to the realism for the student. After the student has gone through the slide show in its entirety, I asked them to answer several questions about the experiment, many of them suggested by Philip Zimbardo as discussion questions that would help people to reflect upon the experiment:

1. What police procedures are used during arrests, and how do these procedures lead people to feel confused, fearful, and dehumanized?
2. If you were a guard, what type of guard would you have become? How sure are you?
3. What prevented "good guards" from objecting or countermmanding the orders from tough or bad guards?
4. If you were a prisoner, would you have been able to endure the experience? What would you have done differently than those subjects did? If you were imprisoned in a "real" prison for five years or more, could you take it?
5. Why did our prisoners try to work within the arbitrary prison system to effect a change in it (e.g., setting up a Grievance Committee), rather than trying to dismantle or change the system through outside help?
6. What was the most important thing that you learned from the Stanford Prison Experiment?

The answers to the questions could be handwritten or typed, and were to be handed in to the instructor to be graded before the end of the semester. As most of the questions were subjective, I graded the assignments based upon how thoroughly the student answered the question, and how much detail they used from the historical facts of the study in answering the questions.

Question 1 was probably the most "objective," in the sense that Dr. Zimbardo had arranged the experiment so that the students' experience of being arrested would be realistic. Thus, all the student had to do to answer this particular question was to relate how the student prisoners in the experiment were treated by the arresting officers. This

**Table 1: Stanford Prison Experiment Question Two, Part A: What Type of Guard Would You Have Been?**

Tough & Fair	202	(31.5%)
Good Guy or Good Girl	229	(35.7%)
Tough, Hostile	121	(18.9%)
Don't Know/Not Sure	24	(3.7%)
Didn't answer question/misunderstood question/cannot classify answer	65	(10.1%)

material was directly from an early portion of the slide show. However, some students interpreted the question to mean *today's* police procedures in general that dehumanize the arrestee, and thus answered the question with recent experiences that they had heard or read about in the news or in their community.

Questions 2-4 were very subjective; they are self-reflection kinds of questions. I could not possibly anticipate anyone's answer, and instructed students to be honest. I did so at the risk that such an assignment only reinforces the widespread view among students that sociology is nothing more than one's "opinion" about social reality. Nonetheless, I continue to ask the questions each semester, because they provide a window into the student's personality and you get some feeling that you've come to know the student personally – something that may be difficult to do in more conventional ways at the medium to large sized teaching institutions. I usually held on to the assignments for years, just in case a student approached me later for advice or for a letter of recommendation. Especially if I did not know the student very well, the answers to the questions provided some contextual information that might be useful in evaluating the student.

Question 5 is more objective than questions 2-4, but at the same time, allows for some individuality to come forth in the responses. Among other things, the response to this question might be an indicator of how closely the student was paying attention to the information about the experiment. On this question an answer that I expected to see was this: the prisoners, like everyone else in the experiment, had internalized the role assigned to them, and no longer felt that they could simply resign from the experiment. The experiment had come to be the social reality for the prisoners. However, I received other kinds of answers to this question and accepted them.

Question 6 is the one I most enjoy reading; and as long as students continue to say

that they learned something from the experiment, I will probably continue to assign it. Just about everyone was able to cite something specific that they took away from the exercise.

The answers to the questions were fairly predictable for question 1 as they could be composed directly from some of the earliest slides in the slide show. Most students got the point that the arrest was supposed to be realistic and humiliating, and to clearly show who was in charge and who was going to be punished. Interestingly, many students generalized their answers to the question so as to include the tactics employed by *all* the authority figures in the experiment and not just the arresting officers. As one student put it:

They arrested them in front of neighbors and family, stripped them, made them wear a "mock dress," put a bag over their head, and "debugged" them by spraying them down. They were not able to use the restroom in private.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, some interpreted the question to mean the tactics of today's police and answered accordingly, with arrests that they had read about or seen on TV, or perhaps even with something they'd seen in their neighborhood.

What type of guard would you have been, and how sure are you of this? This was the second question, and is an interesting question from my standpoint because it helps me to get to know something of the student's personality and their honest assessment (hopefully) of how they might have reacted to the situation, if thrust into it. Table 1 shows the students' answers to the question. The largest group of students professed to be the "good guys" or "good girls" types of guards. Many stated that they were nice people, that being nice was part of their personality, and that they did not enjoy seeing others suffer:

I would be a good guy guard. I would be like