# Stanford Prison Experiment

### Overview of Concepts

* Stanford Prison Experiment

## "What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil or evil triumph?"

**- Philip G. Zimbardo**

## What is the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE)?

In 1973, social psychologist, Philip G. Zimbardo and his colleagues conducted a study based on reported brutality within the American prison system (Mcleod, 2023). The teams' theories were either that guards maintained sadistic personalities, or the prison environment created this opportunity for guards to act in brutal manners. Zimbardo leaned towards the idea that the environment made the guards act this way rather than their personalities.

Zimbardo and his team created a mock prison inside the basement of the Stanford University psychology building. As shown in the picture below, the team went the extra mile in replicating prison cells and establishing what looked like a legitimate prison. Once the setting was created, Zimbardo and his team sought out volunteers. Of the 75 applicants, 24 men were chosen after rejecting applicants who had "psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse" (Mcleod, 2023). The intent was to recruit men who were mentally and physically stable, mature, and least antisocial based on the results from their screenings.



Participants were paid $15 a day for partaking in the experiment. It is documented that the participants did not know each other, which in research meant there would be fewer biases during the experiment. Once they were randomly assigned to either a role as a guard or prisoner, the prison process took a start. Just like arrests during the 70s, the ones who were assigned as guards arrested the "prisoners" with no mercy. This included arresting them in their homes or in public with no remorse. Prisoners were then blindfolded during their transportation to the prison. After being fingerprinted and given identification numbers, the prisoners were placed in cramped cells within the mock prison. Thus began the first few issues in the first hours of the experiment.



## Findings and Complications with the SPE

Within the first hours of the study, both prisoners and guards adopted their roles quickly. Despite being told this was a mock situation, the guards still treated it with the seriousness and dedication of a real job. On the first night, prisoners were treated with brutality with some experiencing harassment via blasting whistles at 2:30 AM. This would be the lighter of the brutal actions committed by the guards. Prisoners were insulted and dehumanized by the guards. Guards asserted their dominance and **authority** by making their prisoners do meaningless tasks while striking down any prisoner who expressed open rebellion. Within days, a clear relationship was established between the guards and the prisoners as the prisoners obeyed the commands of the guards. In other words, the prisoners were stripped of their independence and depended on the guards.



Less than two days in, the first prisoner to experience "emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage" was Prisoner #8612. Prisoner #8612 was forced to continue until the psychologists deemed him unfit to continue the study and let him out. This further escalated as Prisoner #819 broke down similarly to #8612; however, #819 was reluctant to leave the experiment as he had been broken into believing that he was a bad prisoner and deserved the punishment. This occurred when the guards had the prisoners chant "Prisoner #819 is a bad prisoner. Because of what Prisoner #819 did, my cell is a mess, Mr. Correctional Officer" (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). It wasn't until Zimbardo reminded #819 that it was all an experiment that he broke out of his trance and left the experiment.

After six days, Zimbardo chose to end the experiment due to increased guard aggression and excessive emotional breakdowns from multiple prisoners. Even Zimbardo had lost track of his role as a researcher as he adopted the mindset of a prison superintendent. In all the darkness, Zimbardo and his team learned about the psychology of what is good and what is **evil.** As mentioned by Zimbardo, the findings suggested that the situation leads to the actions of a person and not personalities. Based on his findings, it can be said that people are quick to accept social roles even if said social roles are heavily stereotyped. Furthermore, the behavior of the prisoners could be due to two reasons: **deindividuation** and **learned helplessness**. Prisoners had lost a sense of self and identity while accepting their new "identity" as prisoners. They also had submitted to the guards and thereby did not stand up for themselves. During interviews, all participants found it surprising that they were either brutal or submissive in ways they'd never displayed before. Overall, these actions could be in part due to the guards reinforcing positive and negative behavior for the prisoners.

## Criticisms

A deep involvement in any project can become a benefit or a hindrance to said project. In the case of Zimbardo, he integrated himself into the role of an investigator and prison superintendent (Mcleod, 2023). A criticism in any research study is the level of involvement which may create an unethical experience for participants. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) were not established until a year later in 1974, which means his study began without any external regulations (Extranet, n. d.). Even though Zimbardo's study found multiple points of interest about human behavior, his results cannot be generalized due to the stereotyping of prison life. Replication of a simulated prison would not be allowed these days, so all we have is real-life occurrences and Zimbardo's study to analyze.

Any research study can become unethical if monitored improperly. The role of psychologists now is to ensure that any test subject involved is treated fairly, or if there is some harm there must be a valid justification. Following the study, no guard was punished and they went about having normal lives (Mcleod, 2023). Some guards felt justified in their behavior by claiming that they were

 **acting**

. We can learn from Zimbardo's study about the negative consequences of being allowed in a position of power.

### What is the IRB?

In the history of psychology, we learn that psychology did not always have ethical and moral values with research and discovery. Though it has calmed down and there is less mistreatment of human life, it is still wise to recognize what the field of psychological research is capable of. In the case of social psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo, we learn about the effects that authority can create even in a mock environment.

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) were established in 1974 following decades of unethical studies which could be especially seen during the Nuremberg War Crime Trials (Extranet, n.d.). As defined by the American Psychological Association, "An IRB is a committee within a university or other organization receiving federal funds to conduct research that reviews research proposals. The IRB reviews the proposals before a project is submitted to a funding agency to determine if the research project follows the ethical principles and federal regulations for the protection of human subjects. The IRB has the authority to approve, disapprove or require modifications of these projects" (2017).

IRBs are the foundational parts of conducting a study whether it be on your campus, in classes, or in other environments. Should you receive the chance to conduct a study, be prepared to submit proposals to the IRBs and await approval for your ethical study.

### Teaching Connection

Now that you've learned about the SPE, you might be wondering "So what?" In the context of teachers, we have authority in a classroom over our students. It is then your job to ensure that every child is treated properly. Though the prisoners in this experiment were grown men, they still obeyed and developed learned helplessness through the improper use of power and authority. Therefore, it is our job to ensure that our students do not fall trap to abusive behavior, especially within your classroom. The following are points to consider when teaching students:

* Students are young and impressionable.
* It's important to lead a class with authority but without harm.
* In-class experiences will shape students.

## Key Vocabulary

* **Authority:** The capacity to influence others. Formal authority enables an individual to exert influence as a result of either high, legally recognized office (legitimate authority) or high rank in a long-established but not legally codified hierarchy (traditional authority). Informal authority is based on the individual having either attributes that facilitate the achievement of a group’s goals (rational or expert authority) or an attractive and authoritative personality serving to enhance his or her credibility (charismatic authority).
* **Brutality:** Behavior that is very cruel or violent and showing no feelings for others
* **Deindividualization:** From the noun "deindividuation": "an experiential state characterized by loss of self-awareness, altered perceptions, and a reduction of inner restraints that results in the performance of unusual and sometimes antisocial behavior. It can be caused by several factors, such as a sense of anonymity or submersion in a group." In the context of the SPE, prisoners felt a loss of self-awareness and a loss of self, leading to deindividualization.
* **Environment:** The aggregate of external agents or conditions—physical, biological, social, and cultural—that influence the functions of an organism. The physical environment may be measured in terms of temperature, air pressure, noise, vibration, atmosphere, or sources of nutrients, which may be specified by a range of values (e.g., a temperature scale).
* **Evil:** In the words of Zimbardo from his book, The Lucifer Effect,  “Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others—or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf.”
* **Learned Helplessness:** A phenomenon in which repeated exposure to uncontrollable stressors results in individuals failing to use any control options that may later become available. Essentially, individuals are said to learn that they lack behavioral control over environmental events, which, in turn, undermines the motivation to make changes or attempt to alter situations.
* **Sadistic:** About sadism, "the derivation of pleasure through cruelty and inflicting pain, humiliation, and other forms of suffering on individuals."
* **Screening:** The initial evaluation of a patient to determine his or her suitability for psychological or medical treatment generally, a specific treatment approach, or referral to a treatment facility. This evaluation is made based on medical or psychological history, mental status examination, diagnostic formulation, or some combination of these.

Definitions used were taken from Miriam Webster, the APA Dictionary of Psychology, and Zimbardo's book "The Lucifer Effect."

### Summary

* Philip G. Zimbardo conducted a mock prison study in 1934.

	+ After initial screenings, participants were randomly selected to be prisoners or guards.
		- Prisoners were arrested much like a real prisoner would be.
* The purpose was to examine what causes brutality in a prison setting: personality or environment.
	+ Based on the findings, Zimbardo concludes that the environment plays a significant role.
* Guards expressed sadistic and cruel tendencies within 24 hours of the experiment.
	+ Prisoners developed **learned helplessness**.
	+ Guards expressed explicit authority over them.
* After less than a week, Zimbardo felt the need to shut down the experiment.
	+ Prisoners were experiencing emotional distress and guards were ready to fight the prisoners.
* Zimbardo lost himself within the role of a prison superintendent much like the participants lost themselves in their roles.
* What we learn from this is that authority can create negative experiences if managed improperly.
	+ Future teachers will have authority over students.
		- It is their job to ensure that it is used properly and ethically within a classroom.
* As important as psychology is, all participants in  must be treated humanely and ethically.

## References

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## Additional Readings

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