New directions in research on well-being: psychological process in everyday contexts

Irene Petruccelli

Rome, March 16th 2021
And in the final chapter of his book (*The Lucifer Effect*), Zimbardo introduces a new concept of “The Banality of Heroism” where he asks the reader if they would be able to take on the role of “hero” if the need ever arose.
Some people are able to resist social influence and remain immune to the power of situational forces.

- Education
- Models
- Peer pressure
- Decisions
- Get involved Vs mind your business
- Everyday heroism
- Be a positive deviant
- Make someone feel special
STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

- Philip Zimbardo
- 1971
- Palo Alto, California
• On a quiet Sunday morning in August police car swept through the town picking up college students as part of a mass arrest for Armed Robbery, and Burglary.

• The 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, the sirens wailing.

• 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 wonder what he had done to get himself into this mess.
VOLUNTEERS

• What suspects had done was to answer a local newspaper and calling for volunteers in a study of the psychological effects of prison life.

• To see what the psychological effects were of becoming a prisoner or prison guard.

• To set up a simulated prison and then carefully note the effects of this institution on the behavior of all those within its walls.

• More than 70 applicants answered our ad and were given diagnostic interviews and personality tests to eliminate candidates with psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse.
VOLUNTEERS

• A sample of 24 college students from the U.S. and Canada who happened to be in the Stanford area and wanted to earn $15/day by participating in a study.

• The study of prison life began, then, with an average group of healthy, intelligent, middle-class males.

• These boys were arbitrarily divided into two groups by a flip of the coin.

• Half were randomly assigned to be guards, the other to be prisoners.

• It is important to remember that at the beginning of the experiment there were no differences between boys assigned to be a prisoner and boys assigned to be a guard.
• The 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 go to the toilet down the hallway (which prisoners did blindfolded so as not to know the way out of the prison).

• To create prison cells, they took the doors off some laboratory rooms and replaced them with specially made doors with steel bars and cell numbers.
• At one end of the hall was a small opening through which they 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.

• An intercom system allowed us 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.
A STATE OF MILD SHOCK

Blindfolded and in a state of mild shock over their surprise arrest by the city police, the prisoners were put into a car and driven to the "Stanford County Jail" for further processing.

The prisoners were then brought into the jail one at a time and greeted by the warden, who conveyed the seriousness of their offense and their new status as prisoners.
HUMILIATION

• Each prisoner was systematically searched and stripped naked.
• He was then deloused with a spray, to convey the belief that he may have germs or lice.
• A degradation procedure was designed in part to humiliate prisoners and in part to be sure they weren't bringing in any germs to contaminate the jail.
• The prisoner was then issued 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 footwear, and each prisoner covered his hair with a stocking cap made from a woman's nylon stocking.
• Trying to create a functional simulation of a prison – not a literal prison.
• 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.
• Indeed, as soon as some of our 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.

➢ Oppressiveness of the environment.
Prisoners:
• feel anonymous, humiliated, emasculated....
• minimize each person's individuality

Guards:
• Uniforms, whistle around their neck, a billy club borrowed from the police, special sunglasses.
• Mirror sunglasses prevented anyone from seeing their eyes or reading their emotions, and thus helped to further promote their anonymity.
• Maintain law and order in the prison and command the respect of the prisoners.
• The cells were so small that there was room for only three cots on which the prisoners slept or sat, with room for little else.

• At 2:30 A.M. the prisoners were rudely awakened from sleep by blasting whistles for the first of many «counts». The counts served the purpose of familiarizing the prisoners with their numbers (counts took place several times each shift and often at night). But more importantly, these events provided a regular occasion for the guards to exercise control over the prisoners. At first, the prisoners were not completely into their roles and did not take the counts too seriously.

• Push-ups were a common form of physical punishment imposed by the guards to punish infractions of the rules or displays of improper attitudes toward the guards or institution (push-ups were often used as a form of punishment in Nazi concentration camps). It's noteworthy that one of the guards also stepped on the prisoners' backs while they did push-ups, or made other prisoners sit or step on the backs of fellow prisoners doing their push-ups.
Zimbardo: «Because the first day passed without incident, we were surprised and totally unprepared for the rebellion which broke out 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. The guards were very much angered 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 what they did was fascinating for the staff to behold. At first they 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 skin-chilling carbon dioxide, and they forced the prisoners away from the doors. (The fire extinguishers were present in compliance with the requirement by the Stanford Human Subjects Research Panel, which was concerned about potential fire threats)». 
• The guards broke into each cell, stripped the prisoners naked, took the beds out, forced the ringleaders of the prisoner rebellion into solitary confinement, and generally began to harass and intimidate the prisoners.

• The rebellion had been temporarily crushed, but now a new problem faced the guards... the number of prisoners was greater than the guards’ one.

• So what were they going to do? One of the guards came up with a solution. «Let's use psychological tactics instead of physical ones». Psychological tactics amounted to setting up a privilege cell.
• One of the three cells was designated 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. The effect was to break the solidarity among prisoners.

• 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. Indeed, after the nightly 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, and soon the prison began to smell of urine and feces – further adding to the degrading quality of the environment.
• After half a day of this treatment, 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, thoroughly confusing all the prisoners. 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. By dividing and conquering in this way, guards promote aggression among inmates, thereby deflecting it from themselves.

• The prisoners' rebellion also played an important role in producing greater solidarity among the guards. Now, suddenly, it was no longer just an experiment, no longer a simple simulation. Instead, 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.
• Less than 36 hours into the experiment, a prisoner began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage.

• Zimbardo: «In spite of all of this, we had already come to think so much like prison authorities that we thought he was trying to "con" us – to fool us into releasing him... 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 we became convinced that he was really suffering and that we had to release him». 
VIDEO:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIUlBrvqyyo
PARENTS AND FRIENDS

- The next day, we held a visiting hour for parents and friends. We were worried that when the parents saw the state of our jail, they might insist on taking their sons home. To counter this, we manipulated both the situation and the visitors by making the prison environment seem pleasant and benign. We washed, shaved, and groomed the prisoners, had them clean and polish their cells, fed them a big dinner, played music on the intercom, and even had an attractive former Stanford cheerleader, Susie Phillips, greet the visitors at our registration desk.

- When the dozen or so visitors came, full of good humor at what seemed to be a novel, fun experience, we systematically brought their behavior under situational control. They 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. Of course, parents complained about these arbitrary rules, but remarkably, they complied with them. And so they, too, became bit players in our prison drama, being good middle-class adults.

- Some of the parents got upset when they saw how fatigued and distressed their son was. But 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, I responded by shifting the blame from the situation to her son. "What's the matter with your boy? Doesn't he sleep well?" Then I asked the father, "Don't you think your boy can handle this?"

- He bristled, "Of course he can – he's a real tough kid, a leader." Turning to the mother, he said, "Come on Honey, we've wasted enough time already." And to me, "See you again at the next visiting time."
The next major event we 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 went as follows: Prisoner #8612, whom we had released the night before, was going to round up a bunch of his friends and break in to free the prisoners.

How do you think we reacted to this rumor? Do you think we recorded the pattern of rumor transmission and prepared to observe the impending escape? That was what we should have done, of course, if we were acting like experimental social psychologists. Instead, we reacted with concern over the security of our prison. What we did was to hold a strategy session with the Warden, the Superintendent, and one of the chieflieutenants, Craig Haney, to plan how to foil the escape.

After our meeting, we decided to put an informant (an experimental confederate) in the cell that #8612 had occupied. The job of our informant would be to give us information about the escape plot. Then I went back to the Palo Alto Police Department and asked the sergeant if we could have our prisoners transferred to their old jail.

My request was turned down because the Police Department would not be covered by insurance if we moved our prisoners into their jail. I left angry and disgusted at this lack of cooperation between our correctional facilities (I was now totally into my role).

Then we formulated a second plan. The plan was to dismantle our 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, I would be sitting there alone. I would tell them that the experiment was over and we had sent all of their friends home, that there was nothing left to liberate. After they left, we'd bring our prisoners back and redouble the security of our prison. We even thought of luring #8612 back on some pretext and then imprisoning him again because he was released on false pretenses.
• 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…

www.prisonexp.org